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*Risk-Bearing and Progressive Ambition: The Case of Members of the United States House of Representatives**

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This study analyzes the decisions of members of the House on whether to seek higher office (governor or senator) during the period 1954–1974. It differs from previous ambition analyses in that it offers a more concrete theoretical base for the study of progressive ambition and it attempts to predict which members will seek higher office rather than just analyze the careers of members who did run. Hypotheses are offered which deal with the probability of winning a higher office, the value of the higher office, the value of the present office, and the impact of whether or not members are “risk-takers.” These hypotheses are then tested. Finally, a number of other hypotheses which follow from the theory are discussed.

“Ambition lies at the heart of politics. Politics thrive on the hope of preferment and the drive for office” (Schlesinger, 1966, p. 1). Since Joseph Schlesinger wrote those introductory lines to his superb study of career patterns in the United States, a substantial amount of research has been conducted on ambition and office-seeking behavior.¹ Most of this

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¹ Some examples are: Fishel (1971), Mezey (1970), Black (1972), Hain and Smith (1973), Frost (1972), Swinerton (1968), and Prewitt and Nolan (1969). Ambition theory has even found application in nondemocratic situations; see Ciboski (1974).

research has, however, been primarily empirical in nature, and has not attempted to provide a more explicit theoretical framework for ambition analysis.² In addition, most of this research has followed Schlesinger's example in selecting for analysis persons who actually achieved or tried for an office, and examining their career patterns and characteristics.

The present study departs from both of these trends. The theoretical focus is progressive ambition; the focus of the empirical analysis is on members of the U.S. House of Representatives between 1954 and 1974 and their decisions on whether or not to seek either a U.S. Senate seat or the governorship of their state. We begin by formulating a theory of progressive ambition and deriving a set of testable hypotheses from that theory. We then proceed to test those hypotheses on data on the office-seeking behavior of congressmen in relation to Senate seats and governorships. Instead, however, of analyzing the backgrounds of members of the House who sought those offices (analysis which has already been done—see Hain and Smith, 1973, and Frost, 1972), we will examine each member who had an opportunity to run for one of those offices and whether or not the opportunity was taken. Finally, we will return to the theoretical level and offer some hypotheses for future consideration.

A Theory of Progressive Ambition

Schlesinger (1966, pp. 9–10) discusses three “directions” or types of ambition: discrete, static, and progressive. Briefly, discrete ambition relates to the politician who seeks an office for one term and then seeks neither reelection nor another office. Static ambition relates to the politician who seeks an office with the intent of attempting to retain it for as long as possible. Progressive ambition relates to the politician who holds an office and attempts to gain another regarded as more attractive.

Since Schlesinger's analysis considered people who behaved ambitiously, (i.e., sought certain offices), rather than (as in the present study) examining a selected set of politicians and predicting whether or not they would seek a given office, he did not address a certain conceptual question regarding the distinction between static and progressive ambition that we must consider. In discussing static ambition, he states (1966, p. 10): “How widespread such ambitions are we cannot tell, for the possibilities of making a career of one office are varied. Nevertheless, it is certainly a marked goal of many American congressmen and senators.” Thus a retrospective analysis categorizes direction of ambition on the basis of manifest

² One salient exception is Black (1972).

behavior, and (to use members of the House as an example) representatives who serve one term and leave voluntarily have discrete ambition, those who attempt to remain in the House have static ambition, and those who run for higher office have progressive ambition. A prospective analysis such as ours, however, cannot retain such a categorization. We believe, and here explicitly assume, that progressive ambition is held by almost all members of the House.³ That is, we assume that if a member of the House, on his first day of service, were offered a Senate seat or⁴ a governorship *without cost or risk*, he would take it. Thus static ambition is not something chosen a priori, but is a behavior pattern manifested by a member because of the risks of the particular opportunity structure he finds himself in, and his unwillingness to bear those risks.

Now we turn to some additional assumptions about the actors who are to be described by our theory. First, we assume that they are *rational*, in the sense of being maximizers of expected utility.⁵

Put most simply, being rational in a decision situation consists in examining the alternatives with which one is confronted, estimating and evaluating the likely consequences of each, and selecting that alternative which yields the most attractive set of expectations. (Goldberg, 1969, p. 5.)

Whatever one's position on the usefulness or the range of applicability of rational choice models of politics,⁶ such models should be most useful in such calculated political choice situations as the choice between alternative offices.

Next we assume a particular calculus of decision making for the actors. For this purpose we adopt the simple decision calculus outlined

³ We say "almost all" because we believe that discrete ambition should be maintained as a separate category. There are some members of the House who begin service with the intent of simply filling out the present term. The most obvious case of this is the wife of a deceased member who agrees to run in a special election to fill the vacancy and serve only as a "caretaker" until the next regular election. Such cases are, we believe, few and uninteresting. In any event, we ignore them theoretically and will remove them from the empirical analysis below.

⁴ The use of the word "or" here is in the inclusive rather than the exclusive sense. That is, we do not assume that if only one of these offices were offered, every member would take it, but that if both were offered, every member would be willing to accept at least one.

⁵ For a general discussion of utility maximization and the rationality assumption see Luce and Raiffa (1957), Chapter 2, and Riker and Ordeshook (1973), Chapter 2.

