Congress: Ambitious Politicians

Lecture 6 (February 26, 2013)
Outline

1. Goals and Constraints
2. Strategies
3. Consequences
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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.
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.

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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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Advertising

- 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) $\implies$ 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/
Outline

1 Goals and Constraints

2 Strategies

3 Consequences
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.
17.20 Introduction to American Politics
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