

Extension of Remarks



Legislative Studies Section

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EDITOR'S NOTE: The 2003-2004 American Political Science Congressional Fellows are the 50th class of Fellows in this unique program. In 1953 the Congressional Fellowship Program was established to provide political scientists and journalists with an opportunity to learn about the Congress through participant-observation. This landmark anniversary was celebrated at the APSA Conference in Philadelphia in 2003 with two roundtable discussions with former Fellows describing their Fellowship experiences and reflecting on how their time in Washington influenced the development of their perspective on Congress. Fellows also met during a reception at the grand Union Club in downtown Philadelphia where they heard from former Fellows - among them Thomas Mann, Norman Ornstein, and Paul Herrnson -- and supporters of the program like David Broder who was designated as an Honorary Congressional Fellow for his service to the program. This issue of *Extension of Remarks* seeks to chronicle the influence of the Fellowship experience on the work of congressional scholars representing alumni over the last four decades. More information about the program and application guidelines may be found at: <http://www.apsanet.org/about/cfp> --SQK

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Shaping Congressional Studies: The APSA Congressional Fellowship Program at 50: Editor's Introduction

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APSA created the Congressional Fellowship Program in 1953 to provide political scientists and journalists with an opportunity to learn about Congress through nine months of participant-observation. The purpose of creating this unique program was to better communicate to the public how Congress works. The Fellowship class of 2003-2004 is the fiftieth class of Congressional Fellowship Program.

On the occasion of the 50th anniversary of the Fellowship Program it is fitting for the Legislative Studies Section, the greatest beneficiary of the Fellowship Program, to commemorate this landmark with a set of essays by former Fellows detailing the influence of the program on their careers and the development of their scholarship. I attempted to choose a Fellow from each of the last several decades to provide both a comparative frame and some perspective over time.

In this introduction I hope to provide some context for better understanding the fullness of the Fellowship experience. I also hope to suggest a unifying theme – which I discuss in two different ways – the different perspectives on Congress that the Congressional Fellowship provides; these

different perspectives are evident in the essays that follow.

Finding an Assignment

Most APSA Congressional Fellows consider their Fellowship year to be one of the highlights of their professional careers: I certainly do. I learned about the Congressional Fellowship Program (CFP) in my first year of graduate school. Tacked to the wall next to my office was an announcement for the 1988 application cycle for the CFP. As I read it and examined the list of political scientists who had served as Fellows, I became excited: “what a terrific opportunity, I want to do *that*,” I said to myself, “and look, they’ll pay you \$20,000 to do it, what a deal!” – \$20,000 was a princely sum when I was making \$5,000 a year as a grad student!

In my first year as an Assistant Professor I applied to the program and was granted an interview in Washington, DC. That interview was the most intense 30 minutes of my professional life. Imagine, there I was less than a year after finishing my dissertation, sitting opposite Linda Fowler, Roger Davidson, Norm Ornstein, Chris Deering, and Ron Elving as they hurled good-natured questions at me in rapid fire succession. I remember two things about the experience: The interview was supposed to last 20 minutes and it lasted 30,

and I made them laugh a couple of times, both of which I thought were good signs (though I had already decided to reapply the following year if I was not successful). I will never forget the day that the fat envelope (another good sign!) arrived informing me that I had been chosen as a Fellow (a feeling I still remember better than what I felt after successfully defending my dissertation!).

The Fellowship experience begins with about a month of orientation meetings that involve talks by politicians, lobbyists, journalists, and other members of the Washington community, and a seminar on congressional procedure at the Library of Congress. Then the fun begins: Finding a position on the Hill.

Congressional Fellows are not “assigned” to offices; rather they are set loose on the Hill to find a position in an office. This is a conscious strategy aimed at teaching Fellows about the job chase on Capitol Hill (an experience that has allowed me to better advise my students about strategies for landing a spot in a congressional office). In the search for a position a Fellow has three resources: 1) the evaluations that past fellows have written about their office assignments; 2) a list of offices that have expressed an interest in hosting a Fellow, and; 3) the fact that they can offer their various talents – which are more extensive than the average college intern -- to a congressional office at no cost to the office. The latter allows a Fellow to immediately assume a responsible position in the office, which is a contrast to what most of our students will do when they intern in a congressional office.

My first impulse was to find a position for myself in a House office, preferably a leadership office or a member of the Rules Committee, which would allow me to indulge my interest in congressional parties and party leadership. I think that I was drawn to the House because of (rather than despite of) the voluminous literature on the House. As Connelly and Pitney point out in their essay,

there is a tendency for us to study those things which others have already studied, and the House was well tilled soil. As I read through the evaluations I was even more convinced that I wanted to work in the House; an evaluation by Barbara Sinclair discussing her work in Jim Wright’s office, another by Larry Dodd discussing his work with John McFall in the House Democratic Whip’s office,¹ Bruce Oppenheimer’s work with the Rules Committee, on and on through the pantheon of congressional scholars and then-rising stars of our subfield.

As I scanned the list of offices that then-Director of the CFP Kay Sterling handed out I did not see many member offices or committees that I had an interest in working for; what did stand out was something called the Senate Democratic Policy Committee (DPC). The name was only vaguely familiar to me, but after a little research I discovered that it was an arm of the Senate Democratic leadership and, fighting against my bias toward the House (I did not want to work in the obstructionist and elitist Senate with its silly unanimous consent rule and its filibusters, how disorderly!) I decided to contact them. In the meantime I left resumes and cover letters in the offices of the Democratic members of the House Rules Committee, and several House party leaders.

During my first interview with the DPC Chief of Staff I sensed that she was not quite sure what to make of a political scientist; I got the sense that she could not quite figure out how a generalist could help them; I think that they were hoped that I would be a policy specialist.² I managed to convince them that I

¹ Dodd’s which laid out the themes that were repeated in his classic essay (1979) on the structure and function of the evolving roles of the Whip’s office.

² President Clinton’s health care reform legislation had just been introduced to Congress and health care was expected to dominate the Senate’s agenda during my time there. I suspect that they would have liked it if I had been a health policy specialist. Through my Fellowship experience I learned a great deal about

was a quick study and that I understood “real politics” and, after several days of not having my phone calls returned, managed to get an invitation for a second interview. This was one that I will never forget. I was invited to attend a DPC Lunch to which all Democratic Senators are invited to discuss the order of business on the Floor and listen to presentations by Administration officials and policy experts. The presenter at this particular Lunch was James Carville, and the Senators were intensely interested in what he had to say – this was in 1993, about a year after the 1992 election – so most of the Democratic Senators were present and engaged. As I sat at the edge of the room (just like a real staffer!) George Mitchell, Ted Kennedy, Chris Dodd, Tom Daschle, and others who I had only witnessed on C-SPAN or the Sunday talk shows walked past me (clearly not noticing my presence, though I have never been so happy to be ignored!). I was as impressed as I could be by the spectacle, mostly by the thought that a position at the DPC could provide some insight into *Senate* leadership a field that was (and still is) under tilted in the congressional literature.