⁶ For some doubts and warnings on this question, see Sprague (1971).

by Riker and Ordeshook (1973, Chapter 3), a variant of which is employed by Black (1972, p. 146). The calculus we posit is as follows:

$$E(a_1) = P_1(O_1)U(O_1) + P_1(O_2)U(O_2) + P_1(O_3)U(O_3) - C(a_1) \quad (1)$$

$$E(a_2) = P_2(O_1)U(O_1) + P_2(O_2)U(O_2) + P_2(O_3)U(O_3) - C(a_2) \quad (2)$$

where $E(a_i)$ is the expected utility of choosing alternative i ,

$P_i(O_j)$ is the probability that outcome j will occur if alternative i is chosen,

$U(O_j)$ is the utility the actor receives if outcome j occurs,

$C(a_i)$ is the direct utility cost incurred by choosing alternative i ,

and where specifically:

O_1 = no office is occupied after the election,

O_2 = the presently held office is occupied after the election,

O_3 = the higher office being considered is occupied after the election,

a_1 = the actor runs for the presently held office (i.e., reelection),⁷

a_2 = the actor runs for the higher office.

An actor will not be able to occupy the present office if he runs for the higher one, nor occupy the higher one if he runs for reelection, therefore $P_1(O_3) = P_2(O_2) = 0$. Since we will eliminate from the empirical analysis those representatives who retire, we can theoretically ignore the case where O_1 is most preferred. In addition, we can further simplify our discussion by assuming that O_1 is the least preferred outcome. This eliminates from theoretical consideration the rare case of the representative who wants to leave the House and decides to run for higher office instead of retiring. This situation seems to occur so seldom that we can safely ignore it at this time. We would hope, of course, to incorporate this case and that of discrete ambition in future development of this theory when we move beyond the present focus on progressive ambition.

Since we assume that O_1 is the least preferred outcome, we can arbitrarily set $U(O_1) = 0$, and expressions (1) and (2) simplify to the following:

⁷ By adopting these descriptions of a_1 and a_2 , we restrict our consideration to those situations where the actor must give up the presently held office to run for the higher office. We will elaborate on this point below.

$$E(a_1) = P_1(O_2)U(O_2) - C(a_1) \quad (3)$$

$$E(a_2) = P_2(O_3)U(O_3) - C(a_2) \quad (4)$$

Thus, for each office the expected value of running for the office is a function of the probability of winning, the value of the office, and the costs of running; by our rationality assumption, an actor will run for higher office only if $E(a_2) > E(a_1)$.

From the above we see, in a more formal context, the relevance of the "opportunity structure" that Schlesinger found so important in his research, for the values of the elements on the right hand side of expression (4) are in large measure set by the opportunity structure and determine the risks of running for higher office. The higher the risks, the less likely is an actor to run. We will now proceed to apply these predictions to the specific situation of House members and the prospect of running for senator or governor, and to offer a series of hypotheses about the situation. At this point we will only discuss those hypotheses for which we offer empirical evidence; other hypotheses for future testing will be discussed after the presentation of the data. We will, therefore, confine our discussion here to the value of the higher office, the probability of winning the higher office, and the value of the House seat, all of which relate to the opportunity structure. After considering these factors, we will introduce one additional theoretical concept concerning the potential candidates themselves.

(1) *The value of the higher office.* We have assumed that (almost all) members of the House have progressive ambition. They would choose, if presented with a costless and riskless opportunity, to be senator or governor. It seems reasonable to begin our discussion by mentioning a few reasons why this should be so.

The attractiveness of a Senate seat relative to a House seat is fairly clear. One former member of the House who achieved a Senate seat summarized the situation this way:

I think at the time I first came to the Congress I really had my eye on the Senate. I like the pace of the Senate and I felt that there was an opportunity to make an impact as an individual in the Senate much more than in the House. Besides a Senator has a six-year term. The opportunity to make a mark in history just seemed to me much greater in the Senate. . . . It is a better job.⁸

⁸ This quotation and others used below are (unless otherwise identified) drawn from a series of interviews with present and former members of the Senate. The interviews were conducted by Robert Peabody, Norman Ornstein, and myself as

Another former representative emphasized the less hierarchical organization in the Senate:⁹

I think one of the most basic differences between the House and the Senate is immediately in the Senate you have an opportunity to participate. In the House you have to wait your time and work your way up through the seniority system. The seniority system is much more constraining on individuals' activities in the House than it is in the Senate merely because of the numbers involved, 435 as opposed to 100. Here almost anybody can come into the Senate and—although you won't get your first committee choice—you'll be put in a position where there's so much to do and there's so much activity, so many problems, that you immediately get visibility that you sometimes never get in the House and you immediately have an impact upon legislation that you sometimes never get in the House.

The governorship, of course, has its own attractions, and one of the major ones is the more direct ability to control outcomes. A senator, who had been governor of his state, said:

The governor can make a decision and execute it. The constitution places vast power in the governor of _____. As a senator, I make a decision and talk about it. There is a vast difference.

While there is certainly individual variation in the evaluation of the two offices, making a Senate seat more attractive to some and the governorship more attractive to others, there are also certain salient features of the opportunity structure of members of the House that affect the relative value of the two offices and make running for the Senate generally more attractive than seeking the governorship.

First, and probably foremost, is the six-year Senate term. The maximum term for a governor in the United States is four years, and a number of states even have two-year gubernatorial terms.¹⁰ A longer term permits an actor more time to enjoy the benefits of holding office instead of spending his time attempting to retain the office.

