

The background of the book cover is a high-contrast photograph of a classical building's interior. It features large, dark columns and a floor with strong, parallel diagonal shadows in a warm orange-red hue. In the lower right, two small figures are visible, one standing and one sitting, adding a sense of scale to the grand architecture.

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# CONGRESS

Games and Strategies



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# CONGRESS

## Games and Strategies

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# A PREFACE FOR TEACHERS

Authoring this book revealed to us the many ways instructors teach about the subject of Congress and their differing preferences about the appropriate topical coverage of the subject. Many who field undergraduate courses on our national legislature also teach several other American politics classes as well. Our text incorporates thorough references to the recent literature that will satisfy congressional specialists, but also includes a number of features that will appeal to nonspecialists, such as annotated paper topics and teaching ancillaries.

Explaining Congress to undergraduates can be a difficult task, so we want to support instructors in every way possible. Accordingly, our text supplies more instructional aids than its competitors. Our "In Depth" sections at the end of each chapter provide a battery of possible paper topics and class projects. The computer simulations included with this volume have many class applications. We also believe our text is the first to include an instructor's manual with lecture, exam and assignment suggestions.

We decided to organize our analysis around the game concept for three reasons. First, many participants in congressional politics use the analogy frequently to explain their own calculations and actions. Second, concepts from game theory have proven useful in explaining the behavior of the institution. Third, the analogy makes the subject matter more accessible to undergraduates who grew up contesting Nintendo, basketball, and other games. They will find the concepts of rules, strategies, winners, and losers to be a useful set of tools for making sense of Congress and its components.

Instructors teach about Congress in a variety of formats. Some conduct semester-long courses on the topic; others are limited to a trimester. Some combine coverage of Congress with other topics, such as the presidency or public policy; others do not. We designed this book to fit each of these needs. Those who focus solely on Congress will find this text allows them to include more advanced readings and supplementary books on their syllabus. Teachers combining Congress with other topics will find our book coordinates flexibly with additional readings and assignments on those topics.

We learned much while writing this book and would like to hear from those who adopt it. Please let us know where you think there is room for improvement.

**Stephen E. Frantzich**  
**Steven E. Schier**

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# INTRODUCTION

## *The Congressional Games*

One of the most frequent analogies [is] between baseball and . . . legislatures. . . . Baseball and legislatures share the notion of a season. . . . The best and most memorable plays occur at the last. . . . In baseball, as in legislative life, the rules frequently determine strategy. (Kurtz 1992, 11)



Analogies serve as powerful mechanisms by which we understand the world. We did not have to directly experience the first night's bombing of Baghdad during the Persian Gulf War to develop a feeling for its eery nature as U.S. pilots told us it was like the biggest Fourth of July fireworks display they had ever seen. A useful analogy allows us to compare something with which we are familiar to that with which we are not as familiar. Analogies fall into the intellectual process of categorizing events and phenomena by looking for relevant similarities. The fact that no two events or phenomena are absolutely identical, however, warns us not to completely trust analogies. Different analogies may be used to describe the same phenomenon. For the residents of Baghdad the air raid was more *like* "being at the center of Hell." Despite their restrictions, analogies can help us better understand phenomena if we remain aware of their limitations.

Useful analogies encourage us to build on our existing knowledge to expand our understanding of unfamiliar realms. This book will compare the political intricacies of Congress with a subject with which we are all familiar—games. One aspect of games, however, their frivolity, is not the aspect of the analogy we wish to emphasize. Congress comprises a set of serious games. The game results regularly decide what resources and programs will be available to the American government, in which life and death matters may be involved. Unlike many contests, Congress is involved in a **continuous game** series,<sup>1</sup> which lacks distinct beginnings and ends.

---

<sup>1</sup>Continuous games are not won once and for all, while discrete games have a clear beginning and end. The battle over a particular piece of legislation in a congressional conference committee may be viewed as a discrete game that ends when the final votes are counted and the committee disbands. The game of passing legislation on the floor of either house, though, goes on round after round with the same players, rules, and strategies.

