CONGRESS AND POLICY CHANGE

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Preface

Students of American politics have a particular fondness for Congress. More than the other branches of our national government, the presidency and the Supreme Court, those who study Congress have had personal contact with that institution and its members. The 535 members of Congress are necessarily more accessible than one President and his immediate staff, or the nine justices of the Court, and many congressional scholars have had experience as legislative staff or congressional fellows. The presidency and the Court, by comparison, are more remote and less accessible, and probably to some extent because of this, less thoroughly studied than the House of Representatives and Senate.

The major reason for studying Congress, however, is its constitutional role as the chief policy-making body in the country. The policy-making process in Congress is complicated greatly by our expectations that members of Congress act as representatives. They are delegates for the interests of their districts and their states and as such are necessarily in regular contact with their constituents and spokespersons for policy interests. They need to be concerned with reelection and with achieving personal, partisan, and constituent goals in Washington. As the size of government has grown, so has the policy-making role of all branches of the government, and for Congress, especially, this has entailed tremendous growth in its internal complexity, staff, and the demands placed on its members. These, like changes in the nature of elections over the last thirty years, have important and varied effects on the policies that Congress adopts.

This book is about congressional policy making, and particularly processes by which congressional policy changes—and does not change. At times in our history Congress has been a policy initiator, at others it has been the bastion of resistance to new directions of government action. It reflects the will of the citizenry at times, while at others its rules and processes have done more to serve the interests of special and minority interests.

Studying the processes of policy change in Congress and the forces that give rise to change presents interesting challeges. Congress is more than the sum of its parts. It is more than the representatives and senators that fulfill those roles at any time; more than the buildings on Capitol Hill; and more than a reflection of the wishes and interests of people the institution represents. Congress is all of these things plus its evolving norms and rules for how it makes decisions. It is a complex institution, composed of elected representatives and senators, staff, and historical traditions, all interacting

with ever growing sets of interest groups, as well as the demands and constraints placed upon it by a national agenda of economic, social, and technical problems as well as other institutions of government.

Congress considers thousands of bills each session and, in recent years, it enacts into law around a thousand bills each congress. Much of this is of little consequence for the country. The effects of most bills are negligible, while a few do bring about noticeable, but still incremental, policy change. Major policy change, departures that chart genuinely new directions of governmental action, or initiate government action in new areas, is rare. To achieve it requires special sets of circumstances—discussed at length in the essays here—and these must be viewed in the context of an institution better suited to protecting the status quo than to embracing bold policy actions.

The first chapter is an overview of Congress and the policy process from the perspective of the individual member of Congress. Lawrence Dodd develops a theory of congressional behavior that rests on a simple set of assumptions about the goals of individual representatives. He then builds on these in the context of Congress to lay out for us an unusually comprehensive view of the relationship among members' goals, the institution of which they are a part, and the policies they bring into being.

From this overview we then stand back from the institution in the second section and look at congressional elections and their effects on congresssional policy change. In chapter 2, David Brady provides a perspective on the nature of electoral realignments and how these influence policy change in Congress. The time perspective is shorter in the research presented by Edward Carmines and James Stimson in chapter 3. They describe the evolution of the civil rights issue in the Congress since World War II, and they explain the dynamics by which the parties took clearly opposing stands on racial issues, arguably the most important and enduring cleavage of American politics. In both of these chapters we see how elections bring about changes in Congress, and how these changes then influence the policies and consequent behavior of parties, and, through this, the voters in U.S. national politics. The final chapter in this section, by Gerald Wright, shows the potential for policy change in the current era, and then describes how the incumbency advantage in House elections, which has grown substantially in the last 30 years, has a major dampening effect on the responsiveness of Congress to electoral change.

The two essays that make up the third section, chapters 5 and 6, ask how the electoral campaigns—periodically faced by all members of Congress—influence what members do. Here, Marjorie Hershey draws on social learning theory to illuminate what members learn from their campaign experiences and how this influences the goals they adopt and the roles they set for themselves. Richard Fenno's essay draws on his close-hand observa-

tions of senators, first in the 1980 elections and then in Washington. He paints a vivid portrait of what he calls "the adjustment process," the crucial transition from a campaigner to legislator. Understanding not just that there are different arenas in which congressmen operate but the effects of one on the other informs our analysis of members' behavior in the institution and in the policy-making process.

The next section focuses on how congressional procedures and leadership combine to affect the nature and processes of coalition building in Congress. Without highly disciplined parties, policy change must necessarily be preceded by the difficult task of putting and holding together majority coalitions. In chapter 7, Barbara Sinclair discusses the resources and strategies employed by the leadership in the House of Representatives, and how the challenges of the leadership have evolved over time. Roberta Herzberg in chapter 8 lays out for us the many mechanisms used for blocking legislation and thereby highlights the challenge faced by coalitions builders in today's Congress. John Ferejohn in chapter 9 describes the interesting legislative history of the food stamp program to illustrate one important process of coalition building, the legislative logroll. Within this the party leadership in Congress must operate.

