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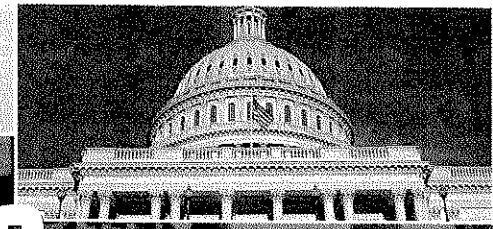
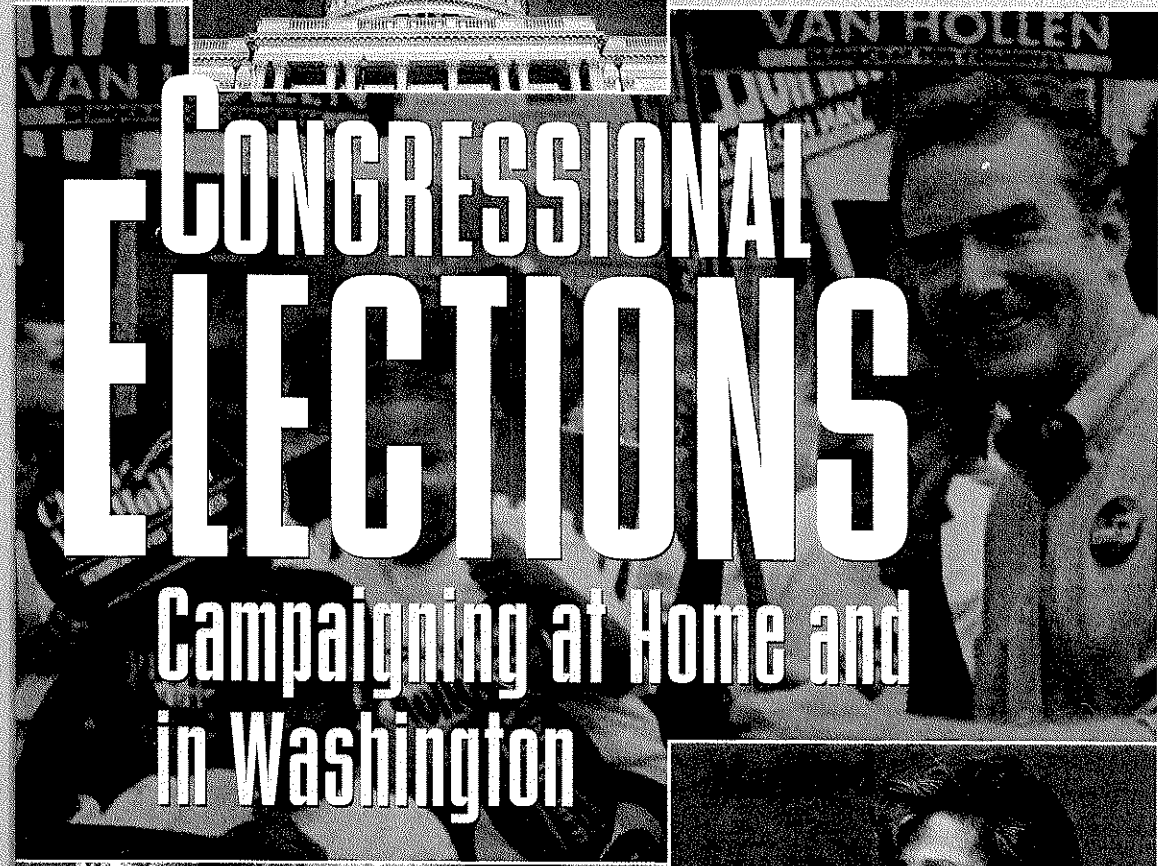
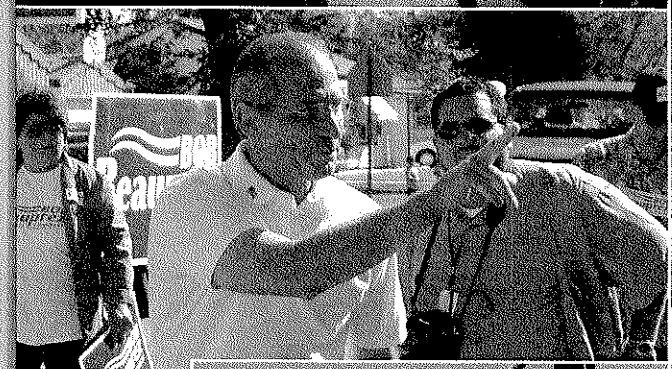
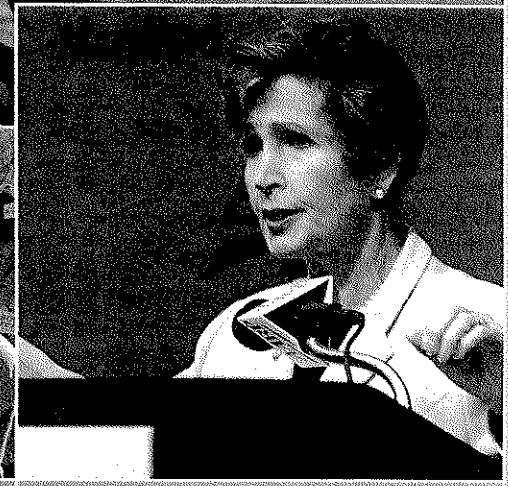


