

# THE CONGRESSIONAL EXPERIENCE

*A View from  
the Hill*



DAVID E. PRICE

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# *The Congressional Experience*

A VIEW FROM THE HILL

*David E. Price*

*Westview Press*

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*Transforming American Politics*

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## TRANSFORMING AMERICAN POLITICS

*Lawrence C. Dodd, Series Editor*

Dramatic changes in political institutions and behavior over the past three decades have underscored the dynamic nature of American politics, confronting political scientists with a new and pressing intellectual agenda. The pioneering work of early postwar scholars, while laying a firm empirical foundation for contemporary scholarship, failed to consider how American politics might change or to recognize the forces that would make fundamental change inevitable. In reassessing the static interpretations fostered by these classic studies, political scientists are now examining the underlying dynamics that generate transformational change.

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*David E. Price*

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## *Introduction*

On November 4, 1986, I was elected to the U.S. House of Representatives from the Fourth District of North Carolina, a five-county area that includes the cities of Raleigh, Chapel Hill, and Asheboro. Many thoughts crowded in on me on election night, but one of the most vivid was of that spring evening in 1959 when I had first set foot in the part of North Carolina I was now to represent. At the time, I was a student at Mars Hill, a junior college in the North Carolina mountains a few miles from my home in the small town of Erwin, Tennessee. I had taken an eight-hour bus ride from Mars Hill to Chapel Hill to be interviewed for a Morehead Scholarship, a generous award that subsequently made it possible for me to attend the University of North Carolina (UNC). I was awed by the university and nervous about the interview; thinking back on some of the answers I gave the next morning ("Would you say Cecil Rhodes was an imperialist?" "I believe so"), I still marvel that I won the scholarship. But I did, and the next two years were among the most formative and exciting of my life.

I went north in 1961 to divinity school and eventually to graduate school and a faculty appointment in political science at Yale University. But the idea of returning to the Raleigh-Durham-Chapel Hill area of North Carolina exerted a continuing tug on me, particularly as I decided on a teaching career and thought about where I would like to put down personal and academic roots. Fortunately, my wife, Lisa, also found the idea agreeable, despite her budding political career as a member of New Haven's Board of Aldermen. Therefore, when I received an offer to join the political science faculty at Duke University and also to help launch the university's Institute of Policy Sciences and Public Affairs, I jumped at the opportunity. In mid-1973, we moved with our two children—Karen, three, and Michael, one—to Chapel Hill. Though we were delighted with the community and the job and saw the move as a long-term one, I would have been incredulous at the suggestion that within fourteen years I would represent the district in Congress.

The Fourth District is relatively compact by North Carolina standards (see Fig. 1.1), yet it displays an extraordinary economic, social, and political diversity. Some 61 percent of the population lives in Raleigh, the state

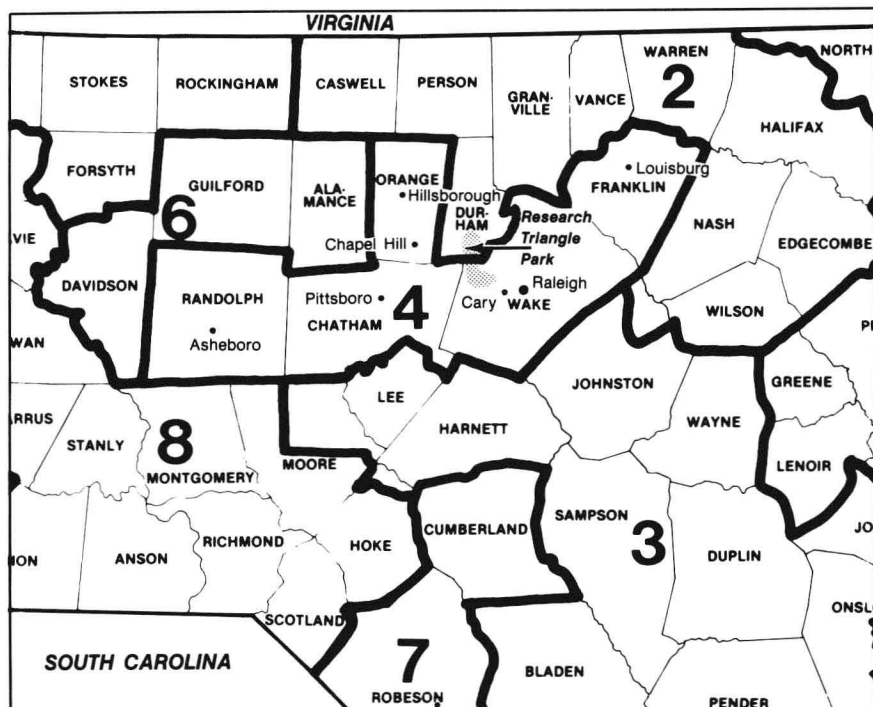


FIGURE 1.1 Map of North Carolina's Fourth Congressional District.

capital, and surrounding Wake County. Wake still ranks fourth among North Carolina counties in tobacco grown, and many of its small towns, like those of neighboring Franklin and Chatham counties, are rural and agricultural in outlook. Textiles and other traditional industries are still important, especially in the western part of the district. Nonetheless, the area has experienced rapid and diverse economic growth, most notably in the high-tech Research Triangle Park (which the Fourth District shares with the Second) and also in a variety of small businesses and mid-sized manufacturing firms. Raleigh, Cary, and Chapel Hill have become highly suburbanized, with an influx of Research Triangle employees, young professionals, and upscale retirees. Blacks comprise 19 percent of the district's population, and economic growth and diversification have brought small but increasing numbers of citizens of Chinese, Indian, Latin American, and other ethnic backgrounds to the area. Politically, the district is 60 percent Democratic by registration, but with a solidly Republican enclave in Randolph County and widespread split-ticket voting elsewhere, it has frequently gone both ways in national and statewide elections.

