

# The Profession

## Out of the Past: Theoretical and Methodological Contributions of Congressional History

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Never before has congressional history received so much attention. While historians continue to produce important studies (Bogue 1989; Silbey 1985; Thompson 1985), political scientists account for much of the upsurge in interest. In turning to Congress's past, they are offering fresh examinations of behavioral shifts, structural development, and other diachronic patterns (Brady 1988; Cooper and Young 1989; Skladony 1985; Stewart 1989; Swift 1989). However, while such work is increasing, most political scientists continue to approach Congress ahistorically, implicitly treating the institution's present as a unique period for which the past has little relevance. Political scientists are therefore poised at an interesting juncture in congressional scholarship: while a majority yet remains loyal to the postwar tradition of ahistoricism, a growing number are rediscovering an even older political science tradition of historically informed scholarship. With this in mind, now is a particularly appropriate time to ask: What can be gained from the study of Congress's past? And further, is it worth the effort? To answer those questions, let us examine history's contributions to two key aspects of any research perspective: theory and methodology.

### Theory

An historical approach to Congress furnishes a span of institutional time embracing a wide variety of changing conditions and variables. While this variety provides the raw material for an empirically rich and accurate depiction of Congress, it also favors the formulation of theory with certain characteristics essential

for the development of a rigorous and robust understanding of Congress. These characteristics include:

### Exogenous Influences

Our ahistorical focus on the contemporary Congress leads congressional theory to overestimate the impact of endogenous factors, particularly institutional actors. Absent an historical perspective, institutional actors appear to be behaving relatively free of external constraints and pressures. Unsurprisingly, we therefore tend to see them as the primary institutional dynamic and assign them undue causal weight.

Congress's past suggests otherwise. From an historical perspective, we can appreciate the impact of exogenous patterns and forces that are often too subtle or inchoate for contemporary scholars and participants

to adequately discern. In the 1810s and 1820s, for example, few contemporaries realized that a larger and more complex congressional agenda helped to fuel the reconstitution of the U.S. Senate from "an ancillary upper chamber, much in the mode of a House of Lords, to an important, prominent chamber in the mode of the contemporary Senate" (Swift 1989, p. 178). Similarly, with the use of historical perspective, scholars have been able to trace the relationship between the realignment of 1896, with its large-scale creation of safe congressional seats, and the rise of twentieth-century careerism, a linkage too incipient for even the most astute contemporaries to recognize (Price 1975; Schattschneider 1975).

### Institutional Integration

Political scientists cleave to a tradition of theorizing that treats Con-



U.S. Capitol, 1891

gress in a fragmented fashion. We therefore have extensive and sophisticated sets of separate literatures on Congress's many aspects, including committees, parties, leadership, and elections (Loewenberg, Patterson, and Jewell 1985). While this scholarship greatly enriches our understanding of Congress's various dimensions, an historical perspective reminds us of their interrelated nature: factors influencing one dimension of Congress also directly and indirectly influence others. In the 1960s and 1970s, for example, external agenda, party, and media changes came to affect not only Senators' behavior, but eventually fundamental dimensions of their chamber, including committee and subcommittee structure and rules (Sinclair 1989). The historical study of Congress therefore favors a more integrated theory, with analysis taking into account the institution's many, and interrelated, dimensions. As a consequence, an historical approach to congressional theory would not only be more likely to capture the institution's true nature, but would also advance our understanding of Congress in whole versus piecemeal, a scholarly goal we too often lose sight of.

### Dynamism

An ahistorical approach encourages the formulation of static congressional theory. When congressional development is analyzed from a purely modern perspective, there is the tendency to see contemporary institutional equilibria as both inevitable and enduring, the product of strong forces that will also act to check any change. Consequently, our theories of the modern Congress are nondynamic, aimed at explaining such seemingly stable phenomena as subcommittee government, weak parties, and decentralized leadership (Dodd 1987).

An historical perspective, however, views congressional stability as contingent. As a cursory examination of Congress's past reveals, even the most seemingly stable of equilibria—the Senate's Golden Age, Congressional Government, Czarism, and King Caucus—were undermined by the rise of countervailing exogenous and endogenous factors.

