CONGRESSIONAL FELLOWSHIP PROGRAM

Practice and Theory: How Experiencing the Political Process Can Inform Scholarship

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The opportunity to write this article for *PS* emerged because I was an APSA Congressional Fellow for 2014–2015. In addition to testifying to the value of the fellowship itself, I would also like to speak more broadly about the value to one's scholarship of a front-row seat to politics. While my experience as essentially the interim tax legislative assistant for an involved member of the Ways and Means Committee has given me a fascinating window into tax politics and policy, I would like to address a topic of more universal interest to my fellow political scientists. Much of what our discipline does is based on theories of the political process: their creation, extension, modification—or challenges to them. Experiencing the political process can improve theory-building in many ways, from observing trends and events with larger implications, to the use of new sources, to new ideas of how to measure phenomena, to a greater appreciation for asymmetries of various kinds and how they structure politics. At the same time, one gains a greater appreciation for variables that place limits on generalizability.

A FRONT-ROW SEAT: MORE TO OBSERVE WITH THEORETICAL IMPLICATIONS

Seeing the process up close leads one to observe trends and events they might otherwise have missed. Some of these observations have broader implications for political science theory. Before delving into more specific ways such observations may come to light, two examples may be helpful. These examples are presented here not as developed research projects but as examples of starting points that would lead to further inquiry.

A natural place to begin inquiry involves various theories of congressional organization. One perspective is distributive theories of Congress, the notion that Congress is organized to distribute "pork-barrel" projects to members' districts. Classics in this tradition include Weingast and Marshall (1988) and Baron and Ferejohn (1989)—a tradition that has many variations, as well as being linked to other theories, such as the Mayhew's observations of credit-claiming and phenomena such as logrolling. And yet, since 2010 the Republicans have banned earmarks, making the distribution of these projects extraordinarily difficult though not technically impossible. This move, prompted by political considerations, has had ripple effects through different aspects of governance and elections. One of the more prominent policy examples is the difficulty in funding the Highway Trust Fund, which runs into the red regularly. Such bills would typically come adorned with a cornucopia of different projects for members who might otherwise vote against the bill. Speaker Boehner lamented this state of affairs (Eilperin and Sullivan 2013):

> When it comes to things like the highway bill, which used to be very bipartisan, you have to understand it was greased to be bipartisan with 6,371 earmarks. You take the earmarks away and guess what? All of a sudden people are beginning to look at the real policy behind it.

Observing the process up close now shows a very different story. Furthermore, the change in earmark policy has garnered virtually no political science interest.

Another theory of congressional organization is informational theories, the idea that Congress is organized to promote legislative expertise. Krehbiel (1991) is a classic in this tradition. Yet any staffer working in Congress, will observe the effects of Speaker Gingrich's reforms cutting resources for staff in both committees and members' offices—cuts that have persisted, with recent reductions by Speaker Boehner in 2010 and 2012 (Drutman and Teles 2015). The work load is tremendous, with a wide variety of issue areas covered by staffers who, on average, only stay in their positions a few years. These young staffers work hard, learn quickly, and are often in their positions because they deeply care about politics. But better pay and larger congressional staffs would be much more effective in fostering expertise by convincing staff to stay longer. One of the savviest staffers I met had worked for a senator for three decades—an unlikely career path in today's environment.

Another observation that prompts questions of informational organization involves committee seniority. In the House, the Republicans only allow a chair to helm a committee for six years. This Congress saw the turnover of a particularly high-profile position because of this rule: Ways and Means chair Dave Camp left, to be replaced by Paul Ryan. Dave Camp had achieved bipartisan respect (though not support) for creating a sweeping tax reform bill. HR 1 never progressed legislatively in the 113th Congress, but involved a tremendous amount of expertise and deliberation between various parties. Given the tremendous difficulties with contemporary tax policy (the parties sharply disagree even on whether it should raise revenue), it is no surprise that anyone filling Representative Camp's position would have a difficult time putting together even minor reforms. There has been much talk of tax reform and little action beyond the creation of Senate working groups and their July 7 reports, which lack detail. One hopes to be wrong—but disagreements between major players and a general lack of progress do not bode well for reform. The House and Senate's tax-writing committees, both controlled by Republicans, are not (at the time of this writing) even bringing up the same bills. It is hard to imagine that the loss of Camp's expertise has been inconsequential.

DIFFERENT SOURCES

One of the perks of working in Congress is the vast amount of informational resources at your disposal, from the Congressional

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https://doi.org/10.1017/S1049096515001018 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Research Service (CRS), to the Governmental Accountability Office (GAO), to the legislative liaison offices of federal agencies, to more specialized bodies such as the Joint Committee on Taxation (JCT) and the Congressional Budget Office (CBO) for fiscal policy, as well as a wealth of people outside of government who are willing to help. I've leaned on CRS frequently, been briefed by JCT for legislation, conferred with the GAO over a potential report—these bodies of expertise are crucial to congressional knowledge. (Federal agencies' legislative liaison offices can reflect difficulties in the principal-agent relationship that are to be expected.) Specialized updates from CQ and different news listings, as well as Dear Colleague memos flood your inbox. Needless to say, many of these things are not accessible to people outside of Congress. But some of it is accessible. There are a number of sources I rarely read before my fellowship that I read daily now: *Tax Notes*, *Politico*, *The Hill*, *Roll Call*, as well as weeklies like the *National Journal*. These sources reveal a level of maneuvering that is often not covered by publications with a broader audience. For example, the tension between the House Republican leadership and more conservative members in the Freedom Caucus has played out in the wake of a trade vote that did not go as expected for Speaker Boehner. None of this (at time of writing) has been picked up by the mainstream press. Of course, conferring with those engaging in the process is another important source. On this specific issue, party leadership's tools for congressional control, a perceptive staffer noted to me that the loss of earmarks makes it more difficult for leadership to control the rank and file. For scholars of partisan organization and the committee system, such details give valuable insight to the sticks and carrots used, and their limits, and may also lead to additional theorizing.

