The Congressional System:
Notes and Readings

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THE CONGRESSIONAL SYSTEM: NOTES AND READINGS

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This collection is intended to make available to students of Congress the best recent research on the legislature, within a frame of reference which links the papers in a meaningful fashion. Recent behavioral research in political science as applied to the legislative branch has produced substantial new knowledge of congressional operations and a resurgence of interest in the study of Congress. Enterprising social scientists have discovered that senators and representatives are not nearly as inaccessible as they had believed, and they have observed and interviewed the lawmakers far more systematically and rigorously than ever before. Quantitative methods have been used more widely and more effectively than in the past. However, this current research has been conducted in small-scale studies and has most often been published in journals, which are less accessible to students of politics. (Seventeen of the twenty-one papers in this collection were originally published in scholarly quarterlies.)

To integrate these diverse studies in some coherent frame of reference, this book uses the systems approach (pioneered by David Easton and others). Hopefully, the systems framework will make clear the interrelationships of the various facets of the legislative process, interconnections which might go unnoticed when reading the papers and essays individually.

I first became interested in the "systems perspective" during a year as Postdoctoral Fellow at the Mental Health Research Institute of the University of Michigan. Although what appears here may not entirely satisfy the more rigorous "general systems" theorists at the Institute, nonetheless it is highly probable that this collection would not have been

assembled nor the Introduction written without the stimulation and the opportunity to follow one's inclinations that the Institute provided. Much of the preparation of the editorial material was done during my tenure as Research Associate, Center for International Affairs, Harvard University.

A number of individuals also contributed aid and comfort. First and foremost, I am grateful to the scholars, whose work is reprinted here, who have brought renewed life and new distinction to the study of Congress. Specifically, Richard F. Fenno, Bernard C. Hennessy, Charles O. Jones, Charles F. Levine, Morris S. Ogul, and Raymond E. Wolfinger read the editor's material in one form or another, and their commentaries, often critical, helped to improve the quality of what appears here. Had my mind been more open, the Introduction and notes might have been better still. I must also record my obligation to Linda Smith, who ably assisted with the permissions correspondence and, together with Lois Fiore, typed the manuscript. In addition, the editors at Wadsworth Publishing Company are to be commended for their helpfulness and efficiency.

It goes without saying, of course, that none of these institutions or individuals bears any responsibility for this book. I am prepared to take full credit and, somewhat less willingly, all the blame for what appears between these covers.

Finally, it is probably the case that no book is written or edited without the patience, forbearance, encouragement, and support of the author's family. This is most certainly true in this instance, and to my wife Helen and our children—Erik, Kurt, Alice, and Karen—this book is gratefully dedicated.

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INTRODUCTION: CONGRESS AS A POLITICAL SYSTEM

The twentieth century has been described as the age of the executive. Though the power of representative bodies may have waned relative to executive authority, the United States Congress is still central to the operation of the national government. Virtually no federal action can be taken without the consent, explicit or implicit, of the legislative branch. This book, by analyzing the workings of Congress, hopes to promote a better understanding of the operation of the institution, to clarify its participation in policy making, and to assess its strengths and weaknesses.

To comprehend the contribution of Congress to the formulation of public policy, we must understand more than the formal, codified rules of procedure that define how a bill becomes a law. We also must comprehend the informal, unwritten rules of behavior that often affect the application of the formal rules. The nature and extent of support outside the legislative halls for any particular bill and the ways in which support is brought to bear on individual legislators are relevant to any evaluation of the bill's prospects. Whether the president supports the bill and whether or not he works actively to get it out of committee or to solicit votes for it may be crucial to its passage. The fate of a bill also depends upon the activity of the congressional representatives; we should not assume that the representatives are passive occupants of positions in Congress, their behavior determined by the workings of that institution. The attitudes and values which they bring with them to the legislature influence their behavior, what they

do to bring about the passage or the defeat of a bill. Nor does activity end when a bill is passed, for Congress must watch to see if the bill serves its purposes; it must observe critically the administration of the bill by the executive branch. The opponents of the bill, in Congress and outside, may organize campaigns for its amendment or repeal.

In short, to understand congressional operations, we must take into account not only the basic and commonly noted congressional organization and procedures but also the influence of the informal customs of the legislature and the relationship of its members to a variety of people who are not members. In recent years political scientists have borrowed from their colleagues in sociology a conceptual scheme, known as systems theory or systems analysis, to encompass and relate a large number of seemingly different forms of activity. Because this approach seems so admirably suited to understanding congressional politics, it will be used in this book.

