

THE ELECTORAL INCENTIVE

Congress has declined into a battle for individual survival. Each of the Congressmen and each of the Senators has the attitude: "I've got to look out for myself." If you remember the old best advice you ever had in the army, it wound up with: "Never volunteer." This applies to Congress, and so we have very few volunteers. Most of them are willing only to follow those things that will protect them and give them the coloration which allows them to blend into their respective districts or their respective states. If you don't stick your neck out, you don't get it chopped off.

—Senator William B. Saxbe (R., Ohio)

The discussion to come will hinge on the assumption that United States congressmen¹ are interested in getting reelected—indeed, in their role here as abstractions, interested in nothing else. Any such assumption necessarily does some violence to the facts, so it is important at the outset to root this one as firmly as possible in reality. A number of questions about that reality immediately arise.

First, is it true that the United States Congress is a place where members wish to stay once they get there? Clearly there are representative assemblies that do not hold their members for very long. Members of the Colombian parliament tend to serve single terms and then move on.² Voluntary turnover is quite high in some American state legislatures—for example, in Alabama. In his study of the unreformed Connecticut legislature, Barber labeled some of his subjects "reluctants"—people not very much interested in politics who were briefly pushed into it by others.³ An ethic of

1. Where the context does not suggest otherwise, the term *congressmen* will refer to members of both House and Senate.

2. James L. Payne, *Patterns of Conflict in Colombia* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1968), pp. 19-20.

3. James D. Barber, *The Lauemakers* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1965), ch. 4.

"volunteerism" pervades the politics of California city councils.⁴ And in the Congress itself voluntary turnover was high throughout most of the nineteenth century.

Yet in the modern Congress the "congressional career" is unmistakably upon us.⁵ Turnover figures show that over the past century increasing proportions of members in any given Congress have been holdovers from previous Congresses—members who have both sought reelection and won it. Membership turnover noticeably declined among southern senators as early as the 1850s, among senators generally just after the Civil War.⁶ The House followed close behind, with turnover dipping in the late nineteenth century and continuing to decline throughout the twentieth.⁷ Average number of terms served has gone up and up, with the House in 1971 registering an all-time high of 20 percent of its members who had served at least ten terms.⁸ It seems fair to characterize the modern

4. Kenneth Prewitt, "Political Ambitions, Volunteerism, and Electoral Accountability," 64 *American Political Science Review* 5-17 (1970).

5. H. Douglas Price, "The Congressional Career Then and Now," ch. 2 in Nelson W. Polsby (ed.), *Congressional Behavior* (New York: Random House, 1971).

6. Price, "Computer Simulation and Legislative 'Professionalism,'" pp. 14-16.

7. Nelson W. Polsby, "The Institutionalization of the U.S. House of Representatives," 62 *American Political Science Review* 146 (1968).

8. Charles S. Bullock III, "House Careerists: Changing Patterns

Congress as an assembly of professional politicians spinning out political careers. The jobs offer good pay and high prestige. There is no want of applicants for them. Successful pursuit of a career requires continual reelection.⁹

A second question is this: even if congressmen seek reelection, does it make sense to attribute that goal to them to the exclusion of all other goals? Of course the answer is that a complete explanation (if one were possible) of a congressman's or any one else's behavior would require attention to more than just one goal. There are even occasional congressmen who intentionally do things that make their own electoral survival difficult or impossible. The late President Kennedy wrote of congressional "profiles in courage."¹⁰ Former Senator Paul Douglas (D., Ill.) tells of how he tried to persuade Senator Frank Graham (D., N.C.) to tailor his issue positions in order to survive a 1950 primary. Graham, a liberal appointee to the office, refused to listen. He was a "saint," says Douglas.¹¹ He lost his

of Longevity and Attrition," 66 *American Political Science Review* 1296 (1972).

9. Indeed, it has been proposed that professional politicians could be gotten rid of by making reelection impossible. For a plan to select one-term legislators by random sampling of the population, see Dennis C. Mueller et al., "Representative Government via Random Selection," 12 *Public Choice* 57-68 (1972).

10. John F. Kennedy, *Profiles in Courage* (New York: Harper and Row, 1956).

11. Paul H. Douglas, *In the Fullness of Time* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1972), pp. 238-41.

primary. There are not many saints. But surely it is common for congressmen to seek other ends alongside the electoral one and not necessarily incompatible with it. Some try to get rich in office, a quest that may or may not interfere with reelection.¹² Fenko assigns three prime goals to congressmen—getting reelected but also achieving influence within Congress and making “good public policy.”¹³ These latter two will be given attention further on in this discussion. Anyone can point to contemporary congressmen whose public activities are not obviously reducible to the electoral explanation; Senator J. William Fulbright (D., Ark.) comes to mind. Yet, saints aside, the electoral goal has an attractive universality to it. It has to be the *proximate* goal of everyone, the goal that must be achieved over and over if other ends are to be entertained. One former congressman writes, “All members of Congress have a primary interest in getting re-elected. Some members have no other interest.”¹⁴ Reelection underlies everything else, as

12. In the case of the late Senator Thomas Dodd (D., Conn.) these two goals apparently conflicted. See James Boyd, *Above the Law* (New York: New American Library, 1968). Using office for financial profit is probably less common in Congress than in some of the state legislatures (e.g. Illinois and New Jersey).