Second, there is the question of vulnerability. Recent research indicates that governors running for reelection are at least somewhat more vulnerable to defeat than are Senators in the same situation. Data for the

part of a general study of the Senate. The interviews were semistructured and were tape recorded. All subjects were promised anonymity. I would like to thank the Russell Sage Foundation for granting us funds to cover the cost of transcription of the tapes.

⁹ For a general discussion of the differences between the Senate and House, see Froman (1967), Chapter I.

¹⁰ In 1969, the number was ten. See Schlesinger (1972a), p. 143.

period 1950–1970 show that 85.5 percent of Senate incumbents running for reelection were successful (Kostroski, 1973, p. 1217). However, data on incumbent governors running for reelection in almost exactly the same period (1950–1969) show that only 64.4 percent were successful.¹¹ Certainly the likelihood of reelection to a prospective office will affect the value of that office to an individual.

Closely related to the prospects for reelection, and probably even more relevant to our discussion, is a third consideration: the prospects for a career in an office. Beyond a Senate seat and the governor's chair, the only major elective offices are the Presidency and Vice-Presidency—offices which few seek and even fewer attain. Thus, at this level, career considerations loom large. Nelson Rockefeller (R., N.Y.) holds at least the modern record for service as governor: 15 years. Indeed, Schlesinger (1972b, p. 12) shows that of the 151 governors serving during the decade 1950–1959, only 30.5 percent served more than 4 years. However, by the time of Rockefeller's resignation from the governorship in December 1973, thirty-five members of the Senate had equalled or surpassed his length of tenure, and 60 percent had served more than four years.¹²

A final consideration in this regard is one noted by Schlesinger (1966, pp. 99–100):

The second manifest tie between offices is the similarity of functions. The legislative function requires similar skills and talents whether in the city council or the federal Senate. Different demands are made upon judges or executives. . . . Manifestly, the functional resemblance of offices is a condition which affects the course of political careers.

On all of these grounds—greater length of term, lower electoral vulnerability, greater career prospects, and similarity of functions—we would expect, in general, members of the House to place a higher value on a Senate seat than a governorship, and we are thus led to our first hypothesis.

H₁: Among House members, the proportion of opportunities to run

¹¹ These data are derived from Turett (1971), p. 118. Turett only considers a subset of states. He eliminates those states which did not permit reelection at some time during the period of analysis, and states which were "not competitive" at some time during the period. Obviously, eliminating the latter group deflates the success rate of governors. It seems unlikely, however, that including these states would bring the governors' success rate up to that of the Senators', especially since some of these states (*e.g.*, AR, CA, KN, MA, MN, SD) have seen incumbent governors defeated during the period under discussion.

¹² The tenure figures on Senators were compiled from *Congressional Quarterly Report*, 6 January, 1973, p. 24.

for the Senate that is taken will be greater than the proportion of opportunities taken to run for governor.

While we argue that Senate seats are more attractive than governorships, it is clear that not all governorships are equally attractive. Governorships differ in the powers the occupant of the office has under the various state constitutions (see Schlesinger, 1972a). We would expect that a House member from a state with a powerful governorship would find that office more attractive than would a member from a state with a weak governorship. While we do not have data on governors' powers for the entire period under consideration, and therefore cannot test this expectation, there is one feature on which governorships differ and on which the data are readily available: length of term. We have already noted that an office with a longer term should be generally more attractive than an office with a shorter term, and that states vary in the length they set for their governor's term. A member of the House, who serves a two-year term, is going to find an alternative office which also has a two-year term less attractive, *ceteris paribus*, than an alternative office with a four-year term. Therefore, our second hypothesis is:

H₂: Among House members, the proportion of opportunities to run for governorships with a four-year term that is taken will be greater than the proportion of opportunities taken to run for governorships with a two-year term.

(2) *The probability of winning the higher office.* We assumed above that a member of the House would accept a Senate seat or governorship if they could get it without cost or risk. However, such circumstances are seldom, if ever, present. Members seeking higher office often have to bear substantial costs and risks. For many members $P_2(O_3)$ (the probability of winning the higher office) will be relatively small, while for others it will be substantially larger.

One factor which will affect the probability of winning higher office is whether or not the office in question is held by an incumbent running for reelection. As we have seen incumbent Senators and governors have a substantially better than even chance of being reelected. Thus the risk of running against an incumbent is a good deal greater than the risk of running if there is no incumbent in the race. Indeed, for an actor who has decided to make a try for another office, such considerations can determine the timing of such an attempt. A former governor who decided to run for an open Senate seat rather than seek reelection said:

we were talking very realistically about the situation that would evolve if I were to run for reelection as governor. Then that term would have ended with

_____’s term in the Senate, and if I were then to try for the Senate I would be running against an incumbent who had been in office a couple of terms, and obviously if I wanted to be realistic it is a lot easier getting in if somebody is stepping out and you don’t run against an incumbent in either party, and I couldn’t do better than the chance that was afforded me.

Thus the third hypothesis is:

H₃: Among House members, for both Senate and gubernatorial races, the proportion of opportunities to run for higher office that is taken in situations where no incumbent is seeking reelection will be greater than the proportion of opportunities taken in situations where an incumbent is seeking reelection.

In addition to incumbency, another factor that will affect the probability of winning is the partisan bias of the electoral situation. Although party identification is no longer the dependable predictor of voting that it once was (see, for example, DeVries and Tarrance, 1972), there do remain some states (notably those in the deep South) which are relatively “safe” for one party or the other. If this is so, then obviously the likelihood of a candidate winning in a state which is “safe” for the other party is less than if the state is competitive or safe for his own party. Therefore:

H₄: Among House members, for both Senate and gubernatorial races, the proportion of opportunities to run for higher office that is taken in states which are “safe” for the opposition party will be less than the proportion of opportunities taken in states which are competitive or “safe” for their own party.

