IV. CONGRESSIONAL ELECTIONS

A. INCUMBENTS USUALLY WIN

1. During the last 50 years, incumbency has been the single most important factor in determining the outcome of congressional elections.
2. Over 90 percent of House incumbents seeking reelection win.
3. Over 75 percent of Senate incumbents seeking reelection win.

B. REASONS WHY INCUMBENTS WIN

1. Money
   - Incumbents are usually able to raise more campaign contributions than their challengers.
   - PACs contribute more money to incumbents than to their challengers.
   - Incumbents outspend challengers by a ratio of more than 2 to 1.

2. Visibility
   - Incumbents are usually better known to the voters than are their challengers.
   - Incumbents have opportunities to participate in highly visible activities that are covered by local newspapers and local television stations.

3. Constituent service
   - There is a close link between constituent service and reelection.
Members of Congress are able to win supporters by performing casework for their constituents and by bringing home money and jobs (“pork”) for their district. Casework consists of helping individual constituents, often by cutting through bureaucratic red tape. Pork is legislation that allows representatives to bring money and jobs to their district. Incumbents often sit on committees that enable them to earmark or designate specific projects for their district. Pork helps representatives earn a reputation for service to their district.

4. The franking privilege
   - The franking privilege refers to the right of members of Congress to mail newsletters to their constituents at the government’s expense.
   - Within recent years, members of Congress have extended the franking privilege to include e-mails and recorded phone calls.

5. Gerrymandering
   - Members of the House often represent districts that have been deliberately gerrymandered to include voting blocs that support incumbents.
   - Gerrymandered districts discourage strong challengers from trying to compete with incumbents.

C. CONSEQUENCES OF THE INCUMBENCY ADVANTAGE

1. Congress contains a large number of experienced leaders, thus enabling it to maintain continuity of leadership and policy.
2. The continuity discourages radical change while encouraging close relations with interest groups.
3. Because incumbents benefit the most from existing campaign finance laws, they have no incentive to reform them.

Polls repeatedly report that a majority of Americans disapprove of the job Congress is doing. Yet the same polls also report that a majority of Americans believe that their own representative deserves to be reelected. The AP U.S. Government and Politics Development Committee has devoted more multiple-choice questions to this paradox than to any other topic. Be sure that you carefully study the reasons why incumbents are usually reelected.