The nine chapters in the first four sections describe a good deal about Congress, and particularly about the difficult process of making and sustaining new directions in public policy. Finally, in chapter 10 Leroy Rieselbach synthesizes the elements of the various essays into an overall statement of what we know about the processes of policy change in Congress. He also offers some useful guideposts on where we go from here in future research.

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Earlier versions of most of these papers were delivered at the Indiana University Conference on Congress and Policy Change in April, 1983. We would like to express our appreciation to the other participants at that conference, whose helpful and good natured comments assisted the authors significantly in revising the papers for this volume. These included Samuel Patterson, Thomas Mann, Robert Erikson, and James Kuklinski. We would like to thank Elinor Ostrom for arranging for the conference series while she was chairperson of the Department of Political Science and for obtaining initial funding. We also wish to thank the Indiana University Office of Research and Graduate Development and the Vice President for the Bloomington campus for providing those finds. Editorial and technical assistance was provided by Christine Barbour and Carolyn Cooke. We are especially grateful to Fern Bennett, who assisted through the entire project

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Contents

Part I

A Theory of Congressional Change

1

A Theory of Congressional Cycles: Solving the Puzzle of Change

Lawrence C. Dodd

Events of the 1970s caught students of Congress by surprise. Postwar scholars had concluded that the modern Congress was a stagnant and impotent institution, incapable of rapid change or rejuvenation (Burns, 1963; Huntington, 1965). Yet in the 1970s it suddenly experienced precisely those reforms—the weakening of seniority and the Senate filibuster, the creation of a centralized budget process, the strengthening of the congressional parties—that had previously seemed impossible. These reforms, in turn, produced a dramatic resurgence in the policy activism of Congress (Sundquist, 1981).

This unexpected revitalization of Congress has presented scholars with an intriguing puzzle—the puzzle of change. Scholars can no longer hope to understand Congress fully until they can explain the processes that generate institutional change (Cooper and Brady, 1981b; Huntington, 1971; Polsby, 1975). To understand these processes, to solve the puzzle of change, scholars must construct a theory of Congress that is dynamic in character, plausible, well-grounded in existing knowledge about Congress, and susceptible to empirical test.

This chapter seeks to construct such a theory. It does so by building on empirical discoveries of the 1970s and early 1980s.[1] During this period legislative scholars sought to explain the recent congressional reforms by identifying the historical forces that gave rise to them (Cooper, 1971, 1975; Dodd, 1977, 1981; Huntington, 1981; Strom and Rundquist, 1978; Sundquist, 1981). Scholars found that the upheavals of the 1970s were not a unique occurrence to be explained by special historical circumstance. They were the product of broad and recurring cycles of change that had characterized Congress throughout its existence. These historical patterns

suggest that a theory of change, and thereby an explanation of the reforms and policy resurgence of the past fifteen years, lies in developing a theory of congressional cycles.[2]

These cycles of congressional change have occurred at three levels. The first level involves long-term fragmentation and short-term reform of the organizational procedures of Congress, everything from the number of committees and subcommittees to the staff allotments given to members. The second level involves the long-term rigidification of the institutional structure of Congress—the persistence of rules that imposed party government in much of the nineteenth century, for example, or committee government through much of the twentieth century—followed by intense periods of upheaval and structural transformation. The third level involves cyclical change in the policy performance of Congress. This performance declines in periods of fragmentation and rigidification and rebounds in periods of reform and structural reorganization.

The theory presented here argues that these cycles of change, and thus the reforms and policy resurgence of the 1970s, result from legislators' desire to exercise policy making power—to have an autonomous and significant impact on the nation's policy decisions. To attain their primary goal of power, legislators pursue two subsidiary goals: mastery of organizational politics within Congress, and mastery of electoral politics in their external constituencies. A legislator must realize both of these subsidiary goals to exercise policy making power.

The three cycles of change are a product of the pursuit of the two subsidiary goals. The pursuit of organizational mastery generates the cycles of organizational fragmentation and reform. The pursuit of electoral mastery generates the cycles of structural transformation. The organizational and institutional cycles together produce the cyclical changes in policy performance. The remainder of this chapter develops these arguments more extensively, starting with a discussion of the internal changes in congressional organization.