13. Fenko, *Congressmen in Committees*, p. 1.

14. Frank E. Smith (D., Miss.), *Congressman from Mississippi* (New York: Random House, 1964), p. 127. It will not be necessary here to reach the question of whether it is possible to detect the goals of congressmen by asking them what they are, or indeed the

indeed it should if we are to expect that the relation between politicians and public will be one of accountability.¹⁵ What justifies a focus on the reelection goal is the juxtaposition of these two aspects of it—its putative empirical primacy and its importance as an accountability link. For analytic purposes, therefore, congressmen will be treated in the pages to come as if they were single-minded reelection seekers. Whatever else they may seek will be given passing attention, but the analysis will center on the electoral connection.

Yet another question arises. Even if congressmen are single-mindedly interested in reelection, are they in a position as individuals to do anything about it? If they

question of whether there are unconscious motives lurking behind conscious ones. In Lasswell's formulation “political types” are power seekers, with “private motives displaced on public objects rationalized in terms of public interest.” Harold D. Lasswell, *Power and Personality* (New York: Viking, 1948), p. 38.

15. Of other kinds of relations we are entitled to be suspicious. “There can be no doubt, that if power is granted to a body of men, called Representatives, they, like any other men, will use their power, not for the advantage of the community, but for their own advantage, if they can. The only question is, therefore, how can they be prevented?” James Mill, “Government,” in *Essays on Government, Jurisprudence, Liberty of the Press, and Law of Nations* (New York: Augustus M. Kelley, 1967), p. 18. Madison's view was that the United States House, by design the popular branch, “should have an immediate dependence on, and an intimate sympathy with, the people. Frequent elections are unquestionably the only policy by which this dependency and sympathy can be effectively secured.” *The Federalist Papers*, selected and edited by Roy Fairfield (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday Anchor, 1961), no. 52, p. 165.

are not, if they are inexorably shoved to and fro by forces in their political environments, then obviously it makes no sense to pay much attention to their individual activities. This question requires a complex answer, and it will be useful to begin reaching for one by pondering whether individual congressmen are the proper analytic units in an investigation of this sort. An important alternative view is that parties rather than lone politicians are the prime movers in electoral politics. The now classic account of what a competitive political universe will look like with parties as its analytic units is Downs's *Economic Theory of Democracy*.¹⁶ In the familiar Downsian world parties are entirely selfish. They seek the rewards of office, but in order to achieve them they have to win office and keep it. They bid for favor before the public as highly cohesive point-source "teams." A party enjoys complete control over government during its term in office and uses its control solely to try to win the next election. In a two-party system a voter decides how to cast his ballot by examining the record and promises of the party in power and the previous record and current promises of the party out of power; he then calculates an "expected party differential" for the coming term, con-

16. Anthony Downs, *An Economic Theory of Democracy* (New York: Harper and Row, 1957). Downs gives a formal touch to a political science literature of both normative and empirical importance, extending from Woodrow Wilson through E. E. Schattschneider and V. O. Key, Jr.

sults his own policy preferences, and votes accordingly. These are the essential lineaments of the theory.¹⁷ Legislative representatives appear only as modest "intermediaries." If of the governing party they gather information on grassroots preferences and relay it to the government, and they try to persuade constituents back home that the government is doing a worthy job.¹⁸

How well a party model of this kind captures the reality of any given regime is an empirical question. One difficulty lies in the need for parties as cohesive teams (members whose "goals can be viewed as a simple, consistent preference-ordering").¹⁹ In all non-autocratic regimes governments are made up of a plurality of elective officials—not just one man. How can a group of men be bound together so that it looks something like a Downsian team? Probably nowhere (in a nonautocratic regime) does a group achieve the ultimate fusion of preference-orderings needed to satisfy the model; party government in Britain, for

17. *Ibid.*, chs. 2, 3.

18. *Ibid.*, pp. 88–90. Because the information and opinions supplied by representatives are important in decision making, Downs says that in effect some decision power devolves to the representatives. But there is this constraint: "Theoretically, the government will continue to decentralize its power until the marginal gain in votes from greater conformity to popular desires is outweighed by the marginal cost in votes of lesser ability to co-ordinate its actions." Pp. 89–90.

19. *Ibid.*, p. 26.

example, proceeds substantially by intraparty bargaining.²⁰ Nonetheless, it is plain that some regimes fit the model better than others. For some purposes it is quite useful to study British politics by using parties as analytic units. Britain, to start with, has a constitution that readily permits majoritarian government. But, beyond that, at the roll call stage British M.P.'s act as cohesive party blocs that look something like teams. It is not inevitable that they should do so, and indeed there was a good deal of individualistic voting in the Commons in the mid-nineteenth century.²¹ Why do contemporary M.P.'s submit to party discipline? There are at least three reasons why they do so, and it will be profitable here to examine them in order to allow later contrasts with the American regime.

