

Are Members of Congress Simply ‘Single-Minded Seekers of Reelection’? An Examination of Legislative Behavior in the 114th Congress

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Technological innovations, most recently social media, have allowed members of Congress to incorporate campaign activities—particularly communicating with constituents and fundraising—into their daily routines (Smith, Roberts, and Vander Wielen 2015). Since campaigning occurs while legislators are at home and in Washington, their daily activities can often be characterized as governing-as-campaigning (Smith, Roberts, and Vander Wielen 2015). In other words, members of Congress simultaneously govern and campaign while in Washington. The substantial amount of time that members of Congress, especially those in the House of Representatives, spend campaigning leads some to question how much time is devoted to policy making (Klein 2013; O’Donnell 2016). From the standpoint of political science research, there is a substantial body of work on how members of Congress pursue reelection and policy (Fenno 1973; Mayhew 1974); however, little is known about how legislators balance campaigning and governing during their term.

Drawing upon my experiences as an APSA congressional fellow in the 114th Congress, I offer perspective on how members of Congress balance their reelection and policy goals. I begin by summarizing my placement and introducing Fenno (1973) and Mayhew’s (1974) work on the electoral and policy goals of members of Congress. This research is then used as a framework to examine my work as a legislative staffer and present my perceptions of whether tradeoffs occur between reelection and policy making. I conclude by discussing the implications of governing-as-campaigning—legislators pursuing both goals simultaneously—and address directions for future research.

A POLITICAL SCIENTIST GOES TO WASHINGTON (AND WORKS FOR ONE IN CONGRESS)

My APSA congressional fellowship placement was in the office of Representative Dan Lipinski (IL-3), a political scientist and former APSA fellow. In my role as a legislative assistant, I covered agriculture, education, campaign finance reform, voting rights, government operations, and Native American policy. I also worked with the Science, Space, and Technology Committee and the STEM Education Caucus.

For each policy area, I was responsible for following current legislation and political issues within and outside of Congress. Covering these policy areas on a day-to-day basis meant attending briefings, meeting with lobbyists, responding to constituents, writing co-sponsor memos, drafting talking points for the Congressman, and providing information to help with vote recommendations. A substantial part of my time was spent on education policy, especially working with the STEM Education Caucus. Leading Steering Committee meetings allowed me to meet advocates and help them plan briefings to raise awareness of issues important to them, Congressman Lipinski, and the other caucus members. For example, during Engineers Week, the Congressman hosted a breakfast briefing for “Introduce a Girl to Engineering Day” to raise awareness about the importance of mentors in getting girls interested in engineering.

Most of my time was spent staffing the Congressman at hearings and markups for the Science, Space, and Technology Committee. A more accurate statement would probably be *preparing* to staff the Congressman. The committee’s jurisdiction and oversight covers all non-defense related scientific research and development activities coordinated by the federal government’s departments and agencies. With subcommittees devoted to energy, the environment, and space, drafting talking points or memos and answering the Congressman’s questions required a working knowledge of topics such as fusion, solar fuels, and electricity storage. Learning chemistry in high school was finally useful!

The remainder of my time was spent developing a bill that would create and strengthen middle class job opportunities through apprenticeships. Apprenticeships are a workforce training model that combine classroom instruction with on-the-job experience. Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act funds distributed to states could be used to pay the Department of Labor’s Registered Apprenticeship participants, but not pre-apprentices. Congressman Lipinski’s Apprenticeship Improvement Act of 2016 fixes this oversight to ensure that pre-apprenticeship programs can better provide potential registered apprenticeship applicants the opportunity to explore the apprenticeship program, discover career opportunities, and gain the qualifications needed to begin a registered apprenticeship.

In other words, this change shows prospective applicants that apprenticeships offer more than low-paying jobs with little upward mobility.

GOVERNING-AS-CAMPAIGNING: MORE GOVERNING OR CAMPAIGNING?