Winners in one round attempt to maintain their advantage, while losers attempt to change the rules, revise their strategies and/or pursue the game in another institutional arena.

We are not proposing to view Congress as one grand integrated game, nor apply a sophisticated and formal game theory.<sup>2</sup> On the other hand, we do not plan to simply take the journalistic approach and use the aspects of games as literary techniques designed to add some color to our writing.<sup>3</sup> Rather, we see the game analogy as a tool for understanding complex phenomena.

Why do we even mention the game analogy if it doesn't fit perfectly? First it is an analogy members of Congress use regularly themselves (see box I.1). Secondly, it provides a checklist of aspects we need to examine when analyzing either Congress or any of its components. Third, the game analogy invites us to ask important questions we might not have otherwise raised when looking at Congress from a different perspective.

## KEY ASPECTS OF GAMES: A CHECKLIST FOR ANALYSIS

When attempting to analyze an institution or process, one needs a starting point. The game analogy offers a checklist of factors to look for. This checklist ignores some aspects, but more importantly assures that the analyst at least considers other factors. All games share a set of general characteristics:

**Environment:** Games are not played in isolation. They are affected by the general societal and historical context.

**Players:** There would be no game if there were no players. Few games are free-for-alls allowing anyone to play. Determining *who* is allowed to play goes a long way in determining *how* the game will be played.

**Rules:** Games are defined by the rules which players either voluntarily or are coerced to accept. They define legitimate players and strategies, as well as affect the likely outcome.

**Strategies:** Players design a set of moves in hopes of gaining advantage and winning the game. Different game rules and the skills of players determine effective strategies.

**Winners and Losers:** Entire games or individual rounds usually end with one set of players seen as winners and one set as having lost.

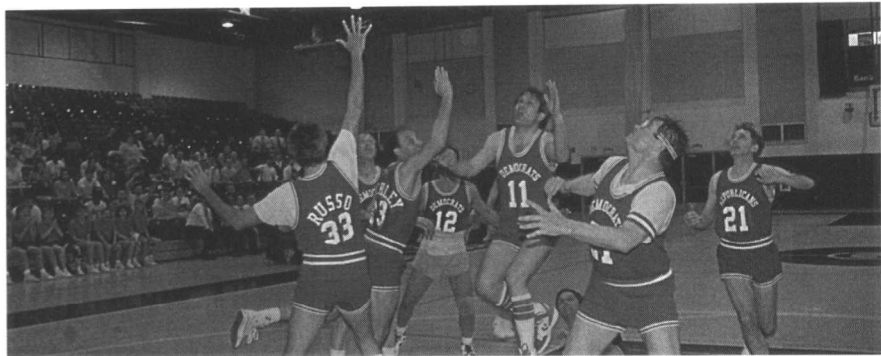
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<sup>2</sup> Game theory in political science involves building formal—often mathematical—models of political strategy. See Steven Brams, 1975, *Game Theory and Politics*, New York: The Free Press.

<sup>3</sup> For one of the better journalistic efforts to apply the game analogy to American politics, see Hedrick Smith, 1988, *The Power Game: How Washington Works*, New York: Random House.

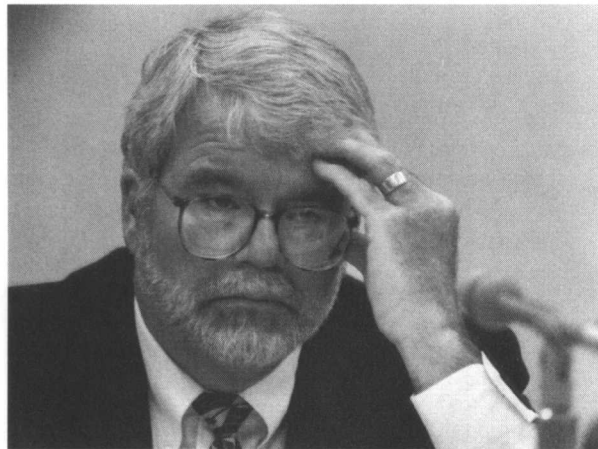
**BOX 1.1****THE MEMBERS SPEAK ABOUT THE LEGISLATIVE GAME**

Members of the House improve their physical fitness and reduce stress through regular basketball games. A number of them see direct parallels between the game on the court and the game in the legislative arena.