Congress has thus had a long and important history of institutional change, a history that will undoubtedly continue. To explain Congress past, present, and future, history suggests that we must recognize the institution's considerable experience with and capacity for change. Nondynamic analyses are unable to account for change when it inevitably does occur, quickly rendering them obsolete. For an adequate understanding, we must therefore formulate theory as dynamic as the institution itself.

### Methodology

Unlike many approaches to Congress, history is methodologically catholic. Behavioralism, for example, emphasizes the significance of certain kinds of empirical phenomena, to which quantitative/statistical methods are usually the best suited. History, on the other hand, suggests the importance of a broader research focus encompassing a variety of phenomena, which in turn invites the appropriate application of a variety of methods, quantitative, qualitative, or otherwise. History therefore favors the eminently sensible position that "[t]he problem, in turn, dictates the method or methods to be used. No one should approach a research problem 'qualitatively' or 'quantitatively.' Instead, one selects whatever tools will help resolve the problem" (Peabody 1969, p. 5).

While an historical approach is methodologically catholic, it can still be abused. Congressional scholars are particularly prone to the ahistorical use of history. Although our research generates rich and rigorous diachronic data, it can be too focused on Congress, slighting or misinterpreting the institution's larger historical context. The result is scholarship that may be empirically accurate, but analytically incomplete or incorrect. We have, for example, accumulated extensive data on membership turnover, showing the beginnings of congressional careerism in the late nineteenth century (Polsby 1968; Fioria, Rohde, and Wissel 1975). Commonly, we explain this trend in terms of membership ambition and an obliging political environment: members increasingly desired careers in Congress, with

those ambitions facilitated by a political environment of weakening competition and party control. However, a broader examination of the late nineteenth century would reveal a pattern of growing careerism in the law, architecture, medicine, the ministry, and many other occupations, suggesting that larger socioeconomic forces of specialization and professionalization played an important, and perhaps primary, role in the development of congressional careerism as well.

Ahistoricism also affects the analysis of qualitative sources on Congress's past. Political scientists usually interpret historical correspondence, newspapers, political tracts, and congressional debates from a purely modern perspective, implicitly assuming that political beliefs and language were much the same then as now. However, even in a country as young as the United States, the past can have many of the hallmarks of a separate culture. For example, our eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century political forebears subscribed to a markedly different system of political beliefs that historians term classical republicanism, characterized by distinctive formulations of such basic political concepts as individualism, popular sovereignty, representation, bicameralism, and the separation of powers. While these early forebears also spoke English, they used these and other words such as president, senate, party, faction, power, and corruption to connote or mean something very different than they do today (Lienesch 1988; McCoy 1980; Watts 1987; Wood 1969). Sound methodology dictates that if institutionalists wish to produce careful and accurate analyses, their research should be as sensitive to these and other historical differences as comparative scholarship is to cross-cultural variation.

### Conclusions

Let us now return to the questions of what can be gained from the historical study of Congress? And further, is it worth the effort? The gains should be clear. History's theoretical and methodological contributions are fundamental to a rich, rigorous, and robust understanding of Congress. Theoretically, an histor-

ical approach fosters dynamic analyses of the institution as a complex but integrated whole, significantly shaped by its environment over time. Methodologically, an historical approach favors the use of effective research strategies appropriate to the problem at hand and the historical context in which it occurs.

Is it worth the effort? Despite history's important contributions, many political scientists remain skeptical. The study of Congress's past, they believe, is a quagmire in which we will become enmeshed in historical detail and arcane disputes over its analysis. In part this skepticism is justified. As political scientists increasingly delve into congressional history, they are producing more detailed studies with different—and conflicting—analyses. However, as the following shows, a closer examination of the past yields a better understanding of its present for at least two reasons.

First, history can be used as the laboratory that scholars of the modern Congress otherwise lack. Congress's long history features a broad, complex, and shifting array of actors, endogenous factors, environments, and outcomes that together provide ideal testing grounds for theories chiefly informed by contemporary, i.e., static, institutional conditions. Prime candidates for such testing include formal models of committees and policy making. Shepsle and Weingast (1987), for example, argue that the power of congressional committees is derived from their influence over *ex ante* (origination of bills) and *ex post* (participation in conference committees) legislative processes. Krehbiel (1990) argues that committees are not composed of preference outliers. Thus, by implication, median votes on the floor, rather than the preferences of committees, dominate legislative policy outputs.