Congressional Elections

Campaigning at Home and in Washington







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In Memory of
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Preface

Each congressional election cycle unveils both continuities and changes in the way congressional campaigns are conducted. Writing this new edition of *Congressional Elections* gave me the opportunity not only to analyze in depth the 2002 House and Senate campaigns and election outcomes but also to assess the far-reaching changes that have taken place in recent years. Although just a few years have gone by since publication of the third edition, congressional elections and the context in which they are waged continue to evolve in ways that are both major and minor, predictable and surprising. It has been my challenge to show how these developments affect an enduring but imperfect election system.

The significance of independent, parallel, and coordinated campaigns as important new components of competitive House and Senate elections cannot be overstated. These party- and interest group–sponsored campaigns comprise massive, broad-based efforts in election agenda setting, television and radio issue advocacy advertisements, direct mail and mass telephone calls, and grassroots mobilization, most of which are financed with soft money. The level of planning and resources dedicated to these campaigns is unsurpassed by previous election cycles.

Another set of changes involves the increasing complexity of interest group participation. In addition to political action committees (PACs), groups have created a veritable alphabet soup of legal entities for the purpose of carrying out a variety of political functions designed to influence elections. PACs, 501(c)(3) and 501(c)(4) organizations, and 527 committees—defined by different provisions of federal law—offer different organizational advantages such as the ability to contribute directly to congressional campaigns, to collect tax-deductible donations, to claim tax-exempt status, or to raise and spend soft money.

CHAPTER TEN

Elections and Governance

"The election is over, and now the fun begins." [1] Those were the words of one new House member shortly after being elected to Congress. Others had more sober, if not more realistic, visions of what lay ahead. Although getting elected to Congress is difficult, especially for those who have to topple an incumbent, staying there also requires great effort. The high reelection rates enjoyed by members of Congress are not a guarantee of reelection; they are the result of hard work, the strategic deployment of the resources that Congress makes available to its members, and the campaign dynamics discussed in previous chapters.

This chapter examines the efforts that members of Congress make in order to stay in office and analyzes the resources and strategies they use to shore up their electoral coalitions. Also reviewed is the impact of elections on Congress as a policy-making institution. First, I discuss the goals and activities of members of Congress and their congressional staffs. I then discuss the committees, issue caucuses, party organizations, and other groups that influence congressional activity. Finally, I comment on the policy-making process.

THE PERMANENT CAMPAIGN

As locally elected officials who make national policy, members of Congress almost lead double lives. The main focus of their existence in Washington, D.C., is framing and enacting legislation, overseeing the executive branch, and carrying out other activities of national importance. Attending local functions, ascertaining the needs and preferences of constituents, and explaining their Washington activities are what legislators do at home. Home is where

members of Congress acquire their legitimacy to participate in the legislative process. The central elements of legislators' lives both at home and in Washington are representing the voters who elected them, winning federally funded projects for their state or district, and resolving difficulties that constituents encounter when dealing with the federal government. The two aspects of members' professional lives are unified by the fact that much of what representatives do in Washington is concerned with getting reelected, and a good deal of what they do at home directly affects the kinds of policies and interests they seek to advance.[2] In a great many respects, the job of legislator resembles a permanent reelection campaign.

Members of Congress develop home styles that help them to maintain or expand their bases of electoral support. One common element of these home styles concerns how legislators present themselves to voters. Members build bonds of trust between themselves and voters by demonstrating that they are capable of handling the job, care about their constituents, and are living up to their campaign promises.[3]

A second component of home style is concerned with discussing the Washington side of the job. Members describe, interpret, and justify what they do in the nation's capital to convey the message that they are working relentlessly on their constituents' behalf.[4] Many respond to the low opinion that people have of Congress by trying to separate themselves from the institution in the minds of voters. Members frequently portray themselves as protectors of the national interest locked in combat with powerful lobbyists and feckless colleagues.

Members of Congress and their staffs spend immense amounts of time, energy, and resources advertising the legislator's name among constituents, claiming credit for favorable governmental actions, and taking strong but often symbolic issue positions to please constituents.[5] Their offices provide them with abundant resources for these purposes. House members are annually entitled to roughly $1 million for personnel and office expenses, including $662,700 for staff, a travel budget of up to $67,200, a suite of offices in the Capitol complex, one or more district offices, and virtually unlimited long-distance telephone privileges. Members who are assigned to certain committees, occupy committee chairs, or hold party leadership positions receive extra staff, office space, and operating funds. Senators are allowed even greater budgets, reflecting their larger constituencies and the greater responsibilities associated with representing an entire state. Senators' staffs, office space, and budget allocations are determined by their state's population and by their committee assignments. The annual administrative and clerical allowance for a senator from one of the smallest states is $1.4 million, compared with $2.4 million for a senator from California.[6] Although few legislators consume all the resources they are

