

Political Science 17.20

Introduction to American Politics

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Congress: Ambitious Politicians

Lecture 6 (February 26, 2013)

Outline

1 Goals and Constraints

2 Strategies

3 Consequences

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2 Strategies

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Congress As a Career

- **Framers' Assumption:** Politicians are ambitious and power-hungry, but mostly amateurs (“citizen-legislators”).
- Framers did not anticipate development of **professional** politicians who made Congress their career.

Ambitious, Goal-Oriented, and Strategic

Members of Congress (MCs) have **multiple goals**:

- Good public policy
- Status and power
- **Reelection**

Mayhew:

"[Election] has to be the proximate goal of everyone, the goal that must be achieved over and over if other ends are to be entertained."

Sole focus on reelection is a useful simplification (model), not a complete description of reality.

Mayhew, David R. *Congress: The Electoral Connection*. Yale University Press, 2004.
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MCs as Individuals

- **Downs:** Politicians compete for votes in “teams” (parties).
- **Mayhew:** Party is important, but party performance is a **collective good** that individual MCs affect little.
- So is the performance of Congress or the gov’t as a whole.
- Rational MCs focus on what they CAN affect: their own **individual** reputations.

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- Create familiar and favorable image among constituents (little or no issue content)
- Mere recognition \implies greater favorability
- Newsletters, public forums, television, . . .
- **Fenno**: “Home style” (presentation, explanation) \rightarrow trust

Credit Claiming

- MC as “doer”
- Credit claim must be **credible**.
- Particularistic, geographically targeted (pork/earmarks)
 - Dams, grants, post offices, the Big Dig . . .
- Nonideological logrolling
- Requires a lot of work behind the scenes

Position Taking

- Take a (popular) position on some issue
 - Often vague or consensual
 - Run *for* Congress by running *against* Congress
 - Roll-call votes on proposed legislation:
 - Take position
 - Affect passage (only if pivotal)
- May conflict (e.g., debt limit or Wall Street bailout)

Example: John Barrow

<http://www.barrowforcongress.com/>

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Consequences

- Individual rationality \implies collective irrationality
- Too much pork, too few collective goods (balanced budget)
- Hate Congress but love your representative
- Incumbency advantage (esp. in House)

Next time: Institutional solutions, including differences between House and Senate.

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