



Congress and Political Parties

Since the founding of our nation, there has been a unanimously expressed need for a “national legislature [that] ought to consist of two branches” (Fenno 222). Yet the purpose of representation in this newly formed Congress created a controversial issue. James Madison argued in *Federalist* No. 10 that national legislators should be “trustees - representing their constituents by exercising independent judgment about the interests of the nation” (Smith 256). Despite Madison’s sentiments, most Americans believe that elected representatives should be delegates for their constituents (Smith 256). As a result of this belief, legislators in Congress have modeled their behavior to mirror their constituents’ ideas. As argued by each author in the articles for this week, virtually everything a Congressman or woman does in their office is related to being reelected. This idea is expressed by the kinds of actions of legislators take in their workplace and on the campaign trail for the sake of their constituents and for their positions in Congress.

While the election cycles vary from the House of Representatives to the Senate, they are both centered on one critical element: reelection. The difference in the election cycles means that while “House members never stop campaigning, senators do” (Fenno 227). This difference provides for two separate methods of governing while in Congress. Fenno argues that the goals of a Senator are to be a fine leader, make effective policy, and most importantly to become reelected. They have the ability to “at some point, stop their campaigning and devote their time and energy to something else” (Fenno 238). A Senator may join one specific committee of interest so that he or she can reform that

issue. Despite this fact, Fenno uses direct quotes from current Senators to argue that while a six-year term gives you some “squirming room,” you can never fully understand a senator ““without considering what happens to them while they are running for office”” (Fenno 237). The same issue applies to the House, but due to the short election cycle, there is little time to transition from campaigning to governing.

In order to become reelected, all legislators have to participate in several crucial activities that court their electorate. Mayhew argues that there are three principle activities used by congressmen and women: advertising, credit claiming, and position taking. Advertising, a way of getting out a politician’s name, is usually most enjoyed by incumbents with advantages like the franking privilege. Credit claiming is the way a politician gets others to believe that he or she is personally responsible for creating something desirable (Mayhew 248). One of the ways a legislator may do this is through “particularized benefits” like essay materials for a student, emergency leave for a soldier, or something as large as a grant-in-aid program. These claims on credit lead to an “awareness of favors... building for a member a general reputation as a good provider” (Mayhew 250). Position taking, the final contribution to a reelection campaign, is simply taking a stance on an issue. Like Senator Joseph McCarthy made “Communism” his issue, other representatives can simply state what he believes in, without necessarily acting on those opinions, to win voters. Combined, these actions are considered essential to what a public servant cares primarily about: reelection.

Over time, the actions of representatives as the delegates of their constituents have leaded them to become heavily connected to their constituents. They are often forced to directly interact with the public and less often with intermediaries resulting in the emergence of the “plebiscitary syndrome” (Smith 258). This syndrome has come as a

result of new technologies in communication and feedback, creating an undesirable direct communication that can be manipulated, may not be representative of the constituency, and can reduce negotiation flexibility. This syndrome is closely tied to the “campaign complex - the merging of campaigning and governing” (Smith 260). By binding the two, many political scientists believe it “reduces time for other activities, including time for the give-and-take of legislating” (Smith 261).

The result of the seemingly never-ending campaign is connected to the polarization of the United States electorate. After the “civil rights revolution, particularly the Voting Rights Act of 1965, [which] brought Southern blacks into the electorate as Democrats... the southern realignment left both congressional parties with more politically homogeneous electoral coalitions” (Jacobson 505). Over time, the coherence, consistency, and loyalty among voters provided politicians a direct and efficient way to campaign to their electorate. This idea solidified after the Reagan years; it became simple to recognize Republicans as conservative and Democrats as liberals. While this does not necessarily mean voters will line up, it does make campaign issues easier to identify.

The face of Congress has changed heavily since the times of czar rule, king caucus, and conservative Southern Democrats and liberal Northern Republicans. The result of communications technology advances, a changing electorate, and new campaign tactics are modern politicians working solely to be reelected, blurring the lines of governing and campaigning, and dividing parties and voters into red and blue.