When I was offered the position I answered “yes” immediately, and I have always considered myself to have been lucky to *not* serve in the House. By remaining with the Policy Committee I was able to observe the leadership of an institution that is notoriously resistant to leadership and, in some small way, participate in that leadership effort. I also gained an appreciation for the seeming “disorder” of the Senate; and, through force of circumstance, I became something of a policy “specialist.”

Observing Participants and Participant-Observation

One issue that is not directly addressed in the essays that follow, but is aptly illustrated by the experience of these Fellows, is the difference between observing participants in

health policy and have subsequently taught the subject from time-to-time.

the political arena and participant-observation. I believe that there is a fundamental difference between the two that these essays make apparent.

At some point in our graduate training – some more directly than others -- we have been exposed to Richard Fenno’s support of participant-observation as a methodology. Fenno rightly argues that,

Political scientists ought to learn about politicians by talking to them, watching them, and following them around. Some research can be done by bringing politicians – aspiring, active, or retired – to the academic work place. But most of it must be done in the setting in which politicians operate, in their natural habitats. The aim is to see the world as they see it, to adopt their vantage point on politics. For it is precisely this view, from over the politician’s shoulder, that is now missing from academic research (Fenno 1990, 2).

In *Homestyle* (1978) Fenno describes the methodology simply as “soaking and poking” and “just hanging around.”³

I suggest that the Fellowship experience is significantly different – not better, simply different – from Fenno’s conception of participant-observation. As a Fellow one is engaged *with* the politician. In contrast to interview methodology and/or observational research, in which the researcher looks over the shoulder of the politician, the Fellow is *shoulder-to-shoulder* with the politician, adopting not only his or her values but trying to advance his or her interests; that is a part of the job. When I went to work for the DPC I became an *advocate* for the party leadership and the positions of the Democratic Party just like the other staff at the DPC.

The difference of perspective is both important and potentially problematic. As a

³ Of course Fenno’s methodology involves more than simply hanging around and is described in some detail in the Appendix to *Homestyle*.

participant-observer – one who is engaged in the mission of the organization – the barrier between subject and object mostly disappears. One has much deeper access to the organization; the Fellow is treated as an insider, and colleagues do not censor their behavior and observations the same way that they would in interviews, or when they are being observed as objects.⁴ For a short while a Fellow “goes native” which inevitably will have tangible benefits for their research; hopefully during the CFP period a Fellow reflects on the experience with other Fellows or others firmly anchored in the outside world.

From this perspective “going native” is an important part of the participant-observation experience that the CFP makes possible. A problem arises when one “stays native,” and a few political science Fellows (and even more journalism Fellows) have been “lost” on the Hill. Getting out often is not easy. Fellows returning to “civilian life” often find the transition somewhat difficult (see the Wirls essay below for a description); this is a result of emerging from being fully engaged in the Fellowship experience, and returning to one’s own “native habitat.”

In short, the Congressional Fellowship experience provides a different, a truly unique, opportunity to immerse oneself in the world of the politician, to experience the world from the vantage point of the politician and other political actors. This is perhaps a subtle distinction from the position that Fenno establishes, but it is an important one, one that makes the CFP unique (I would argue indispensable) for the congressional scholar.

Collective and Individual Behaviors: Where You Stand Depends on Where You Sit

A second issue not directly addressed in these essays is also a matter of perspective. Though I do not have the data to support this I am willing to bet that the majority of political science Fellows served in the personal offices of members. This makes sense. Through most of the period of the CFP’s existence the subfield has been dominated by methodological individualism. The true classics of congressional studies (e.g., Mayhew 1974; Fenno 1978) over the last several decades focused on the behavior of individual members of Congress, and most Fellows followed suit by spending their time in the personal offices of members and observing many of the behaviors described by Mayhew and others (see Wirls essay).

Several of the essays below (especially those by Sinclair, and Pitney and Connelly), I suggest, indicate that Fellows who served in leadership offices – or committee offices – developed a different perspective on the institution than those who served in member offices. Sinclair, and Pitney and Connelly primarily experienced the institution through the lens of party leadership. Their essays highlight the importance of party and the potential of observing behaviors that are not often highlighted in the member-centered literature, and are often not fully consistent with our view of members of Congress as narrowly self interested and obsessed with district specific issues. Sitting in a member’s office one may not observe the degree to which a member is a part of a larger organization (a party, a committee) that extends beyond the parochial concerns of district or state, and beyond the narrow interests of the member-enterprise. Working as an agent of the member-enterprise may heighten the perception that the member is “all about the district” while other interests may be playing out beyond the view of the observer. By the same token, sitting in a party leadership office

⁴ Having been a Fellow and having conducted dozens of interviews in the ensuing years the barrier between interviewer and interviewee is palpable. A couple of years ago I interviewed someone that I had worked with at the DPC as a Fellow and had a friendly relationship with, even under those circumstances I could observe him self-censoring as he spoke; the bond of trust built through common experience was gone.

may overemphasize the place of the party in the world of the individual member.

Considered this way there are a number of perspectives that the Fellowship experience can generate: House versus Senate, as discussed by Dan Wirls; Republican versus Democrat, as touched on by Connelly and Pitney; individual member versus collective enterprise as experienced by Frances Lee. Somewhere in between these perspectives lies greater understanding of the institution we study. The Congressional Fellowship Program provides a mechanism for better understanding the balance between them; and the congressional studies literature is richer for the existence of the Congressional Fellowship Program. Happy Anniversary CFP!

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There at the Creation: Learning About Congressional Leadership From the Inside

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When, as a graduate student at the University of Rochester, I took Dick Fenno's Congress seminar, he turned me onto interviewing members of Congress. I walked into his office to talk about my paper for the course with some sort of idea about studying southern Democrats from afar, probably via roll call analysis, and I walked out having agreed to do an interview-based study of the Texas congressional delegation. Dick came up with a little money; I went to Washington for about a week and interviewed most of the then-21 members of the Texas delegation. What a way to make a living! Talk to usually interesting, and always colorful people about politics. So I continued and expanded that research for my dissertation, spending a number of months in Washington but on my own, not as a Congressional Fellow. I don't remember for sure but I think I didn't apply for a congressional fellowship because the timing was wrong.

