Do representatives and senators respond to the critiques raised by their challengers? This study, one of the first to explore how legislators’ experiences as candidates shape their subsequent behavior as policy makers, demonstrates that they do. Winning legislators regularly take up their challengers’ priority issues from the last campaign and act on them in office, a phenomenon called “issue uptake.” This attentiveness to their challengers’ issues reflects a widespread and systematic yet largely unrecognized mode of responsiveness in the U.S. Congress, but it is one with important benefits for the legislators who undertake it and for the health and legitimacy of the representative process. Because challengers focus their campaigns on their opponents’ weaknesses, legislators’ subsequent uptake of these issues helps to inoculate them against future attacks and brings new and salient issues to the congressional agenda. This book provides fresh insight into questions regarding the electoral connection in legislative behavior, the role of campaigns and elections, and the nature and quality of congressional representation.

Tracy Sulkin is an assistant professor in the departments of political science and speech communication at the University of Illinois, Urbana–Champaign. She received her Ph.D. from the University of Washington in 2002. Her work has appeared in the American Political Science Review, Political Analysis, American Politics Research, and Political Psychology. This book is based on her dissertation, which won APSA’s Schattschneider Award in 2003.
Issue Politics in Congress

TRACY SULKIN
University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign
Contents

List of Figures vii
List of Tables viii
Acknowledgments xi

1 Electoral Challenges and Legislative Responsiveness 1
2 A Theory of Issue Uptake 19
3 The Nature of Campaign and Legislative Agendas 43
4 Assessing Uptake 71
5 Who Responds? Explaining Individual Variation in Uptake 89
6 Patterns of Responsiveness in Congress 114
7 The Electoral Impacts of Uptake 128
8 Uptake and Public Policy 150
9 Elections, Governance, and Representation 167

Appendix House and Senate Samples 179
References 193
Index 203
Figures

3.1 Campaign and Congressional Attention to Tax Policy, 1988–1998

5.1 Predicted Uptake Counts by Vulnerability

5.2 Vulnerability and Uptake in the U.S. House

5.3 Vulnerability and Uptake in the U.S. Senate

5.4a Relationship between Vulnerability and Uptake for Vulnerable Representatives

5.4b Relationship between Vulnerability and Uptake for Vulnerable Senators

5.5 Relationship between Vulnerability and Uptake – Hypothesis 1

5.6 Relationship between Vulnerability and Uptake – Hypothesis 2

5.7a Vulnerability and Uptake for Relatively Safe Senators

5.7b Vulnerability and Uptake for Vulnerable Senators

5.8a Vulnerability and Uptake for Very Safe Representatives

5.8b Vulnerability and Uptake for Relatively Safe Representatives

5.8c Vulnerability and Uptake for Vulnerable Representatives

6.1 Uptake Patterns across Activities by Vulnerability Group

6.2 Uptake Levels across the First and Second Years of House Terms

6.3 Uptake Levels across Congresses in Senate Terms
List of Figures

6.4 Within-Term Uptake Patterns for Safe and Vulnerable Legislators 126
7.1 Comparing the Uptake Levels of House Candidates and Retirees 133
8.1 Legislative Fates of Uptake Introductions 158
8.2 Uptake Laws by Issue Category 161
Tables

3.1 Characteristics of the House and Senate Samples  page 47
3.2 Issue Priorities in Campaigns and Activity in Congress  49
3.3 Summary of Legislative Activity for the House and Senate Samples  54
3.4 Sampled Candidates’ and Legislators’ Attention to Issues  57
3.5 Relative Attention to Issues across Election Years  62
3.6 Impact of Campaign Attention on Legislative Attention to Issues  70
4.1 Volume of Uptake in Legislative Activity  73
4.2 Factors to Consider in Comparing Uptake Levels  81
4.3 Activity on Health Policy by the House and Senate Samples  85
4.4 Uptake on Health Policy in the 101st–105th Congresses  86
5.1 Correlations between Electoral Vulnerability and Uptake  92
5.2 Summary of Structural Control Variables  94
5.3 Impact of Electoral Vulnerability on Uptake  95
5.4 Impact of Individual and Constituency Characteristics on Uptake  99
5.5 Uptake Patterns by Seniority and Vulnerability  106
6.1 Uptake Patterns across Chambers and across Activities  115
6.2 Impact of Vulnerability on Representatives’ Uptake on Introductions, Cosponsorships, and Floor Statements  119
6.3 Impact of Vulnerability on Senators’ Uptake on Introductions, Cosponsorships, and Floor Statements  120
**List of Tables**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table Number</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>7.1</td>
<td>Status of Sample in the Next Election</td>
<td>131</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.2</td>
<td>Does Uptake Influence Representatives’ Probability of Reelection?</td>
<td>135</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.3</td>
<td>Impact of Uptake Levels on Changes in Electoral Security</td>
<td>137</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.4</td>
<td>Varying Electoral Impact of Different Uptake Decisions</td>
<td>140</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.5</td>
<td>Effect of Uptake on General and Primary Election Opposition</td>
<td>144</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.6</td>
<td>Uptake and the Quality of Competition</td>
<td>146</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.1</td>
<td>Do Challenger-Themed Bills Receive Less Attention from Their Sponsors?</td>
<td>155</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.2</td>
<td>Comparing the Fates of Challenger- and Non-Challenger-Themed Bills</td>
<td>159</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Acknowledgments

Like all books, this one is the result of a number of years of work, and one of the many pleasures of bringing it to completion is the opportunity to thank those who have helped along the way.

This project began as my dissertation at the University of Washington, and my biggest debt is to my committee members there, Lance Bennett, Peter May, John Wilkerson, and especially my chair, Bryan Jones. The old saying about the job of journalists, that they ought to “comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable,” also seems to describe the role played by the best graduate mentors. Bryan combined equal measures of enthusiasm for the project with the conviction that I could make it better. I am grateful to him for both, and for his continuing wise counsel on matters both big and small.

At the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign, I found a collegial and congenial place to complete the book. Many colleagues in the departments of political science and speech communication offered helpful suggestions and feedback. In particular, Jim Kuklinski, Peter Nardulli, and Scott Althaus all went above and beyond the call of duty on many occasions, and I thank them for their patience and advice. Kris Miller, Leanne Knobloch, and Lisa Asplin took time off from their own work to read and comment on mine, and I am fortunate to count them as good colleagues and as good friends.

Funding for the project came from a number of sources, including a National Science Foundation Graduate Research Fellowship, a Congressional Research Award from the Dirksen Congressional Center, and grants from the Center for American Politics and Public Policy at the University of Washington and the Campus Research Board at the University.
of Illinois. A number of undergraduate Fellows at the Center for American Politics and Public Policy at UW helped in coding data, and Jillian Evans at UIUC provided expert research assistance in the final stages of the project.

The analyses presented here would not have been possible without the generosity of a number of colleagues who graciously offered their data to me. Adam Simon provided his content analysis data on discourse in Senate campaigns and Brian Gaines his data on challenger quality. My deepest debt on this front, though, is to those affiliated with the Policy Agendas Project and particularly to John Wilkerson, who shared both the bill introductions data he collected with Scott Adler and, even more valuable, his expertise in working with it.

Finally, I am grateful for the support of a number of family members and friends. Special thanks to Carolyn McNeill, Heather Larsen-Price, Katy Stenger, Matt Sulkin, and Jaret and Kim Treber. Most of all, I thank my parents, Steve and Shelley Sulkin, for thirty years of love and guidance. I dedicate this book to them, and to the memory of my grandmother, Dorothy Sulkin, who passed away shortly before it was completed.
Issue Politics in Congress