which engulfed Britain’s House of Commons in 2009. Members of all parties, it turned out, had been claiming on the public purse for supposed expenses such as cleaning moats and tuning pianos. Members of the mother of parliaments were in a position to dip their fingers in the pie – and did so.

More importantly, incumbent members from all parties typically seek re-election. To achieve this goal, they supply themselves with campaign resources (e.g. free mail) unavailable to their challengers, thus creating a powerful cartel against newcomers. Viewing politics purely as a clash between parties often leads to inadequate emphasis on this distinction within parties between incumbents and challengers. As in any other established class, politicians in post – of whatever party – are reluctant to upset the apple cart that has served them so well. Indeed, the greater the proportion of professional politicians in an assembly, the more likely it is that incumbent candidates will be re-elected (Berry et al., 2000).

Politics as a profession implies a distinct view not only of representation, but also of politics. It rejects the notion that governance is a task which Athenian-style citizen-legislators can undertake. It implies dissatisfaction with the idea that an assembly should draw together a representative sample of citizens ‘different in nature, different in interests, different in looks, different in language’ (Bagehot, 1867, p. 155). Rather, politics as a profession implies an emphasis on training, knowledge, experience, and skill. Politics becomes a job, in the same way as law, medicine, and teaching.

Within the broad category of professional politician, the main contrast is between American political entrepreneurs and the more party-based careerists found in the parliaments of other liberal democracies. In Congress, candidates must compete against opponents from their own party in a primary; in office, they must build a personal profile and record of achievement which protects them from challenge, and offers insurance should their party fall on hard times. And they must raise money for their campaign – which, for members of the House of Representatives, takes place every two years. Members of Congress must nurture their personal brand.

In most other liberal democracies, strong parties at both parliamentary and electoral level leave less room for independent action, resulting in loyal backbenchers, rather than political entrepreneurs. Even when partisanship is important, however, younger and better-educated members are keen to express their professionalism by making a difference. Although the French National Assembly remains a weak institution, Kerrouche (2006, p. 352) reports that even here ‘deputies want to criticize, to attract media attention and to put forward alternative policies’. These aspirations are reflected in a substantial number of private members’ bills and legislative amendments.

Of course, career politicians can only flourish in parliaments where re-election prospects are good. Generally, re-election is the norm in liberal democracies. Typically, most sitting legislators return for a new term (Figure 15.4). The question of the ideal level of turnover is difficult to answer with precision. On the one hand, the return rate should be high enough to sustain professionalism, allowing the