



## Congress and Political Parties

Our founding fathers created a legislature in such a way as to divide the considerable power of that branch of government. “They determined that the Senate and the House should be structurally dissimilar with respect to their constituencies, their size, and the length of their terms” (224). However, after the passage of the Seventeenth Amendment, Representatives and senators both had to be popularly elected. Now, both houses of Congress and their electoral constituencies affect each other tremendously.

Richard F. Fenno Jr., focuses his discussion on the effects of the electorate on the campaigning and governing styles of senators and how they are different for the members of the House of Representatives. Senators have a six year term while House members only have a two year term. While House members never stop campaigning, senators do. And while senators are also concerned about reelection, they are less immediate. Fenno notes a pattern he calls “cyclical campaign activity.” The first indication that there is a cycle in senatorial behavior is the campaign for raising money. There is much campaign activity for raising money during the first year in office, presumably because they are still paying off the debts of the campaign just concluded (230). There is a significant decrease in campaign activity in the third year in office and the highest activity in the fifth year in office because of the proximity of reelection. There is also a weaker indication that home visits are related to this cycle. Another cyclical change is the voting pattern of senators once in office. As reelection time approaches, the voting behavior of senators moves more toward the preferences of their constituents (235).

David R. Mayhew discusses how reelection affects the actions of congressmen and

produces predictable behavior while in office. Much of what congressmen do is motivated by their desire to be reelected by their constituents. Congressmen engage in three types of activities to heighten their chances of reelection. The first and most basic activity is “advertising,” to make their names known and to create a favorable image of themselves. The second activity is “credit claiming,” or taking responsibility for favorable actions or changes in government. This leads congressmen to give particularized benefits to their constituents or “supplicants.” The third activity is “position taking,” to announce their opinions on certain issues that are important to the electorate. There is much research done to discover the stances that are considered salable. They work to prevent offending or disagreeing with as many of their constituents as possible.

According to Steven S. Smith, many factors prevent Congress from working efficiently. There has been a shift towards “plebiscitary politics,” more direct communication between the public and elected officials. Although this seems positive for democracy, it has some serious setbacks. Politicians may appear more receptive to public opinion because they can choose the time and place for direct communication. Additionally, those who contact their representatives are less likely to be of the larger constituency and are more likely to be special interests. Lastly, politicians may be so busy making promises to their constituents that they narrow down their options and produce no real results. “Public opinion would win out over the public interest” (260). Smith expands on this last factor and shows the detrimental relationship between members of Congress and their constituents. Today, there are many serious and complex problems that need long-term policies and commitments. However, members are preoccupied with immediately satisfying their constituents and concentrate on issues of the day rather than of the future.

Gary C. Jacobson explains the effects of partisan polarization in Congress on the

American public. Since the 1970s, party politics became increasingly divisive and this has led to a similar trend in the electorate. "Electorates diverged ideologically after the parties had diverged ideologically" (512). However, we must remember that members of Congress must attract voters through popular positions and are constrained by them. Therefore, the actions of legislators and their electorate directly reinforce one another. But it is important to note that while the two political parties are highly polarized, a large portion of the electorate remain somewhere in between the parties and are moderate voters.

These essays illustrate how legislators and their constituencies directly affect each other. In some cases, the electorate has such an impact on congressmen that their actions become predictable. In other cases, the legislators seem to influence the voting behavior of the electorate by choosing which issues to discuss and support. But there is also a more significant link between the two groups that prevent solutions to grave problems to be forthcoming.