Conspicuously absent from these and other formal analyses of committees (Shepsle 1979; Gilligan and Krehbiel 1988) is the role of factors such as party that other analyses of contemporary committee influence have emphasized (Brady 1986). Which view is more accurate? If we assess only contemporary or static institutional circumstances, critical factors do not vary enough to

“discriminate among or order the impacts of dynamic and stable causes or determinants” (Cooper and Brady 1981, p. 992). Rather, the laboratory of congressional history is “better suited to recognizing and encompassing variation in effects or dependent variables” (ibid.). Scholars would thus encounter changes in both exogenous and endogenous variables sufficient to allow rigorous empirical testing.

Secondly and relatedly, most paradigms of the modern Congress are based on the implicit historical premise that the Congress of today is very different from the Congress of yesterday. The use of congressional history is essential to examine the accuracy of a premise without which these paradigms cannot be accepted. Let us illustrate with some recent historical scholarship that has direct import for how we explain the modern Congress. Our dominant paradigm attributes the development of such contemporary congressional phenomena as the growth in staff, the decline of parties, and weakened leadership to causal factors also depicted as recent congressional phenomena. More specifically, according to David Mayhew's *Congress: The Electoral Connection* (1974), components of today's fragmented, individualistic House and Senate are the products of modern members' interrelated goals of congressional careers and reelection, which they pursue by engaging in certain political and institution-building behavior.

Are the causes identified by this paradigm as recent in origin as they are depicted to be? Because historically stable factors cannot supply the causal dynamic for the development of contemporary phenomena, the answer to this question has critical implications for the electoral connection's explanatory power. Congressional scholars divide on the answer. Research shows that political careerism and careerist behavior (Swift 1987-1988) as well as high reelection rates (Garand and Gross 1984; Huckabee 1989) extend back to the earliest Congresses, suggesting that the causes of modern congressional phenomena lie beyond the ambit of our dominant paradigm (Swift 1987-1988, pp. 644-45). However, in their examination of diachronic elec-

toral patterns, Alford and Brady (1989) conclude that incumbency advantage is a contemporary phenomenon, providing important historical support for the paradigm's account.

Is congressional history therefore worth the effort? As these two reasons demonstrate, this question presumes an epistemological choice political scientists do not have. For an accurate and satisfactory understanding of Congress, history is not an option, but a necessity.

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## The Political Scientist as Comparative Election Observer

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When you have witnessed elections in Chicago, you may think you have seen everything. Not so. The range of elections in Third World countries—from the politics, the efforts to mobilize voters, the attempts to institute democratic forms and educate people as to their relevance, and the stakes involved—is staggering. The wealth of opportunities for observing election performance in a variety of world settings approaches experimental laboratory conditions.

On a different and more important level, the significance of elections for the people involved—the sharing of power, the institution of a sense of accountability for actions in office, the representation of *all* interests in the society, the recognition of individual worth and an acceptance of the sanctity of human life, the institutionalization of the rule of law and due process guarantees, and, more often than not, the promise of a better life—is difficult to overestimate. Expectations are high. The consequences of both the outcomes

and the manner in which the elections are conducted are of fundamental importance to the society's future.

Elections can never carry all the burdens laid upon them. They can make a beginning in some, or all, of the objectives attributed to them and, at times, the results border on the spectacular (Chile); at other times, and more rarely, the election experience is one more chapter in the brutalization and suppression of a people (Haiti, 1987).

Presumably democratic elections can also be used to justify a course of action or a particular foreign policy emphasis (El Salvador, 1984), "demonstration elections" as Edward S. Herman and Frank Brodhead (1984) have labeled them; or they can lead to tenuous but often significant efforts to institute democratic procedures and a commitment to democratic values (Honduras, 1980; Nicaragua, 1984, 1990; Argentina, 1983). The results can be incomplete and the forms and obligations left

after the elections can be rudimentary and fragile, subject to violation and open to abuse. In most of the elections I observed, I suspect this is the case. However, from a long-term perspective, a beginning has been made.

For most nations that hold such elections, a formal and public commitment to entertain democratic standards of worth and democratic criteria of performance has been initiated. Whatever the motivations, an implicit willingness or need (given grudgingly on occasion) has been indicated to join the community of nations and to apply universal standards of democratic fairness and civility to the manner in which government operates.

## The Importance of Independent Observers

Why go? In my experience, reporters in interpreting events in foreign countries are heavily dependent on