THE SYSTEMS APPROACH: AN OVERVIEW[1]

The System

The systems approach focuses attention on what actually occurs—on the behaviors of those who are a part of the system. Institutional structures are important not because they are formally specified but because they may affect individual behavior in ways quite unintended and unforeseen. We may define a system, in general terms, as the *patterned interactions among two or more actors (variables) which operate persistently over time to produce some form of result (output).*[2] As Easton suggests, there exist

sets of interdependent actions such that a change in one part will be likely to affect what happens in another part. Included within a system will be only those actions that display a coherence and unity or constitute a whole. Modification in any part of these must have determinate repercussions on other parts. If not for this connectedness of the parts, there would be little point in identifying the behavior as a system.[3]

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[1] The ideas in this section are drawn from David Easton, *A Framework for Political Analysis* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1965) and *A Systems Analysis of Political Life* (New York: Wiley, 1965); and William C. Mitchell, *The American Polity* (New York: Free Press, 1962) and *Sociological Analysis and Politics: The Theories of Talcott Parsons* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1967); and through them, Talcott Parsons.

[2] In most cases, the actors in a system are individuals; but with respect to the international political system, nations are the unit of analysis, that is, the actors.

[3] Easton, *A Framework*, pp. 27-28.

The kinds of systems which are of interest to social scientists may vary widely: they may consist of two people, say a husband and wife, or be a very large entity, such as the social system of the United States. The system is a set of interrelationships which endure over time and which lead to some persistent forms of activity.

The interacting members of the system can be described as playing *roles.* Such terminology is, in general, consistent with ordinary conversational usage. We are accustomed to talking about individuals playing the roles of husband, father, or citizen. We recognize that a "good" citizen will act in accordance with a set of "rules" that define what kinds of actions he should take and what sorts of actions he should refrain from taking. More formally, we may define role as *"the rights and duties, the normatively approved patterns of behavior"* for people in given positions in society.[4]

Role, thus defined, has both social (or structural) and cultural attributes. A position refers to a specific place in a social structure. The rights and obligations of a position tend to be formalized and codified. A number of behaviors are required or forbidden by law or by some other set of rules for the occupant of a particular position; engaging in forbidden activity will lead to the invoking of formal, legal sanctions. Culturally, a role is based upon a set of norms or expectations about how the person who takes the role should act. The members of the system learn that there are some things that they are expected to do and some things which they must refrain from doing; those who violate the norms, while not subject to formal sanctions, may be punished informally. They may be ignored, socially ostracized, or generally deprived of the rewards which successful role playing brings. In sum, the role concept encompasses a set of legal and extra-legal, formal and informal, norms, expectations, values, and beliefs about how the occupant of a given position in a system should behave in a variety of social situations.[5]

[4] J. Milton Yinger, *Toward a Field Theory of Behavior* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1965), p. 99. For other discussions of role and role theory, see Theodore B. Sarbin, "Role Theory," in Gardner Lindzey, ed., *Handbook of Social Psychology,* Vol 1 (Reading, Mass.: Addison-Wesley, 1954), pp. 223-258; Neal Gross, Ward S. Mason, and Alexander McEachern, *Explorations in Role Analysis* (New York: Wiley, 1958), chs. 1-4; Sheldon Stryker, "The Interactional and Situational Approaches," in H. Christiansen, ed., *Handbook of Marriage and the Family* (Chicago: Rand McNally, 1964), pp. 125-170; John C. Wahlke, Heinz Eulau, William Buchanan, and LeRoy C. Ferguson, *The Legislative System* (New York: Wiley, 1962), esp. ch. 1. The present treatment of role draws heavily on these sources.

[5] Talcott Parsons treats the distinctions made in the previous paragraphs in a somewhat different way, using a different terminology. He suggests that to survive, a system must solve a number of functional problems. One of these is the question of *integration,* the coordination of the actions of the system members. The formal rules which allocate the rights and duties of particular positions, serve to promote system integration. A second problem is that of *pattern maintenance,* the need of the system

A distinction must be made between role and *role behavior.* Role defines how the role-player, whoever he may be, should behave. Role behavior consists of what a particular occupant of the role *actually* does. The behavior he exhibits may or may not correspond with how others expect him to play the role. Inappropriate behavior may occur for a number of reasons. In the first place, the occupant of a given role may not know what behaviors are expected of him; he may have to learn by a painful trial-and-error method. This is the process of *socialization,* the learning by the role players of the behaviors which those others with whom they must deal expect them to enact. In this socialization process, the role taker may learn that there is no agreement (more formally, that *role consensus* does not exist) about how he should behave. That is, the people with whom the role occupant must interact do not agree on what is proper activity for him to engage in. Second, a role player may encounter *role conflict* when he is confronted by incompatible expectations from two or more sources. That is, his role may require him to deal with two or more sets of people each of which wants him to perform different, and mutually exclusive, behaviors. Part of the socialization process involves learning how to cope with such varying expectations. Finally, the occupant of the role may be personally incapable of meeting the demands of the role. We are all familiar with people who seem temperamentally unsuited for marriage, group membership, or citizenship. On occasion, such individuals will be thrust into a particular role, and their personalities will render it difficult for them to behave appropriately. For all these reasons, role behavior may depart from the norms and expectations which define the role.

