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CONGRESS

BURDETT A. LOOMIS

THE CONTEMPORARY CONGRESS

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Burdett A. Loomis

UNIVERSITY OF KANSAS



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**For Charlie Tidmarch and John Lee:
Good friends, gone too soon.**

Preface

Why, one might legitimately ask, come out with second edition of a congressional text less than two years after the original was published? For much of the last forty years, there would have been little or no reason to move ahead so quickly. Congress, even as it moved from powerful committees dominated by strong chairs to the post-reform era of enhanced party leadership, evolved relatively slowly. Although the Senate might fall into Republican hands, the House remained solidly Democratic. Then, in 1994, things did change profoundly as Republicans won control of both houses. Writing in the immediate aftermath of that seminal event scarcely allowed one much perspective.

Now, after Republicans have retained control of Capitol Hill, it seems appropriate to offer a more measured assessment of a possible Republican era in Congress. The zealotry of the first session of the 104th Congress has faded, but the institution is different from the well-defined Democratic post-reform era of the 1980s and early 1990s. Given narrow majorities and expensive, nationalized campaigns (at least in 1994 and 1996), we may be entering a less settled stage in congressional development, one in which it behooves us to take the pulse of the institution with greater frequency as we test our theories and generalizations derived from earlier times.

As with the first edition, St. Martin's has proven to be easy to work with. In particular I'd like to thank Beth Gillett, the political science editor, along with Kimberly Wurtzel and Jayme Heffler, for their support and assistance. In addition, the reviewers for this edition—James Melcher, Cleveland State University; Eric Tiritilli, University of Nebraska, Lincoln; Shirley Anne Warshaw, Gettysburg College; and Gary Young, University of Missouri, Columbia, did exemplary work, and I'm in their debt.

Lawrence, Kansas
July 1997

Preface to the First Edition

Sometimes, less is more. In seeking to write a relatively brief text on congressional politics, I found the very richness of the past thirty years' legislative research to be a serious obstacle to producing a lean, essaylike book that would emphasize the essence of the contemporary Congress. And then, near the very end of the project, Representative Newt Gingrich (R-Georgia) led the Republicans to a historic victory as they captured the House for the first time in forty years.

This book may well sit at the cusp of two eras on Capitol Hill. Our understanding of the post-1954, overwhelmingly Democratic Congress is solidly based in data and theory. The post-1994 Republican Congress may be a brief interlude, but odds are that the changes in partisan control will be much more fun-

damental and entrenched. Moreover, the high levels of legislative turnover in 1992 and 1994 have propelled a new generation of legislators into the Congress.

The Republicans' House and Senate victories in 1994 are at least as important as the changing balance of power in Washington politics. Although we will not return to the late-nineteenth-century dominance of congressional leaders over a weakened presidency, we have witnessed a new era in legislative ascendancy in setting the national policy agenda, both in the Contract with America and the push for a balanced budget.

So, with a rich body of legislative research and a set of potentially revolutionary changes of Capitol Hill, I sought to write a brief overview of congressional politics. As my Scandinavian relatives would say, "Ufta." A rough English Translation: "Are you kidding?"

In hewing to my original goal, I have kept the book short. In many ways, it is a thematic essay more than a text. My organizing concept remains an interpretation of the Congress as relecting a continuing set of tensions between decentralization (centrifugal forces) and centralization (centripetal forces). The strengthened Democratic and Republican leaderships in the House have provided clear evidence of the possibilities of centralization, whereas the highly individualistic Senate remains hospitable to atomistic behavior. In addition, many of the key battles within the Congress can be cast in terms of centrifugal-centripetal tensions. Committee autonomy, the existence of informal legislative organizations, and the fights over pet "pork barrel" projects in an era of budgetary restraint exemplify the ongoing decentralization within a Congress that has at the same time become more centralized through enhanced party leadership.

My intellectual debts within the community on congressional scholars are overwhelming and widespread. Perhaps the most important debt, however, is to the American Political Science Association's Congressional Fellowship Program. Twenty years ago I arrived in Washington to spend a year on Capitol Hill. From my first few days in the Longworth Building, in the crowded office of then-freshman Representative Paul Simon, I knew that the Congress would occupy much of my attention for the remainder of my academic career. It has, to my continuing gratification.