A final consideration which will affect the probability of winning relates to the base from which a candidate runs. It is fairly well known that name recognition is an important consideration in electoral situations. Potential candidates often poll their prospective constituency to determine how well known they are, and the results of such polls affect their decision on whether or not to run. Whether a candidate is known to a voter affects that voter’s decision (see Stokes and Miller, 1962, and Ferejohn, 1977). One thing that will have a substantial impact on voter recognition is the degree of overlap between the constituency a prospective candidate presently represents and the constituency he would like to represent (see Schlesinger, 1966, p. 99). For example, a randomly selected voter from Delaware is more likely to have heard of the single congressman from that state than is a randomly selected voter from California to have heard of any one of the state’s 43 congressmen. A senator from a state with only one congressional seat, when asked why he gave up a safe House seat to run for the Senate, said:

Basically it was the same race . . . on the Senate side, of course, my predecessor was stepping down, so that in a way I was the person that was being challenged whether it was in the House or Senate.

Another senator, who left the House after one term, described his calculations in more detail:

Well, it was an easy decision to make because there are only two districts in _____ and I had determined along with my staff that being the first Democrat in — years to run and win in that district, I would have to run awfully hard to get reelected anyhow, and that any strength I could develop as a second term congressional candidate would be 95 percent of the strength I would need for a Senate race in _____ because of the way the geography is out there and where the media center is, which is in the other district so when I was on the television or in the press it went into the other district and was state wide. So as time went on I decided it would be just as easy to run for the Senate as it was for the House.

Therefore, we argue that the greater the degree of overlap between a potential candidate's present constituency and his prospective constituency, the more likely he is to seek higher office.

Thus, in general, we would expect congressmen from small states to be more likely to run for higher office than congressmen from large states. There is, however, an additional factor affecting the value of the higher office which leads us to modify this expectation. While we would expect that there is little difference between the attractiveness of a Senate seat from a big state and one from a small state, such would not seem to be true in the case of governorships. First, and tautologically, a governor from a large state governs more people than one from a small state. He can have a substantial impact on the lives of a larger number of people, usually deals with a greater range of public policy matters, and is more likely to be observed by the national media.¹³

Second, there appears to be a relationship between the size of a state and the powers granted to its governor. Schlesinger (1972a) has constructed an index of the powers of governors in 1969.¹⁴ If we divide

¹³ Such media coverage can, potentially, be translated into a national candidacy. Governors of the largest states are often considered to be potential presidential candidates (*e.g.*, Reagan of California and Rockefeller of New York). Presidential candidates from the Senate, on the other hand, seem to be as likely to come from small (McGovern, Muskie) or medium sized states (Jackson, Humphrey) as from large ones. For further discussion of these points see Peabody, Ornstein, and Rohde (1976).

¹⁴ A summary of the index values appears on p. 149. We have subtracted from the combined index the values derived from tenure potential since we have considered that aspect separately.

the states by whether they are above or below the median state population and also divide them by whether they are above or below the median value of Schlesinger's index, it appears that in 1969 large states had relatively more powerful governors, and small states relatively weaker ones. Among the large states, 64 percent were above the median index value, while among the small states only 28 percent were above the median.

For governorships, then, something of an inverse relationship exists between the attractiveness of the office and the probability of winning. Thus there should be no clear effect from state size on House members seeking governorships, and so we restrict our next hypothesis to Senate candidacies:

H₅: Among House members, for Senate races, the probability that a House member will run will be directly related to the proportion of the state's population the population of his House constituency comprises.¹⁵

(3) *The value of the House seat.* It is commonplace to note that power in the House rests largely in its committees, and that the way to power in committees is through the seniority system.¹⁶ This is still largely true despite recent reforms designed to reduce the power of committee chairmen.¹⁷ Therefore, if we assume that a major motivation of members is to have power within the House (whether for its own sake, to increase their probability of winning reelection, or because they are concerned about policy outcomes¹⁸), then the more senior a member is, the more power he will have, the higher will be the value of his seat to him, and the less likely he will be to seek higher office. Thus hypothesis six states:

H₆: For both Senate and gubernatorial races, the probability that a

¹⁵ A third consideration, that we may mention in passing, is that governors from small states often have relatively small salaries. This may be of no small import if an office holder is not independently wealthy. For example, one of the factors that apparently led Governor Dale Bumpers of Arkansas to challenge incumbent Senator J. William Fulbright for the Democratic Senate nomination was the fact "that the Arkansas governorship—lowest paying in the nation at \$10,000—requires him to invest his own money in the office" (*Congressional Quarterly Weekly Report*, 23 February, 1974, p. 397). A Senator's salary is \$57,500 at present.

¹⁶ The literature on House committees is too vast to detail here. For a recent study of six House and Senate committees see Fenno (1973).

¹⁷ For a discussion of these reforms see Ornstein and Rohde (1977) and Ornstein and Rohde (1978).

¹⁸ These alternative goals are discussed in Fenno (1973), Chapter 2.

House member will run will be inversely related to his seniority.