To summarize the discussion to this point, we can say that it facilitates understanding of the activities of a wide variety of social units if we conceive of these units as systems. The systems are comprised of sets of persistent and patterned interactions among members of the system (actors) playing various roles. The roles are defined in terms of formal and informal rights, duties, expectations, and norms, which indicate appropriate role behavior. This discussion of system and role suggests a set of questions which must be answered if we are to understand the actions of any system: Who are the members of the system? What roles make up the system? How do these roles relate to one another? At any point in time, what kinds of people occupy the various roles of the system? What kinds of role behavior do they display?

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to maintain its basic normative value patterns in order to facilitate appropriate actions. This function is akin to the definition of appropriate role behaviors by the norms and expectations which comprise a given role. Integration relates to a structural (formal, legal) component of the role pattern while pattern maintenance refers to the cultural (informal, extra-legal) aspects of the system. For a full discussion of the Parsonian schema and complete citation of Parsons' works, see Mitchell, *Sociological Analysis and Politics.*

Environment and Inputs to the System

We cannot speak of a system and the roles that comprise it without noting that some things are not part of the system. This implies further that there exists a *boundary* which separates the system from all that is outside of it, its *environment.* Boundary is, at times, a difficult notion to handle. For some purposes some actors may fall within the system; for other purposes it will be appropriate to exclude them and to treat them as environmental in character. Generally, we include only those actors in whom we are interested as members of the system; that is, the analyst is free to set somewhat arbitrarily the boundary of his system in order to suit his research purposes.

Despite this ambiguity in definition, there exist some clues as to what to include and what to exclude from a system. The expectations and norms that define the roles will be related to one another and quite distinct from the defining roles in other systems. The members of a system will interact with each other more frequently than they interact with non-members. They will tend to form a group displaying solidarity and group loyalty.[6] In short, though delineations of system boundaries may vary, we can often establish that some people interact sufficiently often and with sufficient intensity to justify including them and excluding others as members of a system.

Simply because some things are not included in a system but are treated as environmental does not, however, eliminate them from consideration. In the social world, few if any systems are self-sufficient, that is, can survive without any interactions with environmental systems. To put the matter another way, systems of interest tend to be "open," not "closed." Thus, it becomes important to look at the nature of the interchanges between elements in the environment and elements within the system's boundary. The transactions directed from the environment to the system are called *inputs* to the system. These inputs are of two forms, demands and supports. Demands may be defined as *requests or requirements originating outside the system that the members of the system behave in given ways.* The demands may create problems and cause stress for the system. The system may not have sufficient resources to deal with any given demand, or there may be too many demands from the environment for the system to cope with.[7] As the character and volume of the demands alter, the structure of the system may prove inadequate, and new processes—formal structures, new role orientations, or some combination of the two—will have to be developed if the system is to survive.

[6] See Easton, *A Framework,* pp. 68-69.

[7] Easton, *A Framework,* pp. 114-115. Some demands may originate within the system (Easton calls these "withinputs"), but their net effect is the same as that of the more numerous external demands.

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Difficulties for the system may stem from the second type of inputs, supports, as well as from demands. We may define support for a system as *the sentiments and the actions based on those sentiments that individuals hold toward the system.* Support may be overt, when it is reflected in specific actions directed toward the system, or covert, when it occurs at the level of attitudes and opinions. Thus support may vary from open, positive activity on behalf of the system, through passive acquiescence or indifference, to overt antagonism toward the system. Obviously, a system cannot survive unchanged if its support falls below some minimum level. If people no longer care enough about its continued existence or openly seek its destruction, the system will be in jeopardy. Support may also, following Easton, be described as diffuse or specific. The former refers to general feelings of attachment to the system; the latter pertains to favorable responses to the system which stem from particular action (outputs) that the system takes.[8]

In sum, a system, whatever its formal structures and role patterns, will interact across its boundaries with actors in its environment. These interchanges from the environment to the system, called inputs, will be of two general types: demands, requests for specific actions on the part of the system; and supports, the expression of sentiments and in some cases the conversion of these sentiments into positive or negative actions toward the system. Both kinds of inputs may lead to stress on the system, which will be required to take action to respond satisfactorily to the inputs and thus to preserve its own existence.