First of all, in both British parties the nominating systems are geared to produce candidates who will vote the party line if and when they reach Parliament. This happens not because nominations are centrally controlled, but because the local nominating outfits are small elite groups that serve in effect as nationally oriented cheerleaders for the Commons party leadership.²²

20. See, for example, Richard E. Neustadt, "White House and Whitehall," *The Public Interest*, Winter 1966, pp. 55-69.

21. See William O. Aydelotte, "Voting Patterns in the British House of Commons in the 1840's," *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 134-63 (1963).

22. Austin Ranney, *Pathways to Parliament: Candidate Selection in Britain* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1965), p. 281;

Second, British M.P.'s lack the resources to set up shop as politicians with bases independent of party. Television time in campaigns goes to parties rather than to scattered independent politicians.²³ By custom or rule or both, the two parties sharply limit the funds that parliamentary candidates can spend on their own in campaigns.²⁴ Once elected, M.P.'s are not supplied the kinds of office resources—staff help, free mailing privileges, and the like—that can be used to achieve public salience.²⁵ These arguments should not be carried too far; M.P.'s are not ciphers, and obviously dissident leaders like Aneurin Bevan and Enoch Powell manage to build important independent fol-

Leon D. Epstein, "British M.P.'s and Their Local Parties: The Suez Case," *54 American Political Science Review* 385-86 (1960).

23. Jay G. Blumler and Denis McQuail, *Television in Politics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1969), pp. xi-xxviii.

24. R. T. McKenzie, *British Political Parties* (New York: St. Martin's, 1955), pp. 252-53, 555.

25. "An American Congressman, it is said, collapsed with shock on being shown the writing-rooms and the Library of the Commons full of men writing letters in longhand: members of Parliament answering the constituency mail." Bernard Crick, *The Reform of Parliament* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1965), p. 58; and, generally, Crick, pp. 58-59. Things have changed somewhat since Crick's account, but the contrast is still valid. See also Anthony Barker and Michael Rush, *The Member of Parliament and His Information* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1970). Loewenberg reports that, in West Germany, "the average member of the Bundestag works under Spartan conditions." Gerhard Loewenberg, *Parliament in the German Political System* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1967), p. 53.

lowings. But the average backbencher is constrained by lack of resources. It comes as no surprise that individual M.P.'s add little to (or subtract little from) core partisan electoral strength in their constituencies; the lion's share of the variance in vote change from election to election is chargeable to national swings rather than to local or regional fluctuations.²⁶

Third, with the executive entrenched in Parliament the only posts worth holding in a Commons career are the ones doled out by party leaders. Up to a third of majority party M.P.'s are now included in the Ministry.²⁷ "For the ambitious backbencher, the task is to impress ministers and particularly the Prime Minister."²⁸ Party loyalty is rewarded; heresy is not.

The upshot of all this is that British M.P.'s are locked in. The arrangement of incentives and resources elevates parties over politicians. But the United States is very different. In America the underpinnings of "teamship" are weak or absent, making it possible for politicians to triumph over

26. Donald E. Stokes, "Parties and the Nationalization of Electoral Forces," ch. 7 in William N. Chambers and Walter D. Burnham, *The American Party Systems* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1967), pp. 188-89.

27. Crick, *The Reform of Parliament*, pp. 30-31. Crick adds: "A modern Prime Minister has a patronage beyond the wildest dreams of political avarice of a Walpole or a Newcastle." P. 31.

28. John P. Mackintosh, "Reform of the House of Commons: The Case for Specialization," in Loewenberg (ed.), *Modern Parliaments*, p. 39.

parties. It should be said that Madisonian structure and Downside teamship are not necessarily incompatible.²⁹ Connecticut state government, in which party organizations exercise substantial control over nominations and political careers, comes close to the British model; governorship and state legislative parties are bound together by party organization.³⁰ But Connecticut is exceptional, or, more accurately, it is at one end of a spectrum toward the other end of which there are states in which parties have little binding effect at all.³¹ In American politics the place

29. Indeed in city studies there is the standard functional case that cohesive parties may arise to deal with problems caused by constitutional diffusion. See, for example, on Chicago, Edward C. Banfield, *Political Influence* (New York: Free Press, 1961), ch. 8. American parties have traditionally been strongest at the municipal level. But something interesting happens to Downs on the way to the city. Where parties are held together by patronage, and where there are no geographically subsidiary governments that can serve as independent political bases, there is a strong tendency for party politics to become monopolistic rather than competitive. Ambitious politicians have little incentive to sustain an opposition party and every incentive to join the ruling party. The same argument generally holds for national politics in mid-eighteenth-century England.

30. See Duane Lockard, *New England State Politics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1965), chs. 9, 10; Joseph I. Lieberman, *The Power Broker* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1966); James D. Barber, "Leadership Strategies for Legislative Party Cohesion," 28 *Journal of Politics* 347-67 (1966).

31. In the California Senate, for example, at least until recently, committee chairmanships were given out to the most senior