To understand governing-as-campaigning, it is important to consider the goals of legislators. The two most salient and commonly held goals of members of Congress—obtaining reelection and crafting good public policy—are reflected in the idea of governing-as-campaigning. How and when these goals are pursued can provide insight into how members of Congress balance governing and campaigning in Washington.

Incumbents have three goals: win reelection, craft good public policy, and gain political power and prestige (Fenno 1973). However, as Mayhew (1974) observed, the necessary precondition to obtain power and legislate in Congress is to get reelected, which led him to argue that members of Congress can be analyzed as “single-minded seekers of reelection.” Mayhew believes that members of Congress engage in three different types of activities geared toward securing reelection: advertising, position taking, and credit claiming. In other words, incumbents work to ensure constituents know who they are, what they stand for, and how they are creating positive change that benefits the district or state.

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Members of Congress as “Single-Minded Seekers of Reelection”

This section examines governing-as-campaigning and the tradeoffs that result from balancing reelection and policy concerns by exploring my work for Congressman Lipinski during the 114th Congress. First, I will discuss examples of my work that were directed toward assisting Congressman Lipinski win reelection and offer insight into any tradeoffs that occurred from engaging in reelection endeavors versus focusing on policy making. Because members of Congress seeking reelection often engage in advertising, position taking, and credit claiming endeavors (Mayhew 1974), I will use these three activities to systematically identify when my work concentrated on reelection efforts. I will then introduce instances in which I helped the Congressman pursue his public policy agenda and discuss whether there were tradeoffs associated with emphasizing policy making over winning reelection.

Advertising

Advertising activities “disseminate one’s name among constituents in such a fashion as to create a favorable image but in

messages having little or no issue content” (Mayhew 1974, 49). The most visible forms of advertising are attending events in the district, sending newsletters to constituents, and writing letters offering congratulations or condolences. As a staffer in the DC office, none of my day-to-day activities related to advertising; however, advertising occurred frequently. A substantial portion of the communications director’s job was devoted to advertising activities. For instance, Congressman Lipinski’s Facebook page often showed him attending events in the district, such as Boy Scout fundraisers and local youth sporting events.

In terms of the tradeoffs of concentrating on reelection via advertising at the expense of policy making, there appeared to be very few. The bulk of the Congressman’s advertising endeavors were focused on events that he attended in the district, which occurred when the House was not in session. As a result, the Congressman did not have to choose between governing and campaigning.

Position Taking

As defined by Mayhew (1974), position taking occurs when legislators announce their stance on issues by making floor speeches, explaining roll call votes, and issuing press releases, among other activities. The ways to position take are nearly endless; however, to gain the electoral benefits from this activity, members of Congress must “make pleasing judgmental

statements” regardless of whether the positions can be achieved through policy change. In other words, the legislator is “a speaker rather than a doer” (Mayhew 1974). Most of my involvement in the Congressman’s position taking endeavors related to preparing questions and talking points for Science Committee hearings. Oftentimes I would draft questions in a manner that would allow the Congressman to discuss the importance of funding research and upgrades at national labs. This was important to the Congressman’s constituents, as Argonne National Lab is located in the district.

From my vantage point, there were few tradeoffs between pursuing reelection through position taking and focusing on policy making for a couple of reasons. First, the Congressman’s positions were realistic and achievable as they were grounded in knowledge of the issues and the political environment. Second, nearly every policy-related activity provides an opportunity for position taking. For example, floor speeches and press releases often occur before or after a roll call vote. Committee hearings are policy-oriented activities with built-in opportunities for position taking, as far as my experience goes. In other words, hearings are meant to inform future policy proposals by conducting oversight of

the executive branch or obtaining information from experts about policy issues, but members of Congress can also bolster their chances for reelection by position taking when asking the witnesses questions.