allocated, many come close. The average House member hires approximately fourteen full-time aides; the average senator hires about thirty-four.[7] Among these aides are administrative assistants, legislative assistants, legislative correspondents, computer operators, schedulers, office managers, caseworkers, press secretaries, receptionists, staff assistants, and interns. Each performs a different set of functions, but nearly all are somehow related to building political support among constituents. Legislative correspondents, legislative assistants, and computer operators are highly conscious of the electoral connection when they send franked mail to constituents or set up their boss's web site.[8] Caseworkers help constituents resolve problems with the federal bureaucracy, knowing that their performance can directly affect the reelection prospects of the legislator for whom they work. Receptionists, staff assistants, and schedulers are well aware that the tours they arrange for visitors to Washington contribute to the support their member maintains in the district. Those who forget that constituents come first are quickly reminded of this by the member's administrative assistant, who is responsible for making sure that the office runs smoothly and frequently serves as the member's chief political adviser.

The most reelection-oriented staffers tend to be congressional press secretaries. Most members of Congress have at least one press secretary, and some have two or three deputy press assistants.[9] The press secretary is the chief public relations officer in a congressional office. Press secretaries write newsletters and press releases and are heavily involved in crafting the targeted mass mailings that most legislators send to constituents. They also produce copy for radio and television spots, which they arrange to have aired on local stations. Press secretaries help to organize town meetings, arrange interviews with the local correspondents, and disseminate to the news media transcripts and videotapes of their boss's floor and committee speeches. A good press secretary is often able to arrange for local media outlets to print or air a legislator's remarks verbatim or with minimal editing.[10]

Many factors led to the emergence of the press secretary as a key congressional aide, including the election of highly media-conscious members since the mid-1970s, increased television coverage of politics, the opening of Congress to greater media scrutiny, the growth in the size of the congressional press corps, and the availability of new communications technologies. These changes created both pressures and opportunities to increase the public relations side of congressional offices.[11] Members of Congress, who work in a resource-rich institution, responded by allowing themselves to hire specialized staff who could help them advance their political careers.

Congress also has allowed its members to exploit new computer technologies to firm up their relations with voters. Legislative aides use computerized

databases to target large volumes of mail to specific audiences. Information on constituents who write or telephone their legislator about an issue is routinely entered into a computerized list that includes the constituent's name, address, and reason for the contact. They are then sent periodic communications that update them on what their legislator is doing in this area of concern. Constituents who contact members' offices via e-mail or by accessing their Internet web site often receive e-mails in return.

Subsidized House and Senate recording studios and party-owned recording facilities also help legislators reach out to voters. Many members use the studios to record radio shows and television briefings or to edit floor speeches that they deliver to local media outlets. Some make use of satellite technology to hold live "town meetings" with constituents located on the other side of the country.

A DECENTRALIZED CONGRESS

The candidate-centered nature of congressional elections provides the foundation for a highly individualized, fragmented style of legislative politics. Members are largely self-recruited, are nominated and elected principally as a result of their own efforts, and know they bear the principal responsibility for ensuring they get reelected. Local party organizations, Washington-based party committees, political action committees, and other groups and individuals may have helped them raise money and win votes, but politicians arrive in Congress with the belief that they owe their tenure to their own efforts.

Reelection Constituencies

Legislators' first loyalties are to their constituents, and most members staff their offices, decide which committee assignments to pursue, and choose areas of policy expertise with an eye toward maintaining voter support. Campaign contributors, including those who live outside a legislator's district or state, form another important constituency. Local elites and interest groups that provide campaign support or political advice routinely receive access to members of Congress, further encouraging legislators to respond to forces outside of the institution rather than within.[12] Other personal goals, including advancing specific policies, accruing more power in the legislature, or positioning themselves to run for higher office, also have a decentralizing effect on the legislative process.[13] Much of the work done to advance these goals—conducting policy research; disseminating press releases; drafting bills; attending committee meetings; overseeing the bureaucracy; and meeting with constituents, campaign contributors, and lobbyists—is borne by staffers who owe their jobs and their loyalties to individual legislators more than to the institution.[14] This, in turn, makes their bosses less dependent on congressional leaders and encourages members to march to their own beat.

Congressional Committees

The dispersal of legislative authority among nineteen standing committees and eighty-eight subcommittees in the House, sixteen standing committees and sixty-eight subcommittees in the Senate, four joint committees, and a small number of select committees in each chamber adds to the centrifugal tendencies that originate from candidate-centered elections. Each committee and subcommittee is authorized to act within a defined jurisdiction. A chair and a ranking member, who are among the majority and minority parties' senior policy experts, head each committee and subcommittee. Each also has its own professional staff, office, and budget to help it carry out its business.

The committee system was designed to enable Congress to function more efficiently. It allows Congress to investigate simultaneously a multitude of issues and to oversee a range of executive branch agencies. Although committees and subcommittees are Congress's main bodies for making national policy, much of what they do revolves around local issues, the distribution of federal grants and programs, and the reelection of individual legislators. Most legislators serve on at least one committee or subcommittee with jurisdiction over policies of importance to their constituents. Members use their committee assignments to develop expertise in policy areas, to actively promote their constituents' interests, to build reputations as champions of popular issues, and to attract political support.

