

To what extent do the parochial interests of individual members impede the effectiveness of Congress as a whole?

Congress exists in theory as a legislative body for the benefit of all citizens of the USA. In practice, the reality is rather different. Individual congressmen often pursue their own parochial interests at the expense of the effectiveness of Congress as a whole. To understand this, we must resort first to the self-interest axiom, which suggests that humans seek to achieve their own ends rather than the ends of their fellow men. This line of argument is used most often in economics to describe the rational consumer, but can be applied equally well to the rational politician. The primary goal of the rational politician is re-election, not simply for the salary and perks of the office, but also for the prestige, excitement and power which go with it. In the House of Representatives, congressmen are fighting for re-election every two years, so the subject is constantly on their minds. The theory can equally be applied to the rational voter, who votes for those politicians who follow his wishes and do him favours. This 'mutual exploitation' leads to a Darwinian process of natural selection; the people as a whole weed out those politicians whose primary motive is not re-election. Mayhew's authoritative work on this subject describes congressmen as "single-minded seekers of re-election" and describes three strategies to achieve this, all of which are entrepreneurial in character; position-taking, credit-claiming and advertising. Splitting credit-claiming into two, Morris P. Fiorina claims that "for most of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, congressmen have engaged in three types of activities: lawmaking, pork barrelling and casework". All of these are examined below.

In taking a position during the process of lawmaking, the critical consideration of the rational politician is to take a position which maximises approval in the home district. Fiorina claims:

*"Politicians have propounded an ideology which maintains that the good of the country...is simply what is best for a majority of congressional districts."*

This is made easier by the relative ethnic or economic homogeneity of congressional districts. When a district is dominated by a major economic interest, the views of the Representative are rarely decided autonomously. For example, a Representative from the 7<sup>th</sup> District of Michigan feels obliged to protect General Motors workers from the threat of Japanese imports, and would be unwise to vote against such measures. As a result of such position-taking, Americans pay far higher prices for tobacco, peanuts, rice and sugar than they would in a free trade situation.

David E. Price, a political scientist and former congressman, reports that legislators must attempt to 'broaden the scope of conflict' by putting purely local concerns on the national agenda. He

argues that the electoral payoffs for taking a position may be just as great as those for succeeding in getting policy through. Mayhew supports this, asking whether Hatfield and McGovern “would have been any the more esteemed by their supporters if their [anti-Vietnam war] amendment had won rather than lost”. Due to this, claims Price, involvement in policy is “too often superficial and fleeting”. This robs the legislature of the energy and persistence needed to make it work effectively. Fenno argues:

*“Appearing to do something about policy without a serious intention of, or demonstrable capacity for, doing so is a corruption of the representative relationship”*

American voters also appreciate those who take positions independent of their parties on certain issues; Price describes this as a ‘Lone Ranger ethical bias’. This lowers the capacity of the party to act in an orderly and effective fashion. Former congressman Jacob Javits had no hesitation in revealing his view on the subject:

*“In this clash of loyalties - loyalty to constituents, loyalty to party, and loyalty to myself - my constituents and I had to prevail”*

Another means of appealing to local interests is pork barrelling, that is the channelling of federal funds into local projects. Enormous importance is attached to appropriations. Applications for funds would be sent to one’s own Representative, who would, if he had confidence that it would get through, ‘flag’ it for discussion. Sometimes a member of Congress gets even more involved, such as helping to initiate a project. Fiorina states that congressmen must ‘bring home the bacon’ if they are to succeed, and that they see new schemes such as dams, federal buildings, sewage treatment plants and urban renewal projects as ‘sweet plums to be plucked’. Price lists some examples from his own district: \$5,000,000 for an experimental radar system at Raleigh-Durham Airport, a \$1,700,000 planning grant for new buildings at the University of North Carolina and \$550,000 for the restoration of an historic building on another university campus. The economic value of such projects is easily detected by constituents, and may be more important to them than, for example, their Representative’s views on civil rights legislation. The rules of the House allow this pork barrelling and indeed recognise its importance; certain legislation gets ‘privileged status’ and can thus avoid the Rules Committee. Examples are taxation and spending, rivers and harbours bills and public lands bills. Fiorina cynically sums this up in the following way:

*“The House will allow a civil rights or defence procurement or environmental bill to languish in the Rules Committee, but it takes special precautions to ensure that nothing slows down the approval of dams and irrigation projects.”*

Groseclose and Stewart found by analysing transfers of congressional personnel that a seat on the House Appropriations Committee was seen as being more valuable than a seat on any other two committees combined, excluding the Rules Committee and the Ways and Means Committee. Price writes that such a seat is valuable because it “allows one to influence decisions directly” and “broker requests from colleagues”. Spending limits are imposed by wider governmental decisions, but Appropriations subcommittees still have wide discretion in deciding what gets funded and at what level, and Price claims that “members vie intently for their favour”.

The other main activity of the average congressman is casework. Roughly half of them keep their main residence in their district and return there for long weekends, spending only three workdays per week in Washington D.C. Casework involves a huge range of issues such as social security, medicine, veterans' benefits, tax problems, immigration, naturalisation and passports. The common theme in all of these is the congressman as ombudsman; contact with Congress is the standard appeals process against bureaucratic decisions. The congressman is, in Fiorina's words, a ‘monopoly supplier of bureaucratic unsticking services’. Bureaucrats are, according to Fenno and Wildarsky, terrified of the House Appropriations Committee, who have the ability to cut their budgets and prevent their expansion or even survival.

Indifference must never be shown to constituents, as this would generate bad publicity; word of mouth is an effective means of generating popularity and an even more effective means of generating unpopularity. Fiorina suggests that some congressmen deliberately stimulate demand for bureaucratic fix-it services, asking constituents whether or not they have problems and offering to help. Price claims that “party and ideological differences often mean nothing to a constituent who has been helped”.

There is within the system a clear advantage for the incumbent politician, and the re-election rate of 95% is unprecedented in Western democracies. Not only do congressmen spend much of their time dealing with local interests, but they also advertise the fact heavily. Members of Congress can send mail to their constituents informing them about their achievements, and while the content is governed by strict specific rules (for example the number of times a congressman can use the words ‘I’ or ‘my’ in a newsletter) the spirit of the rules is rarely enforced, and newsletters often end up looking more like campaign leaflets.

The balance of work between legislating, pork barrelling and casework is affected heavily by parochial interests. In legislative decisions, despite the relative homogeneity of congressional districts, it is certain that some elements of a congressman's constituency will be displeased. Programmatic accomplishments are dangerous due to their controversial nature and often

difficult to claim credit for, as constituents know that such accomplishments are achieved not only by their own representative but by a majority of the relevant chamber of Congress. In contrast, pork barrelling and casework are much less controversial. Fiorina claims that 'snipping ribbons' is 'pure profit' for the incumbent politician, while Clapp reports that someone with a reasonable complaint or query is seen as an opportunity, not a burden. With pork barrelling and especially with casework, it is much easier for a congressman to claim all the credit. It is hard to deny Bowles's claim that:

*"Members of Congress are local political figures running for office by appealing to local people and local groups on local issues"*

While it has been suggested by some that the current system provides a reliable method for the transmission of local demands, it is clear that such a high concentration on purely local concerns is to the detriment of Congress as a whole. It is common for an individual politician to distance himself from the institution as a whole, running for Congress by running against Congress; despite such high re-election rates, the institution rarely gets an approval rating of above 30%, which may be both a cause and a consequence of such behaviour. The effectiveness of Congress at fulfilling its constitutional role, legislating for the nation, is impeded to a great extent by the parochial interests and parochial behaviour of its individual members.