(4) *Risk acceptance and progressive ambition.* To this point, our theory has outlined the impact of various situational factors (or the "opportunity structure") on the congressman's decision on whether to seek higher office. These situational factors determine the risks a potential candidate must face in trying to move up. The risks do not, however, tell the whole story. That is (returning to expressions 3 and 4 above), if two candidates are faced with the same levels of $P_i(O_j)$ and $C(a_i)$, and each has an identical preference ordering in which O_3 is preferred to O_2 which is preferred to O_1 , it may still be the case that one will run and the other will not. This is because "some people are more likely to select risky alternatives than are others" (Riker and Ordeshook, 1973, p. 75).¹⁹ People with the same preference ordering will differ in the *intensity* of those preferences. One representative may find a Senate seat more desirable than his House seat, but only slightly so, while either is very strongly preferred to having no office. A second congressman may find the higher office enormously more attractive than his present one, which is only slightly preferable to returning to private life. The latter is the kind of person we conventionally refer to as ambitious, and he will accept far greater risks to achieve the higher office than will the former. Indeed, we believe that it is differences in intensity of preference, and thus willingness to take electoral risks in seeking offices, that distinguishes the ambitious politician from the nonambitious.

These considerations lead us to our next hypothesis:

H₇: If two House members are presented with similar opportunities to seek higher office, and one is a "risk taker" and the other is not, then the "risk taker" will have a greater probability of running for higher office than the other.

This concludes the discussion of hypothesis on which we will bring data to bear. We will discuss further consequences of our theory after presenting some empirical results.

The Data

The data used to test the hypothesis relate to all members of the U.S. House of Representatives who were presented with an opportunity to run for either a Senate seat or the governorship in elections between 1954 and 1974 inclusive. To test the hypotheses we require information on the length of governors' terms, whether an incumbent is running for

¹⁹ See also Shepsle (1972a, 1972b).

reelection to the prospective higher office, the degree of inter-party competitiveness of the state, the size of the state, and the seniority of each congressional incumbent.

All election statistics, information on length of gubernatorial terms and information on whether an incumbent was seeking reelection to the higher office²⁰ are taken from appropriate volumes of *American Votes*. Seniority data were taken from *Members of Congress 1945-1970* (1971), supplemented by information in the 1973 *Congressional Directory*.

We consider a member to have an opportunity to run for higher office if he is a member of Congress (subject to the exceptions discussed below) in a year when an election is held in his state for a Senate seat or the governorship, and the office in question is either held by an incumbent of the other party or has no incumbent seeking reelection. Thus for the present study we do not consider the possibility of a congressman opposing an incumbent of his own party. While we expect the nature of the calculations to be basically the same in such a case, the situations are quite different and require separate analyses.

We have already stated that we would exclude members with discrete ambition from our theoretical discussion and from our empirical analysis. Therefore, members who resign from the House or who announce their retirement at the end of a term are not considered to have had an opportunity to run for higher office. Secondly, since our consideration of progressive ambition is limited to the Senate and governorships, any House member who ran for any other office is excluded from the analysis. Thirdly, since we have limited our discussion to situations where a congressman must give up his House seat to run for higher office, five states²¹ which elect their governors at times other than November of even numbered years are omitted from the analysis of members seeking governorships, as are members from other states who run in special elections held at times other than November of even numbered years.²² Finally, we exclude from our analysis of any given

²⁰ A congressman seeking higher office is considered to be opposing an incumbent even if the incumbent was defeated for renomination and thus was not an opponent in the general election. We do, however, limit our definition of incumbents to office holders elected to an office. Thus Senators who were appointed to vacancies and governors who succeeded to the office because of the death or resignation of the previous occupant of the office are not considered to be incumbents.

²¹ Kentucky, Louisiana, Mississippi, New Jersey, and Virginia.

²² An exception is made in the case of members from states in which their party, at the time of the member's opportunity to run, made nominations for state-

election all members who were elected to the House in special elections since the previous November election. Because of the necessity of planning ahead for a statewide race, such congressmen are almost precluded from running and, in fact, no such member did run.²³

Of course, to test hypothesis seven we need some indicator of which members of the House are risk takers. One possibility would be to develop a questionnaire which contains indicators of willingness to take risks, and administer the questionnaire to a set of potential candidates. The costs, however, would be great and such a course would be impossible with the timespan with which we are dealing. Instead, we assume that it is possible to employ previous behavior as an indicator of risk taking. Specifically, we examined the situation in which each member first sought election to the House.²⁴ We classified situations²⁵ in which (1) an incumbent was running for reelection, or (2) no incumbent was running, but the other party averaged 57 percent or more of the vote in the three

wide office in party conventions rather than in primaries. All members in such situations (who otherwise fit our definition of opportunity) are considered to have had an opportunity to run, and any such member who announced his candidacy for Senator or governor is counted as having run, even though he did not have to give up his House seat unless he actually achieved his party's nomination. (Information on such cases was obtained from appropriate issues of *Congressional Quarterly Weekly Reports*.) The rationale for this exception is that such members were in a situation similar to a member who could run unopposed in his party's primary.

²³ All information on congressmen who ran for reelection, for higher office, or who followed another course during the period 1954–1974, was gathered from appropriate volumes of *Congressional Quarterly Almanac* and checked against information in the *Biographical Directory of the American Congress, 1774–1971* for accuracy.

²⁴ The reader should note that we used the situation in which the member first sought election, rather than the one in which he was first elected. That is, if an actor ran for the House at t_1 , lost, and then ran again at t_2 and won, the situation at t_1 is used as the indicator of willingness to take risks.