My first job after grad school was in California and distance dictated doing research that could be done without spending a lot of time in Washington and that meant non-interview based research.

This was the 1970s and fascinating things were going on in Congress; the House

was changing in all sorts of ways. I was reading about the reforms and teaching about them. And I wanted to see for myself how much and in what ways the body had changed. Specifically I was interested in if and how the rules changes giving the Democratic leadership new powers had changed the exercise of party leadership. Some of the papers presented at meetings by young scholars who had been congressional fellows whetted my appetite. I remember especially a couple of superb papers on the Rules Committee by Bruce Oppenheimer. So after I got tenure, I decided to apply for a Congressional Fellowship. Dick Fenno, the good angel of my entire career, was on the selection committee and, while anyone who knows Dick knows he is always fair, I assume it can't have hurt.

For me, doing a fellowship at that point (early mid-career, it could be labeled) worked well. I knew more about the institution from reading and especially from my previous research than I would have had I done it sooner in my career. Also I was much clearer about what I wanted to learn. I wanted to study party leadership and specifically I was interested in if and how the rules changes giving the Democratic leadership new powers had changed the exercise of party leadership. I

knew that one of the intentions of the Democratic reformers was to strengthen the party leadership; yet whether that in fact the result was at best unclear. A paper by another Congressional Fellow Sid Waldman argued that the reforms *in toto* had had the opposite effect.

To study House party leadership, I needed to get into a Democratic leadership office. Figuring that a political scientist should be able to practice a little politics, I calculated that my best bet was Jim Wright's Majority Leader office since I had grown up in Texas (anyone who knows anything about Congress knows that geography is a key tie) and that I would be most likely to succeed if I could find someone who knew Wright's people to speak for me (personal relationships are key as well). Bob Peabody had done the Jim Wright part of a research project on the close 1976 leadership contest and I asked him to intercede for me. Very kindly, Bob went to talk to Craig Raupe, Wright top staffer in the Majority Leader office and a close friend of Wright's since Wright had run for mayor of Weatherford at the beginning of his political career. Craig agreed to talk to me and, when he asked me if I wanted to attend the freshmen orientation session that weekend and my response was to light up like a Christmas tree at the prospect, I was in.

Getting into that office and what I learned during my fellowship year set me up for a career of studying party leadership in Congress. I was lucky to be there almost "at the creation;" that is, I saw from the inside the kinds of problems and opportunities the reforms created for the majority party leadership and some of the leaders' early attempts to cope. So, for example, I saw how O'Neill used task forces of members to handle the uncertainly the reforms created and to give energetic junior members a way to participate that helped rather than hurt the party. I heard about and got a copy of the letter a group of Democrats sent O'Neill urging him to use more

restrictive rules to bring the chaotic floor sessions under control. I saw how central the budget resolution was becoming to the majority party. And, as I was able to attend whip meetings, I heard members talk (and gripe) and got some sense of what their expectations were. And, of course, the conversations I had with Craig and with Jim Wright were of inestimable value; both were keen observers and had a perspective on the House that went back to the 1950s.

The contacts I made that year were also essential to my research in the following years. Most importantly, Jim Wright and his staff continued to be extremely helpful both in giving me their time and in providing a place where I could hang out when I went to the Hill to interview. My first book on House party leadership was a direct product of the research I did during the fellowship year and of interviews I conducted in the succeeding couple of years.

I was lucky to be there almost "at the beginning;" that is, I saw from the inside the kinds of problems and opportunities the reforms created for the majority party leadership and some of the leaders' early attempts to cope.

Over the next decade I spent a lot of time in Washington and I continued to maintain my contacts with Wright and his staff. So, when Jim Wright became Speaker in 1987, he knew me well and I knew a lot about party leadership and how it had evolved over the previous years. I wrote Wright asking if I could come to Washington and do a sort of informal congressional fellowship. He said 'yes' and I spent from June 1987 to December

1988 hanging out in the Speaker's office. Because Wright and his senior staff knew me, I got enormous access – to talk to Wright himself and to attend many of his meetings with members. During this period in Washington, I saw first hand how the Speakership could be used to drive policy.

Again, contacts I made during that period stood me in good stead when I returned to do a great many more interviews over the next decade, allowing me to write my second book on party leadership in the House and then a number of pieces on House Republican leadership. My understanding of what was going on in the 1990s was immensely enriched by having witnessed the evolution of party leadership and of the two parties in the House since my fellowship year.

Could I have done the same work without the Congressional Fellowship? Possibly, but it would have been really difficult. One of the things I learned during my fellowship year was that being on the Hill in a congressional office day-in and day-out is extraordinarily valuable for understanding Congress and its members. I got a “feel” for the rhythms of congressional life and the concerns of members that I had not gotten even from the extensive interviewing I did for my dissertation. (It completely convinced me that a solely reelection based model of Congress is wrong not just in the sense of being too simple but also in the sense of being seriously misleading.) Getting a real sense of what goes on a day- to-day basis in a leadership office would, I suspect, have been even harder. One of the signature features of congressional life is the crisis-a-day (it actually becomes addicting); of course, that is even more so in a leadership office. Another, related and particularly severe for leaders, is the sheer number of things going on at the same time. These facts of congressional life can be understood on an intellectual basis without the experience of spending considerable time in a congressional

office, but I don't think their impact can be fully appreciated.

The Congressional Fellowship specifically provides another valuable learning experience – the trip home with a member. There one gets to experience the other half of the member's life. Anyone who thinks most members of the House are out of touch with their constituents should follow a member as he or she makes the rounds of everything from graduation ceremonies to senior citizens centers to heart association award dinners. And anyone who thinks most members get a true cross sectional view of their constituents should do the same.

So here's to the Congressional Fellowship program on its 50th anniversary!! It has made an enormous difference in the careers of many scholars; it has contributed greatly to research that truly furthers our understanding of Congress; and the experience is SO MUCH FUN!

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The Backseat Boys

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Apart from the pop-culture reference, the title of this article has more than one meaning. "Backseat" was Dick Cheney's Secret Service codename during his tenure as Gerald Ford's chief of staff (Medved 1979, 336). Both of us served as Congressional Fellows with Cheney: Pitney in 1984, Connelly in 1985-86.