NEW WAYS OF MEASURING POLITICAL PHENOMENA

A front seat to the political process can also give one new ideas of how to measure legislative phenomena. Working in Congress illustrates that the day-to-day working experience is imbued with partisan considerations. As such, polarization and agenda-setting are literatures that are ripe for additional ways of measurement. In terms of polarization, Ways and Means Committee "markup" meetings have been instructive in a variety of ways. Amendments from the minority party, even those that appear to be genuinely friendly, are not considered and end on a party-line vote. This shows a more polarized functioning—many members will recount a time not long ago when this was not the case. As for agenda-setting, the first 20 bills are reserved for majority and minority leadership (HR 1-10 for the majority, HR 11-20 for the minority) and are helpful in identifying their priorities. This is a useful metric that could be compared over many years—it is also a measurement that is rarely reported on in any venue.

AN APPRECIATION FOR HOW ASYMMETRIES STRUCTURE THE SYSTEM

Working in Congress gives staffers a strong appreciation for various asymmetries. The way in which uneven access to information, (financial) resources, and time plays out singularly or in combination has a profound effect on structuring the system. Information, either manifest in accessibility or in expertise, is not uniformly or impartially distributed. This is particularly evident for anyone working on tax equity issues, but is certainly not exclusive to them. In terms of resources, America's current degree of income and wealth inequality has garnered national attention. In Congress, Schattschneider's (1960) classic observation is certainly true that "the flaw in the pluralist heaven is that the heavenly chorus sings with a strong upper-class accent." While individual members may show a deep interest in alleviating inequality, those who contact congressional offices are those who have overcome collective action hurdles and are not representative. Even members who push against this tide find themselves responding to the arguments of the well-heeled out of necessity, a dialogue that drives national conversations. And lastly, time and timing is an enduring feature of congressional politics. For advocacy organizations and some congressional committees, work takes on a "feast or famine" cycle. For most staffers, time is always incredibly scarce. Kingdon's (1984) windows of opportunity emerge and vanish. The public has an impression of a "do-nothing" Congress—accurate, if measured by legislative output. But by any other standard many work at a break-neck pace, with little to immediately show for their efforts. This ironically makes it even more difficult to pass legislation in a time of gridlock, given that one has to be strategic about projects one voluntarily takes on.

These imbalances affect many things. One example I've seen is the nature of what's proposed in terms of fiscal policy. Patashnik's (2014) observation that high deficits and generally scarce budgets led to the "fiscalization of the policy discourse" is an observation I regularly reflect on. Whether a bill has a "payfor" is always a major item of partisan contention. And the nature of the policies that are proposed takes on a different cast. Finding themselves with few options for raising revenue collection, particularly when in the minority, Democrats often instead introduce bills that use tax expenditures to finance policies of concern. Many tax breaks are proposed, but few programs or projects are suggested.

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THE LIMITS OF GENERALIZABILITY

While this article has largely devoted itself to the ways theorizing can be improved by direct experience in the political process, it must also be said that such experience gives one a sense of the limits to generalizability. In one respect this gives one an appreciation for multiple explanations that are brought to bear on different

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1049096515001018 Published online by Cambridge University Press

questions, leading to less parsimonious answers. But there are other problems with theorizing. In particular, the potential significance for human error and human variability is significant. This appears in many ways. While earlier it was identified that financial resources are terrifically mismatched, it must also be said that not all lobbyists are created equal. I've been lobbied on a bill before my boss dropped it (that is, introduced it). I've also run into many lobbyists who cannot identify where the bill they advocate for is in the legislative process, or don't understand the importance of committees of jurisdiction. On one occasion, I was asked to reintroduce a bill from the previous year that the lobbyist then could not identify. Many interests assume that they need such representation to get a meeting, an assumption that helps fuel the industry and contributes to the imbalance in financial resources mentioned previously.

I've also observed failures of coordination—within both parties, and on different subject areas, which was not reflective of the importance of the legislation or the potential items to be negotiated. Given the increasing number of instances where Congress comes down to the last minute before an authorization expires or funds run out, the chances are that such events will increase even if not intended by those with the power to stop them. For example, it was not anticipated that the PATRIOT Act would expire briefly, which was caused by Rand Paul's filibuster at the last minute. For some items this is embarrassing or costly, such as the 2013 government shutdown that cost $24 billion. One worries that there are worse consequences: defaulting on our national debt because of the debt ceiling has become an increasingly frequent possibility. Given the increase of eleventh-hour governance and the very fragmented nature of our gridlocked Madisonian lawmaking institutions, flirting with this kind of disaster is increasingly dangerous. Of course, the individual members and their staffs represent tremendous variability along many dimensions—a variability that is all the more important for existing in a system where committee chairs do not have the lock on policy they once enjoyed, and party leadership can be embattled.

CONCLUSION

Seeing the political process up close pays real dividends for scholarship and how we understand and teach about the political world around us. This is true whether one is working in Congress or engaging in closer observation of sources not typically used in political science. Here I've addressed how theory-building and modification can benefit from such a front-row seat. Experiencing the political process can improve theory-building in many ways, from observing trends and events with larger implications, to the use of new sources, to new ideas of how to measure phenomena, to a greater appreciation for asymmetries of various kinds and how they structure politics. At the same time, one gains a greater appreciation for variables that place limits on generalizability. ■

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https://doi.org/10.1017/S1049096515001018 Published online by Cambridge University Press