Congressional committees can be categorized according to the objectives they enable members to pursue: reelection, prestige, and policy.[15] "Reelection committees," such as the House Transportation and Infrastructure Committee and the Senate Environment and Public Works Committee, enable their members to work directly on the policy areas that are most important to constituents. Reelection committees usually rank high among the assignments sought by new members of Congress. More than half of all first-term House members seek appointment to one or more of them.[16]

"Prestige committees" give their members influence over legislative activities that are of extraordinary importance to their congressional colleagues. The House and Senate Appropriations Committees are the ultimate prestige, or power, committees. They are responsible for funding federal agencies and programs and have

the ability to initiate, expand, contract, or discontinue the flow of federal money to projects located across the country. This gives their members the power to affect the lives of the beneficiaries of these programs and the ability to influence the reelection prospects of legislators who represent them. The House Ways and Means and Senate Finance Committees' jurisdiction over tax-related matters, and particularly their ability to give tax breaks to various interests, give members of these panels sway with their colleagues. Members of prestige committees can help their constituents by acting directly or, by wielding their clout with other legislators, indirectly. Membership on one of the appropriating or tax-writing committees is particularly helpful when it comes to raising campaign funds from individuals and PACs associated with a wide array of economic interests.

In contrast to reelection and prestige committees, "policy committees," such as those that deal with criminal justice, education, or labor issues, are sought by legislators who have a strong interest in a particular policy area. These committees are among the most divisive because they are responsible for some highly charged issues, such as education, health insurance, and welfare reform, and many members use them to stake out conservative or liberal stands. Ambitious legislators who seek a career beyond Congress often use policy committees as platforms for developing a national reputation on salient issues.

Thus the committee system gives expression to the differing goals and viewpoints of representatives, senators, and their constituents. By so doing, it decentralizes Congress.

Congressional Caucuses

Congressional caucuses—informal groups of members who share legislative interests—have a similar but less powerful effect on Congress. Even though caucuses have been prohibited from having their own congressional staffs and office space since the 104th Congress, they continue to function as competing policy centers, alternative suppliers of information, and additional sources of legislative decision-making cues.[17] Groups such as the Congressional Black Caucus and the Congressional Women's Caucus are recognized as advocates for specific segments of the population. The Northeast-Midwest Senate Coalition, Western States Senate Coalition, and other geographically based groups seek to increase the clout of legislators from particular regions. The Steel, Auto, and Textile Caucuses have ties to outside industries and work to promote their interests in Congress. Although they do not hold any formal legislative powers, caucuses further add to the fragmentation of Congress by advancing disparate goals.

Interest Groups

Privately funded interest groups, which form an important part of the political environment with which Congress interacts, also have decentralizing effects on the legislative process. Like caucuses, interest groups are sources of influence that compete with congressional leaders for the loyalty of legislators on certain issues. Roughly eighty thousand people work for trade associations, legal firms, and consulting agencies in the Washington area.[18] Not all these people are lobbyists, but in one way or another they work to advance the political interests of some group, and Congress is their number-one target.[19]

Interest groups work to influence the legislative process in many ways. Some groups advertise on television, on radio, in newspapers, or through the mail to influence the political agenda or stimulate grassroots support for or opposition to specific pieces of legislation. Their efforts often resemble election campaigns. The debate over legislation designed to make it profitable for regional Bell telephone companies—the "Baby Bells"—to invest in high-speed Internet connections exemplifies such efforts. The so-called "Tauzin-Dingell Bill," named after sponsors Reps. W. J. "Billy" Tauzin, R-La., and John Dingell, D-Mich., pitted the Baby Bells, who supported the measure against "Voices for Change," an interest group coalition comprising telecommunications giant AT&T, Sprint, WorldComm, Internet providers, and some local telephone companies. In addition to spending millions of dollars lobbying Congress directly, and contributing hundreds of millions of dollars to candidates and parties, both sides spent tens of millions of dollars on televised issue advocacy ads intended to mobilize grassroots support for or against the bill. Although the bill was ultimately passed in the House, whether the lobbying or the issue ads were more important in producing the outcome remains an open question, as do its prospects in the Senate.[20]

Most interest groups also advocate their positions in less visible ways, designed to play to the legislative and electoral needs of individual members of Congress. Representatives of interest groups testify at committee hearings and meet with legislators at their offices and informally at social events. Lobbyists use a variety of forums to provide members and their staffs with technical information, impact statements of how congressional activity (or inactivity) can affect their constituents, and insights into where other legislators stand on the issues. Sometimes they go so far as to draft a bill or help design a strategy to promote its enactment.[21]

Many groups supplement these "insider" techniques with approaches that focus more directly on the electoral connection. Trade and business groups ask local association members to contact their legislators. Unions, churches, and

other groups with large memberships frequently organize telephone and letter-writing campaigns. These communications show members of Congress that important blocs of voters and their advocates are watching how they vote on specific pieces of legislation.[22] The recent increase in interest group–sponsored issue advocacy advertising in connection with the legislative process and elections has resulted in some groups contributing to the permanent campaigns that consume a significant portion of the professional lives of most members of Congress.