At the time, Cheney held Wyoming's sole House seat and chaired the House Republican Policy Committee. We worked in the committee's office, one of several GOP leadership staff offices on the sixth floor of the Longworth House Office Building. The location symbolized the "backseat" status of the House minority. It sat along a dark, dingy corridor, far from the heart of the Hill. Its windows overlooked something that looked like a prison yard. House Democrats found it easy to ignore "permanent minority" Republicans.

For two years after his Fellowship, Pitney stayed on the sixth floor of Longworth to work at the now-defunct House Republican Research Committee. When Connelly arrived, we began discussing what the discipline could learn from House Republicans. The discussions continued after Connelly went to the Senate side to serve the second half of his Fellowship with Richard Lugar (R-IN).

Our academic instincts naturally led us both to search for the recent literature, but we

learned that there was none. The last book-length treatment was Charles O. Jones's *The Minority Party in Congress*, in 1970. Since then, studies of congressional party politics had focused on the Democrats, relegating the House GOP to the backseat of legislative scholarship.

Why? Political scientists study power, and the House Democrats obviously had most of it. Moreover, most political scientists were (and are) Democrats. While there were few signs of deliberate partisan bias, their personal interests and professional contacts tended to lie on the Democratic side of the aisle. And as is usually the case in any discipline, people wrote on topics that others have written about. By the 1980s, as Richard Fenno later wrote, legislative scholars had become "victims of our Democratic diet" (Fenno 1997, 2).

So we resolved to fill the gap with our own writing. The Congressional Fellowship Program -- Cathy Rudder in particular -- helped us by encouraging us to work in both houses of Congress. (Pitney had worked for Al D'Amato, R-NY). From this point of departure, we reflected that what we saw in the House was dramatically different from what we experienced in the Senate.

As all students of Congress know, individual senators have more clout than their House counterparts. In the mid-1980s, Lugar

and D'Amato had the added advantage of belonging to the majority. When we were on the Senate side, then, our principals were real players who could actually write legislation. In the House, by contrast, the Republicans could uphold Reagan vetoes and attack Democratic proposals, but they could do little to advance their own agenda. After decades in the minority, few of them had ever sponsored a major law, and none had ever chaired a House committee.

Gingrich thought that GOP hopes for majority status hinged on confronting the Democrats. While a "rational" seeker of reelection would have backed off, Gingrich pressed on. His behavior – and Cheney's – convinced us that existing theories of legislative behavior were missing something important.

In one way, majority status is like tenure. If you have it, you might take it for granted. If you do not have it, you are always thinking about it. In another way, however, the two things are quite different. Tenure belongs to the individual while majority status is a collective good. At the time, much of the political science literature suggested that rational politicians would focus on their individual reelection goals, and give short shrift to collective party goals.

That generalization clashed with what we witnessed at Policy Committee meetings and other Republican gatherings. Most members desperately wanted their party to win the majority, and some would take personal risks to advance that cause. None

was more willing to live dangerously than Newt Gingrich. Cheney was the House GOP leadership's liaison to the Gingrich faction, the Conservative Opportunity Society. We both helped in that liaison work, which is how we got to see Gingrich in action.

Gingrich gained national media attention in 1984, when he had a bitter floor exchange with Speaker Tip O'Neill. When the parliamentarian ruled O'Neill out of order, Gingrich became a hero both to younger House Republicans and conservative activists watching on C-SPAN. (A myth has grown up that O'Neill was a jovial figure who generated warm feelings on both sides of the aisle. That is nonsense. O'Neill had little use for Republicans, who in turn resented his hardball tactics.) Such activities did Gingrich scant good with rank-and-file voters in his home district, and they guaranteed that national Democrats would target him for defeat.

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We did draw some insights from political science literature, albeit from different subfields. According to international relations scholar Robert Jervis (1976, 327): "Domestic groups in conflict see the other side as more unified than it is. In local labor-management disputes each side is apt to believe incorrectly that the other is controlled from above. Both Democrats and Republicans in the House of Representatives see the other party as the one that is more organized and disciplined."

Jervis got it exactly right. Democrats thought of the Republicans as monolithic "Reagan Robots." But up close, we saw a kaleidoscopic array of party divisions: moderate v. conservative, young v. old,

confrontational v. accommodationist, party v. committee. Even if it had wanted to, the minority party leadership had no means to impose discipline. House Republicans wanted majority status yet lacked consensus on how to achieve it.

Democrats were not the only ones who misread the House GOP. Connelly attended bicameral GOP staff meetings, and later interviewed Policy Committee staffers in both chambers. He found that Senate Republicans knew little of their colleagues in “the other body” and tended to assume that the House Republicans were a disciplined party. This misunderstanding both stemmed from and contributed to the frequent conflicts between Senate and House Republicans.

Conversely, the Jervis principle explains House Republicans’ attitudes toward Democrats – and perhaps House Democrats’ attitudes today toward majority Republicans. On every controversial roll-call vote, Republicans assumed that the Democrats were using strong-arm tactics to keep their members in line. Some GOP lawmakers and staffers even saw a partisan hand in late mail deliveries to the sixth floor of Longworth.

Then again, such perceptions were not entirely wrong. As David Rohde later showed, House Democrats did indeed have higher rates of party unity than Republicans throughout the 1980s (Rohde 1991, 153). In the 1990s, a scandal erupted at the House Post Office, and people went to prison.

We learned much from Cheney himself. In *Home Style*, Fenno warned of “going native” during participant observation research (Fenno 1978, 275). Still, it was hard not to find Cheney impressive. Connelly's subsequent optimistic writings on a “Boy Scout” view of Congress derived directly from his time with Cheney and Lugar. (Pitney did not write a “Boy Scout” account of his time with D’Amato.)

Some of the literature tries to reduce legislative leadership to institutional context. That is, leaders are purportedly just the creatures of procedures, colleagues, and parties in the electorate. Watching Cheney reminded us that there is more to leadership than followership. When Cheney spoke, people listened. What the press now calls his “gravitas” caused other House Republicans to heed him. He was both a creature and creator of his context.

The Civil War historian Douglas Southall Freeman once explained a source of gravitas: “First, know your stuff. Know your stuff, just that. Know -- know your own branch, know the related arms of the service; you can't know too much if you are going to be a successful leader. And know the yesterdays” (Freeman 1979, 4). Colleagues deferred to Cheney because he knew his stuff. His executive experience gave him a profound understanding of “the related arms of the service.” He knew policy. And from his academic background and research on the speakership, he knew “the yesterdays.” Cheney’s example offers evidence that knowledge is power on Capitol Hill.