Several of the district's counties were represented in the distant past by Nathaniel Macon (1791–1815), North Carolina's only Speaker of the U.S. House of Representatives. For the first two-thirds of the twentieth century, the eastern part of the present Fourth District was represented by only two men: Edward W. Pou (1901–1934), who chaired the House Rules Committee, and Harold D. Cooley (1934–1967), flamboyant chairman of the House Agriculture Committee. Carl Durham, who represented the district's western counties from 1939 until 1961, chaired the Joint Committee on Atomic Energy. Such extended periods of service, with attendant seniority in the House, have become less common in our part of North Carolina since the departure of Durham and Cooley. The main reason for this has been the heightened partisan competition that has produced more frequent turnovers in congressional seats. Members have also become less intent on House careers, sometimes resigning to seek other political offices. And the drawing and redrawing of district lines following the Supreme Court's reapportionment decisions have destabilized traditional electoral coalitions and rendered elections less predictable.<sup>1</sup> When I was sworn in on January 6, 1987, I became the Fourth District's third representative in as many terms.

By the time I ran for Congress, I had amassed a good deal of political experience. Sen. E. L. ("Bob") Bartlett (D.-Alaska) hired me as a summer intern in 1963, and I returned to his staff as a legislative aide for the four succeeding summers, eventually doing interviews out of his office for a doctoral dissertation on the Senate. After moving back to North Carolina, I worked actively in local politics, managed a couple of congressional districts (including the Fourth) in Jimmy Carter's 1976 presidential campaign, and took leaves from Duke in 1980 and 1984 to serve as executive director and then chairman of the North Carolina Democratic Party. But these were diversions, albeit increasingly serious ones, from a primary career in teaching and research. By 1986, I had studied and taught and written about Congress, among other subjects, for some twenty years.

Among some voters—and occasionally among congressional colleagues—my academic background has represented a barrier to be overcome. But usually it has not. My district, it is claimed, has the highest number of Ph.D.'s per capita of any comparable area in the country. Certainly, with eleven institutions of higher education and the kind of people who work in the Research Triangle Park, I have some remarkably literate constituents. I sometimes reflect ambivalently on this as I contemplate the piles of well-reasoned letters on every conceivable issue that come into my office. Yet the electoral advantages are considerable. During my first campaign, we polled to test public reactions to my academic affiliation and background, expecting to downplay them in the campaign.



Instead, we found highly positive associations and ended up running a television ad that featured me in the classroom!

It was, I suppose, in light of my dual background as an academic and a political practitioner that I was asked to contribute some reflections on my first term in office to the 1989 edition of *Congress Reconsidered*.<sup>2</sup> I was reluctant at first, pressed for time and uncertain of the value of the exercise, but I ended up being challenged by the idea of giving an account of congressional operations that would combine personal experience with at least a modest effort at the sort of generalization and analysis characteristic of political science. My own story and the stories of other people and events would be told not mainly for their own sake but as a way of showing how the U.S. Congress works. The article that I produced, greatly expanded and supplemented, forms the core of the present book, which includes chapters on getting elected and reelected, adjusting to life in Congress and finding a niche in the House, policy entrepreneurship, party operations, the budget process, and serving the district.

Certain additional topics that were familiar to me in their academic incarnation—the place of religion in politics, governmental ethics, and the critique of Congress as an institution—have taken on particular interest during my years in office, and I will, in later chapters, offer some reflections on them. Unfortunately, in much of what now passes for discussion on these themes, ideas are used more as weaponry than as a means to enlightenment. I cannot begin to take all that on here, but I will try to nudge these discussions in a more productive direction.

The period covered here—from my election in 1986 through early 1992, midway in my third term—was a contentious and challenging time for Congress and for the country. It spanned the waning of Ronald Reagan's presidency, weakened by the Iran-contra affair, and the advent of George Bush's administration. It saw a new House Speaker, Jim Wright, put his distinct imprint on the 100th Congress (1987–1988) and then resign in 1989 amid ethics charges. It was a time of phenomenal change and great hopefulness in world politics, from the collapse of international communism, the reunification of Germany, and the dissolution of the Soviet Union to the allied military victory in the Persian Gulf and the advent of Middle East peace talks. But at home, it was a period of tepid economic performance and, in 1990 and 1991, a deepening recession. The financial collapse of the savings and loan (S & L) industry and the indictment of numerous high-fliers from the financial world signaled that the excesses of the 1980s were coming home to roost. It was a period when Republicans controlled the executive branch and Democrats the legislative—a time of repeated veto battles and other confrontations and of a deepening federal budget crisis.

It was also a period when the reputation of Congress, never Americans' favorite political institution, reached alarming levels of public disapproval. Media portrayals were often harsh, and politicians ranging from the president to House members themselves often ran for office by running against the institution. Much of the criticism, unfortunately, took the form of indiscriminate and highly partisan "Congress-bashing."<sup>3</sup> And this, in turn, often discouraged genuine accountability by crowding out more reasoned and relevant judgments about individual and institutional performance. My hope in this book is to encourage and facilitate more useful assessments, by conveying a realistic sense of how Congress works and by beginning to raise some of the right evaluative questions.

But first things first. Remembering the dictum of former House Speaker Tip O'Neill that "all politics is local"<sup>4</sup> I will begin with an account of how I came to run for Congress and managed, with the help of many, many people, to get elected.