This book is a result of conversations with Joanne Daniels, who expressed a reckless confidence in my ability to produce a well-done, brief volume. Don Reisman and Kimberly Wurtzel have been exceptionally patient as I mushed about in completing this project. As always, Michel and Dakota have proved to be highly supportive in myriad ways. And yes, Michel, I will clean up all the piles of stuff in my office. Right away. As soon as my mountain of "Newt" material begins to erode.

I would like to thank several reviewers whose suggestions led to improvements in the manuscript as it developed: Cary R. Covington, University of Iowa; Hulen Davis, Prairie View A&M University; Marjorie Randon Hershey, Indiana University, Bloomington; G. Calvin Mackenzie, Colby College; Ronald M. Peters, Jr., University of Oklahoma, Norman; Harold W. Stanley, University of Rochester; Randall W. Strahan, Emory University; and Shirley Anne Warshaw, Gettysburg College.

About the Author

Burdett A. Loomis is currently a professor of political science at the University of Kansas. He received his Ph.D. from the University of Wisconsin, Madison, in 1974, served as an American Political Science Congressional Fellow in 1975–1976, and has taught at the University of Kansas since 1979.

He has written on a variety of topics, including Congress, interest groups, state legislatures, and public policy. Among his books are *The New American Politician* (Basic, 1988), *Time, Politics, and Policy: A Legislative Year* (University Press of Kansas, 1994), and *The Contemporary Congress* (St. Martin's Press, 1998). In addition, he has co-edited five editions of *Interest Group Politics* (CQ Press), the leading reader in the interest group field.

In 1984, Loomis directed the Congressional Management Project, which produced the first of many editions of *Setting Course: A Congressional Management Guide*, a book that helps newly elected legislators in organizing their offices and activities on Capitol Hill. Aside from teaching courses on congressional politics, interest groups, and policymaking, since 1983 Loomis has directed public internship programs in Washington and Topeka. He currently serves as Interim Director of the Robert J. Dole Institute for Public Service and Public Policy at the University of Kansas.

Loomis won a Kemper Teaching Award in 1996, in part for his work in establishing the University of Kansas' Washington Semester Program. He lives in Lawrence, Kansas, with his wife Michel and son Dakota.

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One 

THE DRAMA OF REPRESENTATION

Every two years, in 435 congressional districts, candidates conduct locally based campaigns to determine who will make national policy decisions. Portuguese-speaking fishermen in Massachusetts, Chicago suburbanites, and rural Oregonians, among others, must sort out who can represent their interests, and those of the nation. The U.S. Congress is, to be sure, a national political institution. But its roots begin in 435 constituencies, each of which engages in its own biennial electoral drama. Our examination of the Congress begins with one district where the politics of the 1990s has played out in a series of dramatic episodes.

NATIONAL POLITICS COMES HOME: PENNSYLVANIA'S THIRTEENTH DISTRICT, 1992–1997

Although this Philadelphia-area congressional district does include some pockets of black voters, its core population is “overwhelmingly white and Republican”—with many residents living along the historic and affluent “Main Line” corridor.¹ Despite its traditional Republicanism, the district has proven unpredictable in recent elections; for example, its voters supported George Bush for president in 1988 by a twenty-point margin, yet it narrowly opted for Bill Clinton four years later. In the 1990s, neither party could take the allegiance of the Thirteenth District’s electorate for granted, and the congressional elections of 1992, 1994, and 1996 demonstrated how national and local forces combine to produce a complex and sometimes contradictory representational linkage between legislator and constituency.

¹Philip B. Duncan and Christine C. Lawrence, eds., *Politics in America, 1996* (Washington, DC: Congressional Quarterly, Inc., 1995), p. 1146. The “Main Line” refers to a railroad line that has long served its upscale commuters.

Act I

August 5, 1993. The vote was at hand on the most important proposal of President Bill Clinton's initial year in office—a five-year, \$492-billion deficit reduction package. The top House Democratic leaders and the party's extensive whip organization had worked relentlessly to round up every available vote in support of the deficit reduction proposals that had resulted from endless hours of negotiations in House–Senate conference committee meetings. Almost every representative had come to the floor, eager to witness the concluding scene of this extended struggle. For those who remained undecided, there was no place to run, no place to hide.