During party meetings, we noticed other members who triggered the opposite reaction. Long of wind and narrow of mind, people such as Mark Siljander (R-MI) and Joseph DioGuardi (R-NY) caused their colleagues to roll their eyes and head for the exits. As deGaulle once observed, “Men instinctively distrust an officer who is prodigal of speech” (deGaulle 1960, 59-60).

Cheney was no “pander bear.” At different times, we both traveled with him to Wyoming, and heard him tell constituents what they did not want to hear. Pitney watched him explain to people in the small town of Rawlins that he opposed federal subsidies for rail service to southern Wyoming. Connelly saw him take on a bunch of angry ranchers who were losing grazing

land to DOD needs. In a conversation with Connelly, Cheney manifested his familiarity with political science, explaining why he was not acting as a single-minded seeker of re-election. He said he did not want the job if it entailed pandering.

He also noted that Wyomingites respect independence, something both of us witnessed. They respected him even when -- and perhaps because -- he did not pander to them. Clearly Congressman Cheney was a "trustee," not merely an "agent" for constituent interests. He was more than willing to engage in blunt talk with constituents and colleagues alike. Economic theories of legislative behavior fail to capture such leadership. As James Q. Wilson noted, "whereas economics is based on the assumption that preferences are given, politics must take into account the efforts made to change preferences" (Wilson 1980, 363).

On the Hill and among Congress scholars, Cheney had a reputation as a House institutionalist and something of a thoughtful academic. He was both. Of course, reporters also described him as a "moderate" even though his voting record was quite conservative -- as the press reported during the 2000 campaign. Thus we learned that "style" and ideology are two different things.

As a House institutionalist, Cheney understood the need for bipartisan cooperation. But he also knew that "learning to govern" meant more than learning to play the politics of accommodation and compromise. Sometimes, like Gingrich, he thought it was necessary to confront the majority. He tangled with Speaker Jim Wright, once publicly calling him a "heavy-handed son of a bitch." Coming from Cheney, such a comment gained widespread attention -- precisely his point.

The role of institutionalist had an internal conflict. Cheney was loyal to

the House but also loyal to the Republican White House. He consistently sided with the president on national security issues, even though there was no real electoral payoff either for him or the party. (For instance, polls showed skepticism about aid to the Nicaraguan Contras). On domestic issues, though, he showed a willingness to take on the White House, as in the case of the 1985-86 tax bill. For both of us, this episode crystallized the "government v. opposition" dilemma we later analyzed in our study of the House GOP.

There is a direct line from our Fellowship experience in the House and our subsequent scholarship. In general, our journey on the Hill helped us understand the limits of rational-choice theory and quantification. While roll-call data are important, we learned that they supply only a glimpse of congressional life. That is especially true when floor rules keep many proposals from reaching a vote in the first place. Moreover, floor votes miss many dimensions of behavior. As we have pointed out, Gingrich and Republican Leader Bob Michel (R-IL) had nearly identical voting records but had fundamentally different approaches to leadership.

More specifically, we both gained enormously from working in a leadership office instead of a member office. In the latter, we might well have focused on self-interested district-leaning behavior. In the former, though, we grasped the reality of collective action.

Finally, our scholarly agenda would not have been possible without the trust of Dick Cheney. Nearly two decades ago, we were amazed to find ourselves in leadership meetings and working on leadership projects. We still draw upon those experiences, which would not have been possible without Cheney. The respect political scientists have shown him is well deserved.

In 1994, we published our major book on the House GOP. We titled it: *Congress' Permanent Minority? Republicans in the US House*. Shortly after the publication date, of course, House Republicans won the majority. Colleagues still tease us about it. That's okay, since we were able to supply the discipline with an analysis of the House GOP at the precise moment when it was most useful. Dick Cheney is no longer in the backseat, and neither are the House Republicans.

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The Congressional Fellowship: A Bicameral Perspective

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In August 1994, as I flew back to California with my family, and left the 103rd Congress behind me, I knew, sadly, that my congressional fellowship had ended, but I did not know that it was the end of an era as well. Few professional Congress watchers suspected or anticipated the deluge coming that fall. But something significant had happened during the time my class of Fellows was there, and it was evident even as we returned home. It did not require retrospective analysis following the elections. Congress had imploded. Not that any year in Congress is devoid of interesting issues and events, but it was a good year to be there. If nothing else this was the test of united government after twelve years of some variation of divided government. But it proved to be much more than that. Following Clinton's somewhat uneasy honeymoon and rocky but largely successful first year, the second session of the 103rd revealed the fragility of his mandate and the inability of many congressional Democrats to sense that. Or could it be that Democrats had too much sense of it? Perhaps it was a combination of both. Whatever the case, our time in Congress was a story of decline, from the brilliant debut of Clinton's health care initiative and passage of NAFTA in fall 1993 to the opening of the Whitewater investigation and the legislative train wreck of August and September 1994. This was perhaps not unprecedented, but rather unusual and interesting, especially from

my perspective as someone interested in bicameralism. I came away with a much better understanding of Congress and the relationship between the House and Senate, but also with some thoughts about the strengths and weaknesses of the professional literature that had, hitherto, been my principal source of insight into Congress. A decade later, those impressions have evolved but mostly in ways that confirm their validity.

The Bicameral Congress and Reform as a Lens on Bicameralism

I applied with the express intention of seeing bicameralism in action. This required that I do what few fellows actually do; that is, switch sides of the Capitol mid way through their time in D.C. The utility of experiencing both sides of the Capitol certainly depends on one's interests. But I found it invaluable. I should note that I applied to the Fellowship Program in the middle of my fifth year as an assistant professor. I would in fact be gone during consideration of my tenure case (a little incidental benefit of the program). My work to that point had been about the politics of defense policy and the gender gap in American politics (e.g., Wirls 1986, 1992). Some of that work had been about Congress directly and I had been teaching a senior seminar on Congress. I had been writing some conference papers on what I began to see (around 1990 and 1991) as one of the shortcomings in the literature on Congress: the lack of bicameral

comparison or analysis. Each chamber tended to be analyzed independently.¹ Though some comparative work existed, few scholars seemed interested in the effect of bicameralism on outcomes.