²⁵ Information on recruitment situations were gathered from various volumes of *Congressional Quarterly Almanac*, various volumes of *America Votes*, and *The Biographical Directory of the American Congress 1774–1971*. The data in *America Votes* only go back to 1946, and thus we do not have data on election margins of members before the date. If a state did not redistrict, whether a member defeated an incumbent could be ascertained by comparing rosters of congressmen in *The Biographical Directory*. If a member did not defeat an incumbent, then for the period before 1946 we classed a district which was represented for five or more consecutive years by one congressman as a high risk situation for a candidate of the other party. A few members about whom we could not determine such information because of redistricting were omitted from the entire data set.

previous elections²⁶ as high risk situations and a member who first sought election in such a situation was classified as a risk taker. A race with no incumbent that did not fit (2) above was classified as low risk, and members who first sought election in such a situation are classified as "others."²⁷

This compilation yields a data set of 3,040 opportunities to run, of which 111 (or 3.7 percent) were taken.²⁸

Testing the Hypotheses

In this first exploratory analysis, we will employ cross-tabulation to examine the impact of one or two independent variables at a time.²⁹ Each table will present the proportion of opportunities taken and will control for whether or not the members in question are risk takers.

Table 1 presents the data on hypotheses one and two, relating to the relative value of the higher offices, controlling for whether or not the members are risk takers. Overall, House members are about three times more likely to run for senator than for a four-year governorship and about eleven times more than a two-year governorship. This pattern is true for both risk takers and for others. Again overall, risk takers are about two and one-half times more likely to run for higher office than are nonrisk takers.

In order to make the compilation of data manageable, we combined the test of hypotheses three and four. Members who faced an opportunity to run were placed in one of two categories: low probability of

²⁶ If, because of redistricting after 1946, election statistics were only available for one or two elections, those data were used to classify the situation. If a redistricting took place immediately before the relevant election, maps of the old and new lines were compared up to 1972. If the lines were little changed, statistics for the three previous elections were employed. If the lines were substantially changed, the situation was classified as low risk. For members who first sought election in 1972, we employed the data in *Congressional Districts in the 1970's* (1973) on previous party votes within new district lines.

²⁷ Not as "risk averters" because because we do not know that they would not have run if the previous incumbent had been running.

²⁸ If we counted members rather than opportunities, the totals would be 911 possible candidates of whom 109 ran. There are two fewer candidates here because two members (Robert Taft of Ohio and Sam Stratton of New York) ran twice.

²⁹ While our method of testing is similar to that used in most ambition analyses, we intend in future research to employ multivariate probit analysis, which will permit the evaluation of all of the hypotheses simultaneously. For a discussion of this technique see McKelvey and Zavoina (1975) and Aldrich and Cnudde (1975).

TABLE 1
Proportion of Members Running for Higher Office,
Controlling for Risk Taking and Type of Office

Office:	Member is:		Total
	Risk Taker	Other	
Two-Year	0.6	0.4	0.5
Governorship	(180)*	(252)	(432)
Four-Year	3.6	0.8	2.1
Governorship	(522)	(623)	(1145)
Senate Seat	7.8	3.9	5.8
	(715)	(748)	(1463)
Total	5.4	2.2	3.7
	(1417)	(1623)	(3040)

*Number of opportunities

winning or high probability of winning. The former category included members who would have to face an incumbent, or who were in a state in which the other party averaged 57 percent or more of the vote for senator and governor over the previous four years; the latter category includes other members. (Note that this classification implies no absolute meaning; these probabilities are high or low relative only to each other.) Thus our combined prediction is that the proportion of members who run for higher office when the probability of winning is high will be greater than the proportion who run when the probability is low. Table 2 presents the relevant data.

While the results are in the predicted direction, the impact of probability of winning appears to be minimal. The reason for this apparent lack of relationship becomes clear, however, when we control for type of office (see Table 3). When we compare each cell in part A (the upper half) of Table 3 to the corresponding cell in part B, we almost always find a fairly substantial difference between the two proportions. The difference between the results here and those in Table 2 is due to the fact that Senate races offered mostly low probability opportunities while gubernatorial races offered primarily high probability opportunities. (This is because incumbents are more likely to be involved in Senate races.)

The data in Table 3 offer a fairly strong test of the theory since the

TABLE 2

Proportion of Members Running for Higher Office,
Controlling for Risk Taking and Probability of Winning

Member is:	Percent of Opportunities Taken When Probability of Winning Was:		
	High	Low	Total
Risk Taker	6.0 (603)*	4.9 (814)	5.3 (1417)
Other	2.8 (795)	1.6 (828)	2.2 (1623)
Total	4.1 (1398)	3.2 (1642)	3.7 (3040)

*Number of opportunities

first four hypotheses plus hypothesis seven are all considered simultaneously. We can see that each of the elements that have been considered thus far have independent effects. If we look at the highest probability case from the point of view of the theory (risk takers with Senate opportunities and a high probability of winning), the proportion who run is more than one in ten, while in a number of low probability cases the proportion running is zero. The fact, however, that in the most attractive situation reflected in this table only one opportunity in ten is taken indicates how high the risks are even then. The situation is, again, only attractive relative to the others, not in absolute terms.