Credit Claiming

Credit claiming ensures that constituents know about their legislator's accomplishments (Mayhew 1964, 53). Members of

recess, which ensures that members of Congress can provide remarks that facilitate credit claiming without missing out on policy-making activities, such as committee hearings or markups and floor votes. Furthermore, town hall meetings and other opportunities for credit claiming occur back in the district when the House is not in session and the focus cannot be on policy making. As was the case with position taking, policy-related activities often facilitate credit claiming activities.

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Congress may choose to credit claim through press releases, floor speeches, town halls, and remarks given at various events. The most important part of credit claiming is that it be clear that the member of Congress is touting an accomplishment (Mayhew 1974, 53). For example, members of Congress can take credit for sponsoring or co-sponsoring legislation that was enacted into law because it is evident that they played a significant role in these activities. Conversely, it is difficult to claim credit for a bill being passed into law that the legislator simply voted for because they were not instrumental in its passage.

Some of my work in Congressman Lipinski's office had a credit claiming component. When the House was in session, I would draft the Congressman's talking points for various receptions and events. For example, during Engineers Week, the Congressman spoke at the "Introduce a Girl to Engineering" breakfast briefing and the Chicagoland Engineers Award Banquet. In both sets of talking points, I mentioned the Congressman's work in improving STEM education and promoting advancements in science and technology, such as writing language to fund the National Science Foundation in the 2010 America COMPETES Act reauthorization.

During recess weeks, my work relating to credit claiming shifted to responding to constituents and helping prepare talking points for town hall meetings. An important part of replying to letters and e-mails involved discussing the Congressman's work on that issue or within that policy area. Preparing talking points for the Congressman's town hall meeting included similar information. For example, the talking points on education policy mentioned his co-sponsorship of the STEM Education Act of 2015.

As with advertising and position taking, there were few tradeoffs between pursuing the Congressman's policy agenda and helping him remain in office through credit claiming. Just like opportunities for advertising, the legislative schedule provides members of Congress numerous chances to credit claim. Briefings and receptions on Capitol Hill are often held at times throughout the day when the House is in

recess, which ensures that members of Congress can provide remarks that facilitate credit claiming without missing out on policy-making activities, such as committee hearings or markups and floor votes. Furthermore, town hall meetings and other opportunities for credit claiming occur back in the district when the House is not in session and the focus cannot be on policy making. As was the case with position taking, policy-related activities often facilitate credit claiming activities.

Members of Congress as Policy Makers

As Fenno (1973) explains, reelection is just one of the goals shared by legislators. Members of Congress are also concerned about crafting good public policy in areas that are of personal interest to them and/or that serve constituent needs (Fenno 1973, 9). My work in Congressman Lipinski's office, particularly during recess, was devoted to developing policy that would help the 3rd District of Illinois. As I briefly mentioned, I was tasked with helping craft a bill to boost apprenticeships because many stakeholders (i.e., economic development offices and companies) were struggling to attract applicants. It was difficult for employers to overcome the stereotype that apprenticeships are training programs for manual labor, low-paying positions that offer little opportunity for advancement.

After hours of research and discussions with stakeholders, I helped Congressman Lipinski draft the Apprenticeship Improvement Act of 2016. The bill proposes allowing Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act funds to be used to pay pre-apprentices participating in programs that lead to Department of Labor Registered Apprenticeships. Providing pre-apprentices a wage while they determine whether to matriculate into the registered apprenticeship program helps increase the applicant pool because many Americans looking for work will bypass unpaid opportunities. Furthermore, having more applicants allows companies to expand their pre-apprentice and apprenticeship programs and dispel the myth that apprenticeships lead to undesirable jobs. Instead, pre-apprenticeship program participants will observe the apprenticeship program, explore career opportunities, and acquire the qualifications needed to be selected for a Registered Apprenticeship.