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I spent half the year with Representative Lee Hamilton (D-Indiana), then chair of the Foreign Affairs Committee. The other half was spent in the office of Senator Chris Dodd (D-Connecticut). Insights into bicameralism would have been forthcoming regardless of what I worked on, but fortuitously (though my choice of Dodd as my second assignment was fairly deliberate) both members had a direct interest in one of the signal issues of the 103rd Congress (and one that implicated bicameral relations quite directly): congressional reform. Congress had appointed the Joint Committee on the Organization of Congress and Lee Hamilton was the co-chair. Dodd was not on the joint committee but he was on the Senate Rules Committee, which would receive and consider the joint committee's recommendations, which were released in December 1993. I served as a legislative assistant to both members on this issue. On the

House side, I had the privilege and pleasure of being able to learn from and work with Larry Evans and Walter Oleszek, who were two of the professional staff to the joint committee and then continued to work with Representative Hamilton as the recommendations went forward and were turned into the proposed Legislative Reorganization Act of 1994. In this capacity, I got to roam the halls of Congress as Hamilton met with various congressional constituencies to lobby for the reforms. I also spent several hours in H-313 (perhaps my favorite room in the Capitol) listening to the hearings on the reform proposals. I then moved to the Senate just as Dodd and the Senate Rules Committee were to consider the Senate's version. As the staff assigned to evaluate what was by then left of the recommendations, I was asked first to evaluate any possible effect the new committee assignment rules might have on Dodd. This time I got to sit behind Dodd in Russell 301 as the committee deliberated on its version of reform.

To make a long story short, the fellowship confirmed for me that Representatives and Senators were the same kind of politicians operating under different conditions, a point being brought home by the then emerging institutionalism literature from various perspectives. It was impressive to witness the extent to which the two bodies were composed of similar actors, responding to the same exogenous forces, in nearly the same way. The differences were the institutional rules and contexts through which those identical actors, motivations, and external forces were filtered. Senator Dodd added to my sense of this during an hour-long interview I had with him. We spent much of our time on exactly this issue and Dodd was able to draw on his experience as both a Representative and Senator to reflect on the bicameral parallels and differences. As far as congressional reorganization, one of the touchstone issues

¹ Major exceptions from this era include Smith 1989 and Longley and Oleszek 1989.
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was the Senate filibuster. This was the period during which the filibuster emerged as a central issue for members of Congress and scholars alike. House Democrats (including David Obey, Barney Frank, and Mike Synar) launched a short-lived war on Senate Rule 22 following the release of a DSG report on the increasing impact of the filibuster. Senators, with a few exceptions like Tom Harkin, wanted nothing to do with this. Things pretty much went from "joint reorganization" to "you reform your house; we might reform ours." Senators quickly snuffed out any threat to their individual prerogatives.

Bicameral Parochialism

In particular, my experiences with reform and with Dodd and Hamilton's offices more generally forced me to reconsider a common view of bicameral difference. That is, Senators, who typically represent more people and a wider variety of interests, must take a broader view of public policy. Serving on more committees, Senators become generalists in contrast to House specialists. These are valid on some level. What came to me, however, was how such truisms could be quite misleading. Senators could be as or even more parochial than House members. And not just small state Senators, although they provided some good examples. I witnessed Senator Ted Stevens (R-Alaska) declare that any attempt to limit the right of Senators to offer non-germane amendments "would be the dissolution of the Union" because such amendments were one of the only ways small states got a fair share (I mean, fair shake). "That's," Stevens continued, "how strong the people in small states feel about this."² Well, it's at least how strong Senators from small states feel about this. More generally, Senator Dodd's office was as attentive to Connecticut's variety of parochial interests as Hamilton's was to those in southern Indiana. In some ways the

possibilities for funneling pork to a particular House district (like southern Indiana) are rather limited. Contrast that with nearly any state. While I was there Dodd's office handled numerous such issues, including getting funding for a Seawolf submarine the Navy didn't really want, and helping with a deal to get a Yankee farm team to move to the state. Senators are required to comb all opportunities. Senators in general are stretched too thin to think deeply, and much of the added scope of their job is in service of parochial interests, on behalf of which they can apply their powerful institutional tools (including Steven's Union-preserving non-germane amendment). In turn, I came to think that members of the House, especially if they have a comfortable relationship with their district, are able often to take a fairly broad view of things. Many seemed to have considerable latitude to be policy generalists in ways that some Senators did not have the time, freedom, or inclination to be.

The "Two Congresses"

This rethinking of the relationship between national policy and parochialism went a bit further. One congressional reality that most fellows who work in members' offices experience the quite vividly it is the relationship between members of Congress as representatives of geographical constituencies and members as national policy makers on Capitol Hill, or what Davidson and Oleszek call the "Two Congresses. It is an apt image, but I would stress the following. My time on the Hill brought home how seamlessly the two Congresses are joined. That is, one way of looking at the two Congresses is as competing priorities, tearing members in different directions. To some extent that is true. But the two are, of course, really one, one (dys)functional whole. The sense I got from being on the Hill is the weird way in which it is all integrated via the congressional enterprise, as we sometimes call it. That term for the

² Author's notes from Senate Rules and Administration Committee Hearing, June 9, 1994.

small corporation run by each member is perhaps one of the more apt nicknames given to a feature of Congress.

One interesting aspect of working both sides of the Hill was to see how similar the politics of each operation was. Dodd's and Hamilton's were both intensely direct and personal operations with the sole purpose of supporting and promoting their boss. We all know this, but being a direct witness to the machines in action was revelatory nonetheless. Though as a Senator, Dodd had the bigger operation, the two were comparable. Both were senior Democrats with a fairly safe relationship with their constituencies. So it was instructive to see how similar the operations were. Connecticut and southern Indiana came first. In effect, I came to see how the office operations were what wove the two Congresses into one fabric. For example, I found that staff had internalized their roles so thoroughly that they at times lost any sort of critical or ironic perspective on the possible contradictions between local and national actions.³ And this still makes me think of the relative lack of work on the comparative nature of representation.⁴ Congress makes possible this kind of individualistic enterprise in ways nearly no other legislature does. The extent to which the American system of elections and separation of powers produce this oddity of the personally powerful but politically isolated representative is still something to behold. A personal power that then gets invested into reelection. And when it comes to policy-making, that same energy is often is channeled into the parochial, with few strong links to a national platform or program.

³ One example: Dodd's office worked assiduously to get funding for one more Seawolf submarine, despite the fact that Dodd was a social liberal looking to cut the overall defense budget. When the money came through, there was a celebration in the office among the even more liberal staff.

⁴ Unless I've missed something, everyone still seems to be citing Cain, Ferejohn, and Fiorina 1987.