Members of Congress play hard both on the legislative and the athletic field.

Sports is a metaphor for life. . . . People play basketball like they legislate. . . . I try to make the game move along. . . . I try to include people in legislation. My game is much more inclusive. . . . Norm [Norman Dicks, D-WA] plays the complete game because he plays coach, player, referee. This comes from being on appropriations. He believes he can control the whole world. . . . Tom [Tom Downey, former D-NY] is always pushing for a basket, hunting and pecking for the next point, looking for an opening. . . . It's the same way he legislates. He pushes on the margins on issues. (Representative George Miller, D-CA)



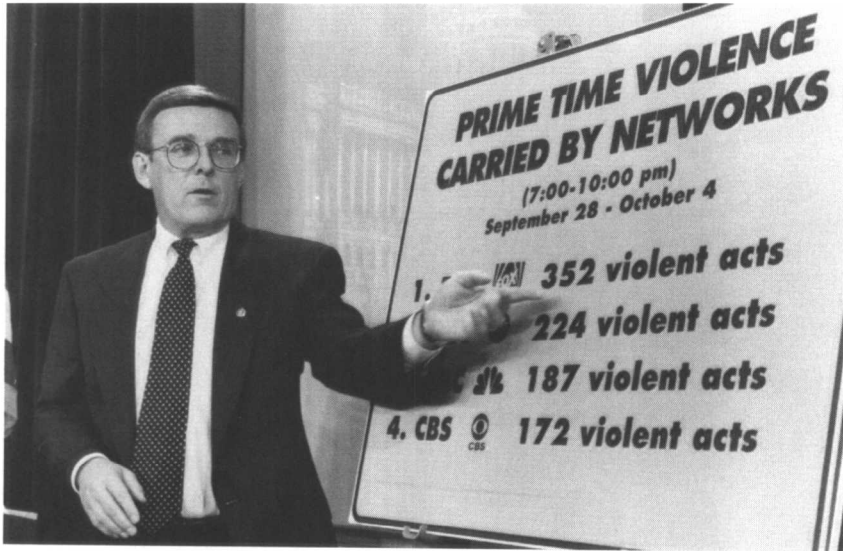
Representative George Miller (D-CA) as an inside player (Chairman of the Natural Resources Committee) observes the strengths and weaknesses of other players on a daily basis.

*Continued on next page*



**BOX I.1** Continued

No politician feels he can't score from any given point on the court once he has his hands on the ball. . . . There is virtually no passing. (Representative Byron L. Dorgan, D-ND)



Representative Byron Dorgan (D-ND) in action, articulating a policy problem related to television violence.

Democrats try to control the [member basketball] games the same way they control the House: through the rules. . . . Republicans play by the rules. Republicans believe in fundamentals: discipline, homework. Democrats say, "Why do the basic homework, we'll just ram it down their throats. . . . As long as we control the rules, why worry?" (Representative Carl Pursell, R-MI)

[Authors' Note: While we as authors find the above quotes useful, we are sensitive to the fact that the references to some contact sports may resonate with male more than female readers. Although some women enjoy and excel at contact sports such as basketball, a larger percentage of contemporary male students have intensively participated in such activities. While we want to emphasize that we are using a **game** analogy as opposed to a **sports** analogy, we must point out that the current male domination of Congress leads its Members to think in more male sports terms. Throughout the remainder of the book, we attempt to use a broad range of games as examples, but when using the words and perceptions of members of Congress, the possibilities are limited.]

**SOURCE:** Quoted in Maralee Schwartz, 1991, "The Gym Rats of the House," *Washington Post*, June 26, 1991, pp. A1, A7.