Interest groups, congressional subcommittee members, and executive branch officials form collegial decision-making groups, which are frequently referred to as "iron triangles," "issue networks," or "policy subgovernments."[23] These issue experts often focus on the minutiae of arcane, highly specialized areas of public policy. Because they form small governments within a government, they further contribute to the decentralization of Congress.

POLITICAL PARTIES AS CENTRALIZING AGENTS

Unlike the structural, organizational, and political factors that work to decentralize Congress, political parties act as a glue—albeit sometimes a weak one—to bond together members. They socialize new members to Congress's norms and folkways, distribute committee assignments, set the legislative agenda, disseminate information, and carry out other tasks that are essential to Congress's lawmaking, oversight, and representative functions. Although they are not the central actors in elections, party committees do help individual candidates develop their campaign messages. Party campaign efforts on behalf of individual candidates and election agenda-setting efforts encourage legislators to vote for bills that are at the core of their party's agenda when Congress is in session.[24] Party issue advocacy that takes place outside of the campaign season is meant to increase or reduce support for specific bills or damage the reputations of members who voted against them. Issue advocacy ads, such as those the Democratic National Committee and the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee aired in May 2001 blasting Bush and congressional Republicans living in California, New Jersey, and other areas experiencing power problems for driving up the costs of fuel, have given party organizations in the nation's capital a greater role in the permanent campaign.

The congressional parties' leadership organizations are structured similarly to those of legislative parties in other countries. The Democrats and Republicans are each headed by one leader in each chamber—the Speaker and minority leader in the House and the majority and minority leaders in the Senate.

Each party has several other officers and an extensive whip system to facilitate communications between congressional party leaders and rank-and-file legislators. Legislative parties convene caucuses and task forces to help formulate policy positions and legislative strategy. Providing campaign assistance, giving out committee assignments and other perks, setting the congressional agenda, structuring debate, and persuading legislators that specific bills are in the best interests of their constituents and the nation are tools that congressional leaders use to build coalitions.[25]

Nevertheless, party leaders have less control over the policy-making process than do their counterparts in other democracies.[26] The persuasive powers of party leaders are usually insufficient to sway members' votes when party policy positions clash with those of legislators' constituents and campaign supporters. Recognizing the primacy of the electoral connection, party leaders generally tell legislators to respond to constituents rather than "toe the party line" when the latter could endanger their chances of reelection. The efforts of congressional party leaders are probably less of a factor in explaining how party members cast their roll-call votes than are commonalities in political outlook or similarities among legislators' constituents.[27] The election of more ideologically oriented members and the drawing of safe, strongly partisan House districts prior to the 2002 elections have increased both.

Party leaders are most able to overcome the forces that fragment Congress when they seek to enact policies that have widespread bipartisan support or when the majority party possesses many more seats than the opposition and proposes popular legislation that advances its core principles. As the historic 104th Congress showed, a change in party control can also act as a catalyst for party unity. Members of the new House and Senate majorities were aware that their accomplishments as a party would directly influence their individual reelection campaigns and their party's ability to maintain control of Congress. Republican members of ensuing congresses also demonstrated an understanding of the importance of party unity and a record of performance in keeping control of a closely divided legislature. Democrats, on the other hand, unified in opposition to the Republicans and sought to portray them as presiding over "do-nothing" congresses.

RESPONSIVENESS, RESPONSIBILITY, AND PUBLIC POLICY

In representative democracies, elections are the principal means of ensuring that governments respond to the will of the people and promote their interests. Voters, through elections, hold public officials accountable for their

actions and for the state of the nation as a whole. Elections are a blunt but powerful instrument of control that enables people to inform their individual representatives, or the government as a collectivity, of how political action or inaction has affected the quality of their lives. Elections are the primary means that democracies use to empower or remove political leaders at all levels of government. Campaigns help to establish standards by which officeholders are judged. Other paths of influence, such as contacting members of Congress and giving campaign contributions, are usually used to advance narrower goals, are more demanding, and are in practice less democratic.

Despite the extensive resources for building and maintaining relationships with constituents that Congress and the rest of the Washington establishment put at the disposal of representatives and senators, members cannot fully insulate themselves or Congress as an institution from the impact of electoral forces. Voters can, and occasionally do, expel large numbers of incumbents, leading to changes in the membership, leadership, operations, and output of Congress. The 1994 elections resulted in a new Republican majority taking control of Congress for the first time in forty years and led to the selection of Newt Gingrich—a relative newcomer to his party's leadership—as House Speaker. The elections also empowered the Republicans to claim a mandate to change some of the ways in which Congress operates and to overturn Democratic programs that originated more than sixty years earlier during the New Deal.

The 1998 midterm elections brought the Gingrich regime to an end and took much of the steam out of the Republicans' program to remake the federal government. The GOP's historic loss of five House seats cost Gingrich the confidence of his Republican House colleagues and led him to resign both the speakership and his House seat. After Republican Speaker–designate Robert Livingston of Louisiana acknowledged an extramarital affair and resigned from the House, Dennis Hastert, a consensus-building Republican from Illinois, rose from relative obscurity to become the new Speaker. In contrast to Gingrich's first session as the House's leader, Hastert's first session was characterized by few legislative accomplishments.