In short, I saw at work the extreme incentives to go the personal route.⁵

The Constructivist or Sociological Congress

It was seeing the personal congressional enterprises in action that made me wonder whether a certain strain of scholarship was lacking in the contemporary literature on Congress. Congressional scholars have done much to explain the various institutional features and their impact. But at the time, and this trend continued, the literature was moving in the direction of formal rational choice and historical institutional approaches. Both were and are valuable. It seemed to me then, however, and I think it is more true now, that we had all but abandoned another approach: the sociological study of Congress. We have this tradition with the work of Fenno and Kingdon, but we don't seem to be doing much of it these days. We should not leave this work for sociologists or even anthropologists; they aren't interested anyway.⁶ Or journalists, for that matter, though I think they have done some great work. I think we political scientists should be interested in this pursuit. The fashion in international relations is to apply the label "social constructivism" to recent attempts to understand how politicians, decision-making institutions, or "states" devise or construct their worldviews. This, apparently, has been somewhat of a breakthrough for theoretical perspectives dominated by various shades of realism. Institutionalism, formal and otherwise, has provided some of the structural foundations of congressional sociology or congressional constructivism, but not some of the processes and details of social construction, and perhaps more to the point, not the implications for power.

⁵ This of course has a rich bibliography. One of the more recent and classroom-friendly arguments: Kenneth Mayer and David Canon 1999.

⁶ One anthropological exception: Weatherford 1981. Some of the work on women in Congress gets at this, including Witt, Paget, and Matthews 1994.

Which leads me to my final point. For decades a pluralist bias or assumption has pervaded the literature on Congress. We can explain why things do or do not happen but we can't tell you who gains or loses from this, or if there is some systematic bias to this process (except perhaps to argue, often implicitly, that Congress serves its own interests). The general implication is that there are different winners and losers depending on the issue or configuration of forces. Some of what I consider the best literature on Congress, including Douglas Arnold's *Logic of Congressional Action*, provides considerable insight into the possibilities and tendencies. And I found his and other such work confirmed by my experiences in Congress. But I also found myself thinking there was a lot more to probe, especially about the ends rather than the means of congressional action. In some of the few instances where direct attempts have been made to detect social power, the results have been lackluster. For example, the literature on PACs and campaign contributions generally failed to detect significant statistical relationships between dollars and votes, but has anyone among us been satisfied by the rather mundane finding that members are not bought in such an obvious manner? Did that convince us that money and various forms of socio-economically based influence did not matter? It took sociologists, in the case of PACs, to make an attempt to theorize around the sterile dichotomy between buying votes and some vague definitions of "access" (Clawson, Neustadtl, and Weller 1998). (And with the recent Supreme Court decision on the Bipartisan Campaign Finance Reform Act, this question has taken on renewed relevance.) The danger is that pluralist assumption can be a way of avoiding attempts to search for patterns of power. This seems to be especially the case when the literature is heavily focused, as it has

been, on the internal or endogenous aspects of Congress and congressional action.

Not that I jumped on the opportunity to fill the void; it is problem that I keep grappling but failing to pin. A number of congressional fellows have translated their experience directly into a book or article. This has often taken the "how a bill (that I worked on) became a law (or not)" format. Though the congressional reorganization process offered such an opportunity, I did not take it, though one article and one book chapter grew out of issues from the 103rd Congress (Wirles 1996, 1998). The irony is that after I left DC I found myself working on pieces of the bicameralism puzzle in an increasingly historical fashion (Wirles 1999), a process that ultimately resulted in a book on the invention of the Senate (Wirles and Wirles 2004). Nevertheless, I think the question about whose interests Congress serves remains a vital one on which we have not shed much light.

Après le Deluge

The only drawback of being a 1993-94 congressional fellow was that for the first time in the program's history, one could argue, a true political earthquake reshaped the institution within weeks of end of the term. Almost before I had a chance to impart my hard earned, first hand wisdom to my students an important portion of that knowledge disappeared. The elections of 1994 and the 104th Congress that resulted eliminated not only the Democratic majority so familiar to us all, but also many of the actors (or their positions) one had gotten to know, in some cases personally. Perhaps most distressing of all, soon thereafter, the names of several committees changed. Do other of my colleagues still refer to the Foreign Affairs Committee? None of this was supposed to change, right? Was I more angry that the Republicans had won or that my base of knowledge had just been decimated? At the time, it was a close call. Then again, Gingrich,

Armev, DeLay and the rest proved to be a most engaging and entertaining group. My students were paying attention to Congress in a way they had never before; and for that, if nothing else, I suppose we should be grateful.

When I first returned to California, I was missing D.C. pretty bad. A few days after getting home, I switched on the TV and there was the Senate Banking Committee holding its first hearings on Whitewater, hearings for which I had helped prepare Senator Dodd. I said to myself, "Damn, I wish I were there." I am not an avid CSPANer; I rarely watch. But almost exactly a year later, I happened to tune in again, and lo and behold, there were more hearings on Whitewater before the Senate Banking Committee, this time under Republican control. I glanced at the screen again. It said it was live; I did not think it possible: it was ten PM; one in the morning in Washington. "Damn," I thought, "I'm glad I'm not there." But I am quite thankful to have been there, and I thank the APSA, once again, for a most memorable and important year.

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The Centrality of Rules, Procedures, and Information: Reflections from a Congressional Fellowship Experience

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As a member of the APSA's Congressional Fellowship Program class of 2002-2003, I do not yet have the benefit of much hindsight to assess how the experience has affected my teaching and research. So I'd like to use this essay to reflect on what I learned over the fellowship year that added to or subtracted from the baseline of what I thought I already knew about Congress.

I spent half of my time as a fellow working in the Senate and half in the House. On the Senate side I worked for the Democratic Policy Committee. The DPC's activities—events, documents, briefings—are all designed to articulate and disseminate a “party message,” provided that there is sufficient unity among Democrats to create such a thing. At the start of 2003, the major issue on the national policy agenda was President Bush's budget and economic stimulus plan. Despite a lack of unity among Senate Democrats on this subject in 2001, the Democratic caucus in 2003 had hammered out a clear party message: Republicans budget priorities are misplaced and fiscally irresponsible, and the Democratic approach would be far more effective at creating jobs and stimulating the economy. As a fellow on the DPC staff my job was to write documents and assist in planning events and hearings that would highlight and convey this message.

Although a great part of what I observed reinforced what I thought I already knew about Congress, I also had the somewhat unsettling experience of having some of my preconceived ideas called into question. Looking back over the year, one seems most prominent: I was quite surprised by Members' seriousness about understanding and mastering the details of public policy.