The notion of inputs from the environment suggests a second set of questions that must be dealt with in the analysis of any system: Who are the major actors in the environment of the system? What kinds of demands do these environmental actors make on the system? What sorts of supports for the system are forthcoming from these environmental actors? What effects do these inputs have on the character of the system itself?

System Outputs

Internal adaptation is one way in which systems reduce the stress placed upon them by inputs from the environment. Perhaps a more common way is to produce *outputs,* which satisfy the demands made upon the system, produce adequate levels of support for the system, or both. By outputs, we mean *those end results or products which the system generates.* Referring to the total political system, Easton refers to the outputs as "the authoritative allocations of values" for society; for less inclusive systems

[8] For a full treatment of these points, see Easton, *A Systems Analysis,* pp. 153-170.

outputs would include decisions and articulated policies which the system announces and acts upon.[9]

Outputs, like inputs, are exchanges across the boundary of the system between members of the system and actors in the environment. Outputs may serve to satisfy the demands made upon the system and thus facilitate the system's survival by reducing the level of demands upon it. Outputs may also produce support. A system decision that allocates rewards—money, favors, or prestige—to some set of individuals or groups may win, in return, the support of the recipients. Outputs which provide sufficient rewards for enough actors in the environment of the system may engender a good deal of support for the system. In addition, diffuse support may linger on long after the specific output has ceased to be rewarding. It is clear that generation of support will enhance the survival potential of any system.

Any system, then, will seek, through production of outputs, to satisfy the demands made upon it and to create support for itself. To understand a particular system, we need to inquire about the kinds of outputs it produces, the effect of these outputs on demand and support levels, and the consequences of these outputs for the system itself. These sorts of inquiries constitute a third set of questions which the analysis of any system must seek to answer.

Feedback

Just as inputs from the environment may affect the internal organization and activity of a system, the outputs from the system may well influence the actors in the environment. A decision that a system makes may satisfy some external actors and produce support; it thus permits the system to take additional actions on the basis of that support. A certain policy enactment may displease groups in the environment, stimulating them to make new demands or to press old demands more vigorously. This is the *feedback cycle,* or loop, *by which future inputs to the system reflect environmental reactions to past outputs.* What the system does presently may influence, via the feedback process, what the system will be required subsequently to face.[10]

The distinction between negative (self-correcting) and positive (self-reinforcing) feedback should be noted. In the former, the responses, or new

[9]See Easton, *A Systems Analysis,* pp. 343-362, for a more detailed discussion of outputs.

[10]On feedback, see Easton, *A Framework and a Systems Analysis;* and Karl W. Deutsch, *The Nerves of Government* (New York: Free Press, 1963), esp. pp. 88-97.

inputs to the system suggest negative reactions to old outputs, and the system will attempt to adjust its behavior to take these critical reactions into account. To cite a simple example, a national system that embarks on a military buildup may stimulate counter-mobilization from another country and, upon learning of this, may cease its production of armaments rather than engage in an arms race that it feels it cannot win. The information that is "fed back" to the system, in this instance, produces a change in the system's outputs. Positive feedback, on the other hand, serves to reinforce the system's commitment to its present outputs by communicating the success of present policy. If a weapons development program does not generate counter-developments on the part of other nations, the first nation may decide to step up its construction of weapons in the hope of gaining a permanent military advantage *vis-à-vis* other countries.

The feedback process adds a dynamic element to the systems approach. Because a system seeks to survive in its environment, it will respond to external changes about which it learns through feedback. Its response may be a restructuring of the system itself, or it may take the form of an altered pattern of outputs. These new outputs may change the environmental conditions, thus stimulating still further changes in the type and intensity of the demands and supports which reach the system. Thus a continuous cycle of adaptation and readjustment is established, which, over time, may lead to fundamental changes in the character and outputs of a system. If the feedback process fails, a system may be unable to make functional responses to its environment and may be unable to survive.

Feedback, in short, refers to what a system learns about the reactions of others to its outputs. To understand any system fully, we must attempt to answer a fourth and final set of questions: What is the environmental response to system outputs? What changes in the inputs (demands and supports) to the system does this response engender? How accurately does the system perceive these environmental changes? What alterations in the system does the new input pattern require?