The reader will note that there is one cell in Table 3 that breaks the predicted pattern (nonrisk taker, two-year governorship, low probability of winning). This deviation is due to a single member seeking office, and as is often true the deviant case is instructive. In 1962, as a result of the 1960 census, Michigan gained one House seat. It was made an at-large seat, and Neil Staebler (a Democrat) won it. In 1964, the state was redistricted and the at-large seat was eliminated. Also in 1964, both a Senate seat and the governorship were up for election. The Senate seat was held by a popular Democrat, Philip Hart, who was seeking reelection. The governorship was held by Republican George Romney who was also first elected in 1962, defeating an incumbent Democrat with 51.4 percent of the vote, and who was running for a second term. Rom-

ney was the first Republican to win the governorship since 1946. Thus Staebler was presented with a number of alternatives. He could *not* run for reelection since his seat had disappeared, but he could (1) run for nothing (obviously unattractive), (2) run in one of the new open House districts (unattractive for someone who had already won a statewide

TABLE 3

Proportion of Members Running for Higher Office,
Controlling for Risk Taking, Probability of Winning, and Type of Office

A. Probability of Winning is High			
Office	Member is:		
	Risk Taker	Other	Total
Two-Year	1.1	0.0	0.5
Governorship	(90)*	(124)	(214)
Four-Year	4.5	1.2	2.6
Governorship	(309)	(410)	(719)
Senate Seat	10.3	6.5	8.2
	(204)	(261)	(465)
Total	6.0	2.8	4.1
	(603)	(795)	(1398)
B. Probability of Winning is Low			
Office	Member is:		
	Risk Taker	Other	Total
Two-Year	0.0	0.8	0.5
Governorship	(90)	(128)	(218)
Four-Year	2.3	0.0	1.2
Governorship	(213)	(213)	(426)
Senate Seat	6.8	2.5	4.7
	(511)	(487)	(998)
Total	4.9	1.6	3.2
	(814)	(828)	(1642)

*Number of opportunities

race) or (3) run from his statewide base against an incumbent Republican governor who had won office with a smaller margin than he himself had received, in what appeared to be a superb year for a Democrat (obviously not an ideal alternative, but apparently the best of those available). Furthermore, while the governor's term was only two years, under the new Michigan Constitution the next election would be for a four-year term. Staebler chose the third option and was soundly trounced by Romney.

One alternative available to test hypothesis five would have been to ascertain the population of each congressional district, determine the proportion of the state's population contained within each district, and then rank the districts in terms of these proportions. Since, however, population figures on districts are based on census data and such figures become progressively more unreliable as the time since the census increases, we have followed the simpler course of determining the amount of overlap between the district constituency and the statewide constituency by the number of congressional districts the state has. We then group the states into five categories: 1 or 2 districts, 3–6 districts, 7–10 districts, 11–19 districts, and 22 or more districts.³⁰ These data are presented in Table 4.³¹

We see that the prediction is supported by the data. For both risk takers and others combined, the proportion of opportunities taken decreases monotonically as the number of districts in a state increases. Moreover, the relationship is clearly not linear. The likelihood of a House member seeking a Senate seat in a state with only one or two districts, where the constituency overlap is great, is more than one in three. This drops sharply to about one in ten for the next category, drops sharply again for the third, with the proportion of opportunities taken in the last three categories being about the same. Furthermore, in four of the five district categories, a comparison of the proportions for risk takers and for others shows that the former is substantially larger than the latter. Indeed, in the theoretically most attractive situation (risk takers, 1 or 2 districts) the proportion that runs approaches one in two, forty times larger than the least attractive situation.

We now turn to the last of our initial hypotheses. During the initial analysis for this paper, seniority data were not compiled. We were,

³⁰ The omission of 20 and 21 districts from the groupings is due to the fact that no state had that many districts during the period.

³¹ Four opportunities of members from at-large seats in states with more than two districts are included in the 1 or 2 district category.

TABLE 4

Proportion of Members Running for Senator,
Controlling for Risk Taking and Number of Districts in State

Number of Districts in State	Percent of Opportunities Taken When Member is:		
	Risk Taker	Other	Total
1 or 2	45.9 (37)*	28.3 (46)	36.1 (83)
3-6	9.3 (86)	11.3 (53)	10.1 (139)
7-10	4.9 (182)	2.4 (124)	3.9 (306)
11-19	6.5 (124)	1.8 (163)	3.8 (287)
22 or more	4.9 (286)	1.1 (362)	2.8 (648)
Total	7.8 (715)	3.9 (748)	5.8 (1463)

*Number of opportunities

therefore, going to test the seniority hypothesis in a future version of this analysis. However, some information bearing on the hypothesis can be presented, so it was decided to include it here, although it is largely retrospective data. The average number of consecutive terms in office served by House members between 1953 and 1969 was 5.22;³² the average number of terms served by the 111 members who ran for higher office was 3.52. Thus House members seeking higher office served about one and one-half terms less than the average House member. Furthermore, we find that the amount of seniority possessed by candidates varies with risk-taking category, type of office, and probability of winning (see Table 5). Among members who sought Senate seats, the only large difference is between members with the least attractive opportunity (nonrisk taker, low probability of winning) and all those in other cells. However, most of

³² These data on House seniority were gathered as part of a study of House turnover from 1791 through 1968, reported in Fiorina, Rohde, and Wissel (1975).