THE THEORY OF ORGANIZATIONAL CYCLES

The internal world of Congress is critical to members because it is the arena in which they acquire positions of power and influence. These positions carry with them those organizational resources—staff assistance, access to information, control over parliamentary procedure, and the like—that a member must possess if he is to have a significant personal impact on congressional policy making. Power-oriented members thus give considerable attention to the internal politics of Congress (Dodd, 1977; Schwarz and Shaw, 1976; Wolfinger and Heifetz, 1965; Jones and Woll, 1979). Their

attention is focused on more, however, than the acquisition of resources. For positions of power such as committee or subcommittee chairmanships to enhance a member's policy impact he also needs the respect and support of his colleagues (Huitt, 1961, 1965; Manley, 1969; Matthews, 1960; Price, 1972). Only if they respect him and trust him will they listen to him seriously, negotiate with him, and follow his leadership. And only if his colleagues have confidence in him will they award him the additional discretionary positions and resources under their control (Peabody, 1976). The personal support of members thus is just as critical to his organizational career as is the formal acquisition of power positions and resources.

The legislator's personal impact on congressional policy making thus depends on his mastery of organizational politics, that is, on his ability to gain and use the resources and skills necessary both to attain positions of power and influence and to gain the personal trust of colleagues. The struggle to develop organizational skills while competing for the appropriate resources necessarily leads to a great deal of frustration on the part of legislators: few will ever be able to gain resources and skills as rapidly as they desire. Their frustration, or their anxiety over the slowness and tenuousness of career advancement, generates the cycles of organizational fragmentation and reform. To explain the organizational cycles we thus must first understand members' career behavior within Congress, particularly the ways they develop organizational mastery and advance their internal organizational careers.

Organizational Careers and the Stages of Mastery

Career advancement within Congress is the process by which legislators gain mastery of organizational resources and skills (Bardach, 1972; Evans and Novak, 1966; Huitt, 1961, 1965; Manley, 1969; Matthews, 1960; Muir, 1982). To become a successful powerwielder, a legislator must exercise mastery in four areas of organizational life: those that affect member's personal reelection, development of policy expertise, influence over other members, and control over organizational decision making (Dodd, 1977; Fenno, 1973; Mayhew, 1974). Only when a member masters resources and skills across all four areas can he hope to have a strong long-term impact on policy.

To gain organizational mastery, a legislator must develop a personal approach to organizational politics—an organizational style—that will allow him to interact effectively with other members (Davidson and Oleszek, 1981, pp. 98–112; Dexter, 1969). Development of such a style will earn the legislator the trust and confidence of other legislators. Their trust and confidence, in turn, will help him gain resources and skills he needs to

achieve immediate policy objectives and establish a reputation as an effective legislative craftsman. His achievements and reputation will broaden and solidify his support among members, enabling him to gain more resources and skills and to further advance his career.

Each legislator's style has its own distinctive character, the result of his own unique personality and political circumstance. Yet legislators' styles also share many similarities as a result of the common problems they confront in pursuing their organizational careers. These common problems, and the natural sequential order that legislators follow in addressing them, impose a set of common stages through which members pass as they establish an organizational style and develop their mastery of organizational politics.

On entering Congress, a member's first organizational need is to ensure the electoral support of his constituents so that he can stay in office and pursue a long-term congressional career. As a result, the newly elected legislator must focus extensive attention on gaining those resources and skills in Congress, and developing the organizational style that will best nurture his security in his district (Fenno, 1978; Hershey, 1974, 1984; Jacobson, 1983; Kingdon, 1968). As the legislator acquires the organizational resources, skills, and personal style that can aid him in constituency politics, his concern necessarily turns to policy making—to advocating and presenting specific policy proposals.

Policy making is an immediate concern in part because it is so closely linked to constituent concerns—to fulfilling specific promises (Clausen, 1973; Kingdon, 1973). It is also important, however, because it provides the legislator the knowledge and experience he needs before he can address broader societal problems and before he can gain legitimacy in the eyes of the legislators he seeks to influence and lead (Manley, 1969; Price, 1972) Thus, as he approaches early midcareer, the legislator must devote considerable effort to integrating a strong policy focus into his organizational style, broadening his political identity beyond reelection concerns.

As policy expertise develops, the legislator then can concern himself with influence over other members and control of organizational decision making. Influence, the ability to persuade and bargain effectively with legislators, generally is required before a legislator has enough support from members to win a position of organizational control. Influence will come as a member gains leverage over resources—campaign funds, information, constituency appropriations—that other members want (Fenno, 1973), and as he develops an organizational style and organizational skills that facilitate his use of influence resources (Manley, 1969). Control of the organization—appointments to its committees, scheduling of bills, rulings on parliamentary conflicts, the regulation of policy debates—allows a legislator to shape the policy agenda and policy decisions of the legislature (Cooper and Brady,