Summary

This section has sketched out, in brief and oversimplified form, the basic elements of the systems approach to the analysis of social units. A system, characterized by a particular set of formal structures and role orientations, interacts with elements in its environment. It receives inputs (demands and supports), processes them in some fashion, and produces outputs. The effects of these outputs on the relevant actors in the environment are returned to the system as new inputs through the feedback process. The interrelationships among these four sets of factors—system, inputs, outputs, and feedback—are summarized diagrammatically in Figure 1.
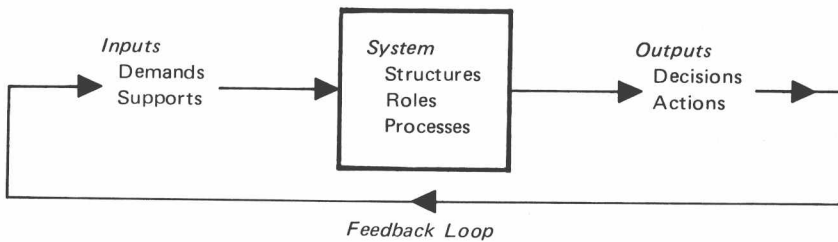
Feedback Loop

FIGURE 1   Schematic Model of a System and Its Environment

Before we move on to look at the congressional system specifically, a note of caution needs to be interjected. This has been an oversimplified view of system analysis. We have talked as if there were but a single system operating in an undifferentiated environment. In fact, this is not the case. What for one set of purposes may appear to be a unified system may appear, from another perspective, as only a part, a *subsystem,* of a larger system. In this book, we will treat Congress as the system upon which we will focus our attention. If, however, we were to look at the entire American political system, we would discover that the legislature is merely one subsystem to be considered along with the presidential (or executive), judicial, popular, and other subsystems of the total governmental system. Similarly, when we look at the congressional system, we will find that a number of important subsystems exist within it. The committees of Congress can be treated as distinct subsystems of the legislative system, as can the party organizations.

Each of these subsystems can be analyzed as total systems, and from that perspective, we discover distinctive structures and role patterns peculiar to each committee or party. Boundary interchanges—inputs and outputs— occur between subsystems. Put another way, what is internal to a total system is environmental to some subsystem; what is a total system from one point of view may be a subsystem from another point of view. Thus, to repeat a point made earlier, every system is the analytical creation of the researcher who studies it. The true test of any formulation is, of course, the extent to which it fosters understanding of that part of social life under investigation.

THE CONGRESSIONAL SYSTEM

As the foregoing suggests, the systems framework seems well suited for an analysis of the U.S. Congress. This approach will permit us to see, as a whole, the entire range of activities in which the legislature engages. It will allow us to integrate a vast amount of recent research into as complete a picture of legislative politics as is possible. The purpose of the present

section is to explain how the concepts outlined in the first half of this chapter apply to Congress.

The Congressional System

For present purposes, it seems useful to define the congressional system as including *all the legislators, the senators, the representatives, and their supporting individual and committee staff facilities.* Other important actors such as the executive branch, the courts, and the public will be treated as environmental factors. Drawing the boundary of the legislative system in this way is consistent with the constitutional separation of powers, which defines the independent but overlapping powers of the three branches of government. In addition, it is reasonable to believe that the members of the legislative system interact with one another more frequently than they interact with those who have been excluded from the system. Each of the environmental actors engages in substantial activity that is non-legislative in character; members of Congress and their staff associates are involved in legislative business almost exclusively. Moreover, there exist a number of specialized norms of behavior that apply directly to those who are identified as members of the congressional system and not to actors in the environment, except as these latter take the norms into account in dealing with the legislature. Finally, in keeping with the definition of a system as the "patterned interactions among actors," and as the selections included in this volume amply illustrate, there are visible regularities in the interactions among the actors of Congress. The formal rules (for example, the regulation of debate in the House and the absence of such regulation in the Senate), the informal norms (seniority, for example), the operation of particular committees, the activities of the political parties, and other features of Congress influence outputs in predictable (or at least in understandable) ways. The parties hold their adherents in line in some circumstances but not in others; patterns of advancement to positions of leadership develop; committee action reflects unwritten decision rules. Other participants in the congressional process are important, but the interactions among congressmen and their staffs are sufficiently distinctive to justify treating the legislature as a political system, with any remaining actors considered as environmental in character.

In examining the congressional system, it is important to know something about its members. Since the behavior of legislators, like that of other people, reflects their life experiences, it is instructive to see what kinds of people are chosen to serve in Washington. The ease with which a legislator learns (is socialized into) his legislative role and the way he performs that role is often related to what he is when he arrives in the nation's capital. One facet of these life experiences can be gauged by looking at the social