As the fifteen minutes formally allowed for voting expired, almost all members had cast their ballots, but the electronic tally board showed the result to be still in doubt. President Clinton's fellow Democrats would have to provide the margin of victory; no Republican had broken party ranks. Unanimously, the 174 minority-party legislators had voted against the Clinton package, with its combination of spending cuts and tax increases. Four Democratic members remained in the well of the House, waiting to cast their votes. Representative David Minge, a conservative first-term Minnesotan, wanted considerably more in spending cuts. Representative David Thornton, from the president's own state of Arkansas, and Representative Pat Williams, from Montana's wide-open spaces and ordinarily a staunch party loyalist, objected to the 4.3-cent gas tax increase. The president called Williams and pleaded, "I can't win this without you. My presidency is at stake."² Williams agreed to support the package, despite his desire to cast a "no" vote that would please his constituents, who often drove long distances across Big Sky Country.

Representatives Thornton and Minge refused to budge, and both voted against the Clinton budget. For Thornton, to oppose his fellow Arkansan was an especially difficult decision. In the end, however, he observed, "My job is to represent the people of the Second Congressional District."³

That left the House's verdict on the Clinton budget proposal in the hands of first-term representative Marjorie Margolies-Mezvinsky (D–Pa.), who had previously announced her opposition to the plan and had steadfastly resisted all tax increases. Although Bill Clinton had received 46 percent of the vote—a bit above his average across the nation—in her upscale, suburban Philadelphia district, Margolies-Mezvinsky won her seat, held by Republicans for the previous seventy-six years, with the extremely narrow margin of 1,373 votes out of 254,000 cast. She had triumphed, she argued, because of her stand "on two basic principles: deficit reduction and holding the line on taxes."⁴ True to her

²Clifford Krauss, "Whips Use Soft Touch to Succeed," *The New York Times*, August 7, 1993, p. 29.

³Ibid.

⁴Richard E. Cohen, "Baptism by Fire for House Newcomers," *National Journal*, June 5, 1993, p. 1366.

word, in May, during the initial House consideration of the 1994 budget, she had voted against the Clinton package. But now the president and the Democratic leadership turned up the pressure. Three months earlier, her support had not been needed, and she could cast her ballot in line with her constituents' clear preferences. By August, however, the House's backing for the budget bill had waned, and her vote had become essential for passage. The pressure on Representative Margolies-Mezvinsky was immense.

As she recounted, "The Speaker requested that I come down to the well and cast my vote. . . . The scoreboard showed the vote was 216–216. Pat Williams and I stood in the well, surrounded by our Democratic peers. . . . Barbara Kennelly, one of those encircling us, leaned over and said, 'You can't let the President down.' I stood there for a moment, and then I heard someone whisper in my ear, 'We need your vote.' 'You've got it,' I replied."⁵ With that, she joined Representative Williams and signaled her "aye" vote in support of the measure. As she walked down the aisle of the House, "one Democrat after another hugged her, patted her on the back and touched her as if she were Joan of Arc. . . . Her Democratic colleagues cheered as the Republicans jeered 'Goodbye Marjorie.'"⁶ Her vote, crucial for her president and her party leadership, had placed her very reelection in jeopardy. Could she explain her actions to her constituents? The question would hang in the air until November 1994.

Act II

On November 9, 1994, voters across the country rose up to defeat thirty-six congressional incumbents—thirty-four in the House, two in the Senate, and every one of them a Democrat. By a margin of 8,000 votes, Representative Margolies-Mezvinsky's constituents chose her Republican challenger, Jon Fox, in a rematch of the 1992 election. In January 1995, the 104th Congress convened with fifty-two additional Republicans in the House, giving them a majority for the first time in forty years. The nine-seat GOP gain in the Senate meant that Republican majorities would organize both chambers. Representative Newt Gingrich (R–Ga.) and Senator Bob Dole (R–Kans.) became Speaker and majority leader, respectively, their majorities bolstered by seventy-three new Republican representatives and eleven first-term Republican senators. Remarkably, not one sitting Republican lost his or her seat in 1994. In suburban Philadelphia and across the nation, the voters repudiated the Democratic Congress; within five months of election day, as they had promised, Republican leaders had brought to a vote in the House all ten items in their widely publicized Contract with America, and nine of the ten had won approval.

⁵Marjorie Margolies-Mezvinsky, *A Woman's Place* . . . (New York: Crown, 1994), p. 202.

⁶Krauss, "Whips Use Soft Touch."