My House experience was about as strong a contrast as one could find. Instead of working for a committee, I worked on a personal staff—for a freshman House member, Congressman Jim Cooper of Tennessee, just elected back to the House in 2002 after his defeat in a 1994 Senate bid. In other words, instead of working for party leadership, I was working for an individual member, one with a record as a maverick, more conservative than

the average Democrat and not at all inclined to coordinate his activities with party leaders. Instead of observing the creation and delivery of a central message, I was able to get insight into the kind of questioning and strategizing that takes place as a new member develops his own individual legislative agenda. Mr. Cooper was on an entirely different set of committees from his previous years of service and was in the process of discovering what it was possible for a new member to do within their jurisdictions.

First, in terms of “adding to the baseline” of my understanding of Congress, I’ll focus on the one generalization that was most strongly reinforced by my experiences: the importance of congressional rules and procedures to policy outcomes. Watching Congress up close this year I was struck by the amount of time devoted to debating and discussing rules. If anything, the focus on rules was even more intense than I was expecting. It was clear that members perceived that the stakes were high in these disputes, and that policy outcomes hung in the balance. Let me just list a few such controversies from this year:

- **The organizing resolution in the Senate.** Negotiations on this matter consumed half of January 2003. The most public aspect of this dispute was the delay in the confirmation hearing for Secretary Tom Ridge, because Senate Government Affairs Chairman Joe Lieberman (like the other Democratic chairmen) had refused to relinquish the gavel to Susan Collins until a deal was done organizing all the committees. But the real issue wasn’t the control of the committee gavels, of course; Democrats were going to concede those eventually. The serious dispute was over the party division of staff and resources on committees. Egos played a role in this debate – as well as concern for

employees who would lose their jobs if the Republicans got the share they were seeking – but the intensity of the debate reflected the policy stakes involved. Democrats clearly recognized how consequential staffing levels would be for their ability to gather and use information to shape policy debates.

- **Rules for considering judicial nominations.** Early in 2003, some Democrats were taking the unprecedented step of demanding that the Senate organizing resolution require Judiciary Committee Chair Hatch to follow the blue slip process that allows senators to hold up nominees for judgeships in their states. Later, Democratic caucus members were outraged when Chairman Hatch refused to observe a committee rule that required at least one minority party member to support ending debate on a nominee before the committee could take a vote to report the nominee from committee. In addition, there was a great deal of hesitation and concern among Democrats about how to respond to Bush’s most objectionable judicial nominees. It was not clear from the outset that Democrats would mount and sustain filibusters, and Democrats spent a great deal of time debating whether filibusters were advisable and justifiable in this situation. All told, of the 14 weekly Democratic caucus meetings for which I have notes, senators discussed procedural issues in judicial nominations in eight of them. On two occasions, these issues dominated the entire discussion of the caucus.
- **Controversy on the budget process.** During the consideration of the congressional budget resolution, the parliamentarian was required to rule on

several difficult, technical issues having to do with the Byrd rule and other rules of the budget reconciliation process.

Despite their arcane nature, it was clear to everyone in the Senate that hundreds of billions of dollars were quite literally riding on these rulings. Although newspaper coverage of these topics was poor and often misleading, they were quite widely understood and heatedly debated in Congress itself.

- **The role of the Rules committee.** There is no way to overstate how large the Rules committee looms in the current House of Representatives. It affects everyone, especially the minority party. Every office interacts with its staff on an ongoing basis: Was my amendment made in order? What amendments were? From the point of view of a staffer working for a moderate Democrat, it was clear that one of the major policy impacts of the House Rules committee is its penchant for disallowing centrist alternatives from consideration. Policy alternatives that might draw moderate Republican support were the ones that seemed most likely to be ruled out of order. During the debate over Medicare prescription drugs, Mr. Cooper waited all night until nearly 3:00 in the morning to testify on behalf of the proposal he supported. As the sun started to rise, Mr. Dooley, the lead sponsor on the amendment, joked that this was the closest that his policy idea would ever get to seeing the light of day. And, of course, he was right.

Although a great part of what I observed reinforced what I thought I already knew about Congress, I also had the somewhat unsettling experience of having some of my preconceived ideas called into question. Looking back over the year, one seems most prominent: I was quite surprised by Members'

seriousness about understanding and mastering the details of public policy. Policy discussions that took place in private, just between members and staff outside public view – no question of preening for the cameras – were on a very high level. The Members of Congress whom I had the opportunity to observe seemed to take a great deal of pride in knowing and understanding the complexities of public policy. This is just not something one often finds mentioned in news media profiles of politicians – or in political scientist's treatments of them, for that matter.

One anecdote from the Senate Democratic Caucus's annual retreat illustrates this earnestness about policy. Prior to my fellowship experience, I might have expected such an event – a weekend session in a Maryland resort hotel – to be a cross between a party and a strategy session. But the structure of the event was a lot more like an academic conference. Other than a dinner and reception on the first evening of the retreat and a nature hike in the afternoon on Saturday, senators sat in a conference room and listened to panelists – journalists, pundits, academics, think tank researchers – give presentations on policy issues. There was almost universal attendance among the senators at every panel over the weekend, even though there were no cameras to take note of it, no media present, and no recorded votes. And yet the senators were there, taking notes and discussing policy. They were even present for a panel that started at 9:00 a.m. Saturday morning on a rather wonkish subject, the problems associated with the assessment of early childhood education programs. The senators attended in force, but the people conspicuously absent were all the guest speakers – the academics, journalists, and researchers – who were still straggling in at 10:00 and after. Unlike the senators, the policy experts themselves just couldn't get up early in the morning for a session on the

difficulties of testing Head Start students, not even given the novelty of the chance to observe an off-the-record conversation among senators. But the senators were obviously engaged with the issues, asking substantive questions of the panelists and sharing information among themselves about their experiences with these programs in their own states.

Now this conclusion about “earnestness” does not mean that political science accounts of Congress give too little attention to members’ desire for “good public policy.” Legislators’ seriousness about policy is not necessarily that high-minded; it’s not just a quest for neutral advice from experts. Information – possessing it and being able to employ it effectively – is so valuable because it aids politicians in everything else they do. Reelection is often said to be the proximate goal, because the achievement of all other goals depends on it. Possessing policy information is, to some degree, analogous. It confers credibility, an asset essential for obtaining power in government and trust among constituents. Among colleagues, being knowledgeable makes Members worth listening to and enhances their influence in the chamber. With constituents, it inspires confidence in their qualifications and ability to do the job. Among other governmental officials, it makes a member someone to be contended with, someone who cannot easily be ignored. In these senses, whatever goals a politician has, information is central to achieving them. I’d always made use of the “information is power” cliché in teaching legislative politics, but nine months of working there has finally given me the context to really understand what it means.