As my work on the Apprenticeship Improvement Act shows, members of Congress will often choose to focus on governing rather than campaigning while in Washington. However, from my perspective working as a staffer for a legislator from

a safe Democratic district, the tradeoff of pursuing policy at the expense of reelection is somewhat minimal as policy-making activities also provide opportunities for legislators to increase their odds of being reelected at the end of their term. The Apprenticeship Improvement Act serves as an example. Introducing legislation that helps businesses attract applicants and create jobs could undeniably boost the congressman's chances for reelection; but, he can only reap these gains at the ballot box if his policy-making efforts are communicated to constituents via credit claiming activities. Consequently, I worked with the communications director to draft a press release about the Apprenticeship Improvement Act.

THE 114TH CONGRESS: GOVERNING OR CAMPAIGNING?

The discussion of my observations of legislative behavior in the 114th Congress examined how members of Congress pursue the two most salient goals identified by Fenno (1973) and Mayhew (1974): getting reelected and creating good public policy. Exploring how incumbents balance pursuing reelection and their public policy agenda is interesting for two reasons. First, daily activity in Congress can be characterized as governing-as-campaigning because legislators focus on reelection and public policy simultaneously, which causes some to question whether policy making is sometimes pushed aside (Klein 2013; O'Donnell 2016). Second, there is a large body of political science research examining how members of Congress pursue each goal but very little is known about if there are tradeoffs associated with emphasizing one goal over the other. My insider view of Congress as an APSA fellow has allowed me to gain insight into both questions about legislative behavior. With respect to the balance between governing and campaigning, the analysis shows that members of Congress pursue both goals identified by Fenno (1973) and Mayhew (1974): winning reelection and pursuing public policy. However, this does not necessarily mean that governing is occurring more than, or at about the same rate as, campaigning. My observations suggest that the two goals are intertwined. Members of Congress often use policy-making activities to pursue reelection by engaging in position taking and credit claiming activities. For example, legislators will position take while asking witnesses questions at a committee hearing. Actions directed at policy making can also be used to help secure reelection. For example, a press release was issued after Congressman Lipinski introduced the Apprenticeship Improvement Act of 2016. Overall, my observations of the 114th Congress do not point toward members of Congress emphasizing campaigning at the expense of policy making. Instead, legislators maximize their time and effort by using policy-making activities as tools to win reelection.

Observing members of Congress pursuing reelection and their policy agenda in a highly efficient manner has led me to the conclusion that there are minimal tradeoffs between pursuing reelection over policy making or vice versa. This is my assessment for two reasons. First, the legislative calendar

dictated whether the Congressman was campaigning or governing on any given day or week. When the House was in recess, the Congressman was back in the district attending events, giving remarks, or holding town halls. Consequently, he could focus exclusively on engaging in advertising, position taking, and/or credit claiming activities. Second, the Congressman used policy-making activities as opportunities to position take or credit claim. He would often position take during committee hearings and issue press releases after introducing legislation.

Although my insights suggest that there are few tradeoffs between pursuing reelection at the expense of policy making or vice versa, this is based on my work for a Congressman from a relatively safe district who is reelected by a sizeable majority. This provides opportunities for future political science research, as there are likely more tradeoffs for legislators who hail from unsafe districts and/or have served relatively few terms in Congress. These incumbents may feel the need to concentrate more on reelection than policy making. Future research should examine how these legislators spend their time both at home and in Washington to see if they engage in more advertising, position taking, and/or credit claiming activities. Another avenue for future research would be to see how behavior changes throughout the course of a legislator's term. For instance, Representatives may balance governing and campaigning equally but focus more on governing once their bill receives a committee markup. Similarly, legislators may campaign more once they find out they have an opponent in an upcoming election. As these few possibilities for future research show, more work is needed to better understand how members of Congress balance reelection and policy-making concerns throughout their term. Governing-as-campaigning is occurring; however, at least based on my experiences, it is not occurring in a way that is detrimental to constituents. Members of Congress are not simply "single-minded seekers of reelection."

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank Congressman Dan Lipinski and his entire staff in the DC office for an extremely enjoyable—and fun—fellowship experience. ■

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