TABLE 5

Seniority of House Members Seeking Higher Office,
Controlling for Risk Taking, Type of Office, and
Probability of Winning

A. Senate Seat

Member Is	Probability of Winning was		
	High	Low	Total
Risk Taker	4.05 (21)	3.46 (35)	3.68 (56)
Other	3.88 (17)	2.58 (12)	3.34 (29)
Total	3.97 (38)	3.23 (47)	3.56 (85)

B. Governorship

Member Is	Probability of Winning was		
	High	Low	Total
Risk Taker	4.19 (16)	2.50 (4)	3.85 (20)
Other	2.00 (5)	1.00 (1)	1.83 (6)
Total	3.67 (21)	2.20 (5)	3.38 (26)

Note: Cell entries give the mean consecutive terms served by members in the cell (number of members in cell in parentheses).

the other possible comparisons (e.g., among gubernatorial candidates) show more substantial differences. This is, of course, the least direct test of any of the hypotheses, and the results must be regarded as extremely tentative.

Summary and Conclusions

This study has differed from most other analyses of ambition in two ways: first, we have attempted to give a more concrete theoretical base

to the study of progressive ambition, and second, our analysis has been prospective rather than retrospective. That is, we have attempted to predict which potential candidates would actually run for higher office, rather than analyze the career patterns of actors who ran.

We chose as the context of our analysis members of the U.S. House and the decision on whether or not to seek a Senate seat or a governorship. The period of analysis was 1954 to 1974. We assumed that progressive ambition was widespread among members of the House, that House members are maximizers of expected utility, and that the decision on seeking higher office is dependent on the probability of winning, the value of an office, and the costs of running, with each of the three factors applied to both the House seat and the potential higher office.

We then offered a number of hypotheses about progressive ambition among House members. The data supported the following predictions: (1) congressmen are more likely to run for a Senate seat than for a governorship; (2) congressmen are more likely to run for governor if the term of office is four years rather than two; (3) congressmen are more likely to seek higher office if the probability of winning is high rather than low (where low probability is indicated by an incumbent running for reelection or the state being safe for the opposition party); and (4) congressmen are more likely to run for the Senate in a small state than a large one. In addition, it appears that less senior congressmen are more likely to seek higher office than more senior congressmen.

We also introduced the concept of *risk taking*. We argued that risk takers were more likely to seek higher office than members who were not risk takers. We employed the situation in which a congressman first sought a House seat as an indicator of willingness to take risks. The data supported the prediction in almost all the situations that were examined.

As we noted earlier, the results presented are preliminary. Any final conclusions must await a multivariate analysis in which all of the variables we have discussed are considered simultaneously. Furthermore, in addition to the hypotheses we presented above, others also follow from the theory and will have to be tested at a later date. Before concluding, it is appropriate to outline a number of these.

First, regarding the probability of winning the higher office, other features of the situation are obviously relevant in addition to whether or not there is an incumbent and the degree of party competition. Incumbents are not invulnerable; some *are* beaten. An incumbent's previous margin of election, particularly if he also was an incumbent then, is an indicator of how vulnerable he is. The lower that margin, the greater should be the

likelihood that a representative would accept the opportunity to run. Another consideration related to this point which should be important is the nature of competition for the nomination for the higher office in both parties. A representative would find a situation in which the only opponent he faced for his party's nomination was a local office holder or someone who had never held office to be a good deal more attractive than a situation in which his primary opponent would be the state's governor. A similar argument would hold relative to the competition for the nomination in the other party if no incumbent were running. Thus we would expect that the more formidable the prospective opposition is, the less likely it is that a representative would take an opportunity to run for higher office.

With respect to the value of the member's present seat, we must consider more than seniority in the House. Party is one consideration; Republicans have less power in the House than Democrats, and their minority status is almost certain to continue; therefore they should be more likely to seek higher office than their majority party counterparts. Other related matters are: whether the member serves on a prestige committee; whether he is a committee or subcommittee chairman or ranking member; or whether he is a member of the party leadership. All of these are power positions in the House and thus members who occupy them should be less likely to seek higher office.

Finally, there is the matter of the probability of winning the present seat. While previous margin of victory is probably the best indicator available, there does not appear to be a simple relationship between it and the probability of seeking higher office. In general, a large margin in the previous election indicates that a member is relatively safe from a challenge. Thus, his probability of reelection is high and he should be less likely to seek higher office than another member who is less secure. However, in the case of members from small states, a large margin is not only insurance against a challenge but also potentially an advantage in seeking another office. If a representative from a state with a single congressional district received a much larger vote in his previous election than did an incumbent senator or governor the representative is considering opposing, then that incumbent's advantage may be largely wiped out. This would make a potential challenge more attractive. As the number of congressional districts increases, the potential benefit of a large previous margin of election in the statewide arena declines. Thus, while it is not clear from the theory what the precise relationship is between margin of election and probability of seeking higher office (since these two forces

would push a representative in opposite directions), it is clear that there should be a stronger positive relationship (or weaker negative one) between previous margin and running for higher office among representatives from states with few districts than among those from states with many districts.

In addition, one other factor related to the probability of retaining the present office is the impact of redistricting. If a member is injured by redistricting, he should be more likely to seek higher office; conversely, if he is made safer he should be less likely to run.³³

This concludes our discussion of the implications of our theory of progressive ambition. While a full test of the theory was not possible at this time, we believe that the evidence that has been adduced strongly indicates that the theory has a good deal of potential.

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³³ The reader will note that no separate mention has been made of either of the cost factors— $C(a_1)$ or $C(a_2)$. This is because we have been unable to devise any variable indicators of costs which are not already taken into account elsewhere. For example, costs of running for higher office will be higher, *ceteris paribus*, in large states than in small ones. Thus a representative in a big state should be less likely to seek higher office.

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