The 2002 midterm elections also brought about significant change. The Republicans increased their hold on the House by six seats and won a fifty-one-seat majority in the Senate, giving the GOP control of both the White House and the 108th Congress. Nevertheless, the transition to Republican control in the Senate was anything but smooth. As anticipated, Democrats and Republicans fought over the distribution of committee assignments and staff. What was unexpected was Mississippi Republican Trent Lott's forced resignation as Senate majority leader–designate after he made racially insensitive remarks at a retirement party for Sen. Strom Thurman. Replacing Lott as majority leader was Tennessee senator Bill Frist, who was first elected in 1994 and had served as National Republican Senatorial Committee chairman during the 2002 election cycle. The congressional elections held over the past two decades show that voters can shake up the status quo in Washington, inspire change in the direction of government, and set standards for what is considered acceptable behavior by public officials.

Individuals whose public service is contingent on getting reelected often straddle the fuzzy line that demarcates responsiveness and responsibility in government. On some occasions, legislators are highly responsive, functioning as delegates who advance their constituents' views. On others, they take the role of trustee, relying on their own judgment to protect the welfare of their constituents or the nation.[28] Responsible legislators must occasionally vote against their constituents' wishes in order to best serve the interests of the nation.

Election Systems and Public Policy

The type of political system in which elected officials function influences to whom they answer. The U.S. candidate-centered system is unique, and it results in a style of governance that contrasts sharply with that of parliamentary systems, which are used to govern the vast majority of democracies. Parliamentary systems feature party-focused elections that tend to hold elected officials accountable to national political majorities.[29] Members of the British Parliament, for example, perform casework and are attentive to their constituents, but they are inclined to vote for legislation fashioned to please national rather than local constituencies. They support party initiatives because they know that their prospects for reelection are tied closely to their party's ability to enact its legislative program. The candidate-centered nature of the U.S. system, in contrast, encourages elected officials to be responsive to the desires of constituents and organized groups that support their campaigns, sometimes in opposition to their party's leadership.

The separation of powers reinforces legislators' predispositions to support district voters first and their campaign's financial supporters second when making public policy. Even when one party controls the White House and both chambers of Congress, it may find it difficult to unify legislators because they can disagree with one another without fear of losing control of the government.

Members of the majority party in Congress cast roll-call votes secure in the knowledge that they will remain in office for their full two- or six-year terms even if their party suffers a major legislative defeat. In parliamentary systems, majority party members understand that a major policy defeat may be interpreted as a vote of no confidence in their party and force an election that could

turn them out of office in less than a month. The separation of powers also affects the behavior of legislators who are in the minority party. They have little incentive to vote against legislation that could benefit their constituents just because it was sponsored by the majority party, since even a smashing legislative defeat would not force a snap election.

The defeat of President Bush's tax cut proposal in the Senate in March 2003 demonstrates the difficulties that parties face when they try to overcome the centrifugal forces influencing members of Congress. Bush, who campaigned aggressively for congressional Republicans and has emerged as one of the United States's most partisan recent presidents, was unable to get his tax cuts enacted despite Republican majorities in the House and Senate. The budget package passed by a largely party-line vote in the House, and prospects for passage in the Republican-controlled Senate initially appeared promising. However, following a presidential request for a supplemental budget of $74.7 million to fund the first six months of the war with Iraq, many senators of both parties became concerned about the implications the cuts would have on the national debt. As a result, a coalition of moderate Republican and Democratic senators voted to reduce the tax cuts by more than half, despite the president's pleas that the cuts were necessary to curb domestic spending and promote economic growth. The Republican senators who opposed the budget were Olympia Snowe of Maine, Lincoln Chafee of Rhode Island, George Voinovich of Ohio, and John McCain of Arizona. These legislators put their own views and those of their constituents above those of President Bush. In denying the head of their party the opportunity to write a budget during a time of war, they committed what some would decry an act of partisan treason. Indeed, the president denounced Voinovich's position at a rally held in the senator's own state, and the pro-Republican Club for Growth ran TV ads in both Ohio and Maine arguing that these "Franco-Republicans [Voinovich and Snowe] are as dependable as France was in taking down Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein." [30]

Most acts of Congress are not as monumental as the defeat of a president's wartime budget. The separation of powers, bicameralism, federalism, and a fixed-date system of elections make it difficult for legislators to enact longer-term, more nationally focused policies. Members of Congress who believe that their individual images, policy positions, and public records were decisive in their election are less likely than legislators in party-centered democracies to sacrifice the interests of constituents or to compromise on salient issues to enact policies advocated by party leaders. House members, who must run for reelection every two years, respond strongly to parochial concerns.

The effects of parochialism are most apparent in distributive politics, which provide tangible benefits to private individuals or groups. Building coalitions

in support of spending on roads, bridges, universities, museums, and other projects is relatively simple in a decentralized legislature such as the U.S. Congress. Bill sponsors can add new programs and projects in order to win enough legislative supporters to pass their plan.[31] A farm advocate who is hoping to subsidize northern sugar beets, for example, might build support for this cause by expanding the number of subsidized crops in a bill to include sugar cane, rice, corn, wheat, and even tobacco, thereby expanding support that began with representatives from Minnesota to include colleagues from Hawaii, Massachusetts, virtually every southern state, and the states of the Midwest.[32] Subsidies for ostrich farmers can be left out because they will not draw many legislative votes, but food stamps can be added to attract the support of legislators from poor urban districts.[33] Trading subsidies for votes is a simple example of logrolling. Other deals are cut over tax breaks, budget votes, and even appointments to the federal judiciary.

Logrolling and other forms of compromise usually do not allow individual legislators to get all the federal "pork" they would like for their constituents. Nevertheless, these compromises enable most legislators to insert enough pork into a bill to claim credit for doing something to help their constituents. A broadly supported distributive bill is an easy candidate for congressional enactment because, like a Christmas tree decorated by a group of friends, everyone can see his or her handiwork in it and find something to admire in the finished product.

Distributive politics are problematic because they are practiced with both eyes focused on short-term gains and little attention to long-range consequences. Broadening programs that were originally intended to provide benefits to one group to include others usually causes the programs to become ineffectively targeted, watered down, and overly expensive. When large sums are spent to benefit many groups, overall spending is increased, and fewer funds remain available to help the group originally targeted for assistance. This does little to promote the original goals of a bill and leads to deficit spending.[34] Pork-barrel spending and logrolling, which are at the heart of distributive politics, contribute heavily to the United States's national debt. Distributive politics are a prime example of what happens when independently elected officials seek to promote the interests of their constituents and campaign supporters without giving much thought to the effect of their collective actions on the nation. Recent congresses, especially those elected between 1994 and 2000, have taken steps to reduce government spending, generating budget surpluses in 1998 and 1999. However, constant wrangling over tax cuts, military spending, and other federal programs has hindered their attempts at debt reduction. The war on terrorism and the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq caused the deficit to balloon following the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks.

Policy Gridlock and Political Cycles

Parochialism also leads to a reactive style of government and incremental policy making. Congress is better at making short-term fixes than at developing long-term initiatives. Congressional leaders often find it difficult to develop a vision for the future. During the 1980s House Democrats took steps to outline, publicize, and act on a partisan agenda. Parts of this effort were successful, but much of it was not. Differences in legislators' political philosophies, the diversity of their constituencies, and the limited resources available to party leaders made it difficult to develop and implement a Democratic game plan for the nation's future.[35] House Republicans also tried on several occasions in the 1980s to develop a partisan agenda, but prior to the Contract with America, they, too, enjoyed only limited success.[36]

Under most circumstances, election outcomes, constituent demands, interest group pressures, and White House initiatives support the continuation of the status quo or suggest only small changes in public policies. When pressure for change exists, Congress generally initiates limited reform, but only after a period of some delay. On some occasions, however, the federal government enacts comprehensive programs that significantly affect people's lives.

Major policy change is most likely to occur during periods of crisis and is frequently associated with partisan realignments. Realignments traditionally occur when a critical event polarizes voters on a major issue, the two major parties take clear and opposing stands on that issue, and one party succeeds in capturing the White House and large majorities in both the House and Senate. The ascendant party then has an electoral mandate to enact major policy change.[37]

The events leading up to and continuing through Franklin Roosevelt's presidency exemplify federal policy making during a period of crisis. The seeds of Roosevelt's New Deal programs were sown in the Great Depression of the 1930s. Republicans controlled the White House, the House of Representatives, and the Senate when the stock market crashed in 1929. The Democrats made a major campaign issue out of the Republicans' failure to initiate economic reforms to reverse the Depression. After winning the White House and both chambers of Congress, the Democrats used their mandate to replace laissez-faire economics with Keynesian policies, which relied on government intervention to revive the economy. Other partisan and policy realignments took place during the late 1820s, the Civil War era, and the 1890s.

Some major policy changes have been instituted in the absence of partisan realignments, but most of these were less sweeping than were those that followed critical elections. The civil rights and Great Society programs of the 1960s and the U.S. withdrawal from Vietnam are examples of major policy changes that occurred in the absence of a partisan realignment. Historical perspective is needed before scholars can conclude that the 1994 congressional elections constituted a full-scale realignment in favor of the Republicans, but Democratic hegemony over Congress has clearly ended.[38] Regardless of whether a realignment was constituted in 1994, the GOP was able to use its stunning electoral success to institute major changes in public policy and shift the national policy debate. Under Gingrich's leadership, the GOP-controlled Congress passed legislation reducing federal mandates on the states, cutting federal regulations, and changing the welfare system from a federally mandated program to one run by each state independently with a block grant from the federal government.[39] The Republicans also shifted the policy debate from how to improve the efficiency and performance of the federal government to how to decrease its scope. For the first time since the New Deal, the subject of reducing entitlement benefits dominated public debate. Politicians, commentators, and policy analysts discussed whether reducing current or future per-capita outlays for Social Security, Medicare, Medicaid, and other entitlement programs was an acceptable way to cut the size and cost of government, reduce the federal deficit, and pay for tax cuts.

Republican House leaders also restructured some major aspects of how the House did business. The GOP cut the number of House committees, subcommittees, and committee staffs; enacted term limits for committee chairs and the Speaker; and made other formal changes aimed at strengthening the hands of the majority party leadership. The Republicans eliminated legislative study organizations, which had formerly enhanced the representation of specific—mostly Democratic—constituencies. Republican leaders also bypassed the normal committee process in writing several important pieces of legislation, relying instead on task forces, which facilitate coalition building within the majority party but greatly reduce minority party input.[40]

After they claimed control of both chambers of Congress in 2003, the Republicans were once again poised to have a major impact on federal policy making. At the procedural level, the rules that House Republicans enacted for the 108th Congress grant more power to the majority at the expense of the minority. The new rules also weakened some of the ethics reforms passed in 1995.

Republican control of the Senate also led to some personnel changes that enhanced GOP prospects for introducing lasting change in the federal judiciary. The replacement of Sen. Patrick Leahy, D-Vt., by Orrin Hatch, R-Utah, as Senate Judiciary Committee chairman, should allow Bush's judicial appointments to enjoy smoother sailing in the confirmation process. Recognizing this, President Bush renominated all thirty appeals and district court

judges whose appointments were stalled under the Democratic-controlled Senate in the 107th Congress, including Miguel Estrada, Priscilla Owen, and Charles W. Pickering, whose nominations the Judiciary Committee quashed previously. Moreover, Republican control of Congress subjected the Bush administration to less rigorous congressional oversight than would have been the case had the Democrats controlled at least one chamber.

The GOP also positioned itself to enact significant policy change. As the party in control of the White House and Congress, the GOP had the ability to dominate the political agenda. Partly as repayment for the extraordinary campaign efforts the president made on behalf of GOP congressional candidates, Republican members of Congress were strongly inclined to back the administration's policy initiatives. This improves GOP prospects for passing more tax cuts, including cutting dividend taxes and other taxes paid predominantly by the wealthy, arguably as a means for stimulating the economy. The Republicans also strongly positioned themselves to push for other parts of their political agenda, including limits on awards resulting from medical malpractice and asbestos lawsuits and other types of tort reform. Additional Republican-led efforts involving easing pollution restrictions for factories and power plants, promoting private sector models of prescription drug– and health care–related reforms, and outlawing certain abortion procedures are likely to receive more preferential treatment than they have had under Democratic-controlled and divided governments.

Some Republican policy initiatives also are likely to benefit from personnel changes at the committee level. Oklahoma Republican senator James Inhofe's replacement of James Jeffords, I-Vt., as chairman of the Senate Environmental and Public Works Committee has resulted in that committee becoming noticeably more receptive to the industry viewpoint that environmental protections often stand in the way of fuller utilization of natural resources and increased profits. Similarly, Massachusetts Democratic senator Ted Kennedy's handing over the reins of the Health, Education, Labor and Pensions Committee to Judd Gregg, R-N.H., creates a less favorable climate for the expansion of social safety net programs and will likely result in more oversight of federal programs concerned with health care and education.[41]

Turnover among legislators below the leadership level has contributed to substantial policy change, particularly in recent congresses. This is largely the result of the polarization of party activists. The nomination of candidates by partisans whose views are more ideologically extreme than those of the public has led to the election of Republicans who are more conservative, Democrats who are more liberal, and fewer moderates of either party during the past decade. As a result, Congress has become more polarized. More ideologically

charged members of the majority party, particularly in the House, have enhanced the power of congressional party leaders in order to help their caucus achieve its electoral and policy-oriented goals. When strong party leaders, such as Gingrich, exploited these powers they were able to structure the congressional debate and control political outcomes. The result was that parties in Congress acted more programmatically.[42] The unity of its members has led the majority party, particularly the House Republicans, to achieve some stunning victories. Nevertheless, as the case of Bush's wartime tax cut demonstrates, this unity can be fleeting at critical times.

Elections that result in a shift in partisan control and the swearing in of many new members can be catalysts for Congress to overcome its normal state of decentralization, especially when a widespread consensus for change exists among the American people. When such partisan turnover occurs, congressional parties in the United States resemble both parliamentary parties in other countries and an idealized system of responsible party government.[43] However, once public support for sweeping change erodes, the centrifugal forces that customarily dominate Congress reassert themselves, and the legislature returns to its normal, incremental mode of policy making. The natural parochialism of members of Congress, bicameralism, the internal decentralization of the House and Senate, and other centrifugal forces promote political cycles marked by long periods of incremental policy making followed by short periods of centralized power and major policy change.

SUMMARY

The candidate-centered congressional election system has a major impact on how Congress functions. The electoral connection encourages members of Congress to develop home styles that result in their building bonds of trust with local voters. Congress, as an institution, provides its members with resources to help them accomplish this objective. The candidate-centered system also finds expression in the highly individualistic legislative behavior exhibited by most representatives and senators and in Congress's decentralized style of operation. Although political parties occasionally overcome the legislature's naturally fragmented state, the centrifugal forces exerted on Congress by constituents, campaign contributors, interest groups, committees, and other organizations within Congress itself cause the institution to return to its normal decentralized operations after short periods of centralization. The result is that national policy making in the United States is characterized by prolonged periods of gradual policy modification followed by brief episodes of sweeping political change.