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The *Giant Jigsaw Puzzle* After 25 Years: Editors Introduction

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During the 2002 APSA meeting in Boston my co-author Scott Frisch and I made a side trip to the John F. Kennedy library.¹ Among the archived papers at the Library were those of James Burke, a member of Congress from Boston and a former Democratic member of the House Ways and Means Committee that, during his term of service, made committee assignments for Democrats in the House. Scott and I have spent the last three years collecting committee request data from the archived papers of Democratic and Republican House members for our research and the trip to Boston presented an opportunity to fill a small hole in our dataset. As we stood waiting for the bus that would take us back to the subway station we began discussing what sort of panel we would like to see at the 2003 APSA meeting. Discussing books that we thought were influential in congressional studies we realized that 2003 would mark the 25th anniversary of the publication of Ken Shepsle's *The Giant Jigsaw Puzzle: Democratic Committee Assignments in the Modern House*. Given the

nature of our research, of course, we felt that it was a book worthy of a retrospective. With Ken Shepsle's blessing and willingness to participate it was hardly difficult to convince this stellar group to come together to discuss this important book. I thank them for their willingness to participate in the roundtable and contribute essays for my inaugural issue of *Extension of Remarks*. Thanks are also due to Nicol Rae for his willingness to include the roundtable in the APSA program.

Published in 1978, *The Giant Jigsaw Puzzle* has proven itself to be one of the most influential and enduring contributions to the congressional studies literature in the last 25 years. Ken Shepsle united a social choice perspective with original data and (then) cutting edge methodological techniques, to craft an interpretation of the committee assignment process. In turn *Jigsaw* laid the theoretical and empirical foundations for an explanation for the organization of the House and for observed policy dynamics; the jigsaw thesis has become nothing less than paradigmatic. Among the numerous influential findings and ideas advanced by the book that have influenced the development of the congressional literature are:

- That members of the House *self-select* to congressional committees based on dominant interests in their districts in an effort to ensure reelection, and

¹ This essay is an elaboration of comments delivered at the Annual Meeting of the American Political Science Association, August 28 - August 31, 2003, Philadelphia, PA. Roundtable on *The Giant Jigsaw Puzzle* After 25 Years. I am deeply privileged by my friendship and collaboration with Scott Frisch; my thinking on committee politics is indelibly marked by Scott's insight (though he bears no blame for any silly ideas that I may express from time-to-time). Thanks to Dave Schoen for collecting the citation data used in this paper.

- That the House party leadership promotes self-selection by seeking to *accommodate* the committee requests of members within the constraints of the supply of committee slots.

As a result of this interest-advocacy-accommodation nexus,

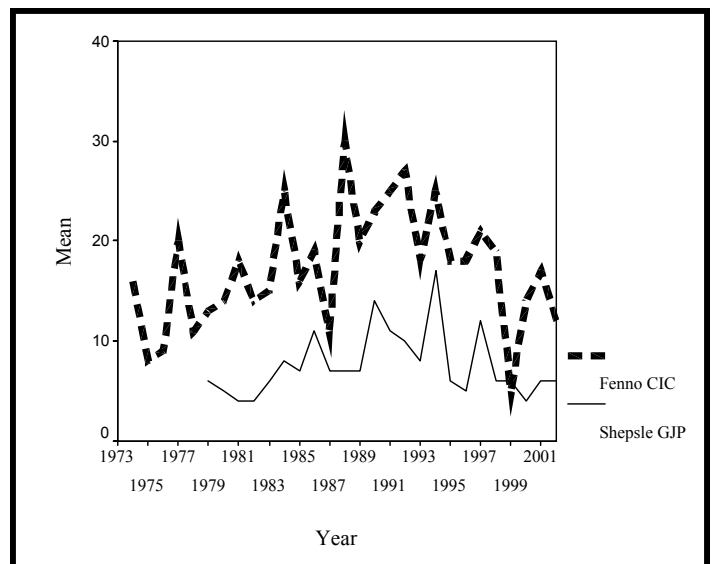
- House committees will be composed of *preference outliers* who demand higher levels of programmatic support for their districts than non-committee members, and
- House committees serve as centers for relatively closed policy networks that protect existing programs and policies (iron triangles).

These and other findings and insights have served as an engine for an enormous volume of research on congressional committees. In these opening remarks I want to provide some broad context for the discussion that follows.

Impact

Despite our post hoc evaluation of this classic, the initial reviews of the *Jigsaw* were not universally laudatory. In her review of the book in the *American Political Science Review*, the late Barbara Hinckley said of *Jigsaw* that “The book is not a major theoretical advance nor a major empirical one, though it offers an important hypothesis on the assignment process along with valuable data and rich detail” (Hinckley 1979, 887). When I read these words two things occurred to me. First, if I read these words about something that I had written I would have been seriously deflated, despite the fact that the review was nominally positive. Second, we would not have been able to organize this roundtable if she was *right*, and on this score her review failed to recognize the importance of the book. Most congressional scholars would agree that *Jigsaw* is an important part of the canon of congressional studies, and is certainly required reading for those interested in the study of the

internal dynamics of the House. Jim Stimson’s review in the *Journal of Politics* was perhaps more prophetic noting that “The significant achievement of the Shepsle volume is the integration of insight and rigor” (Stimson 1979, 1250). He continued his praise observing that “The models are elegant representations of the hypothesized decision behavior, and they in turn are largely supported by parameter estimation. It is good science” (Stimson 1979, 1251). Concluding his prescient review he predicted that “this book will certainly become the standard wisdom on the question on



committee assignments” (Stimson 1979, 1251).

The impact of *Jigsaw* can be measured in a number of ways. One is the degree to which the profession refers to the work. An analysis of the number of citations to the book over the last 25 years suggest that, on average, the book has been cited 187 times, or about 8 times per year; and as the graph indicates the number of citations has remained steady over time (see figure). *Jigsaw* compares favorably with another of the classics in congressional studies: *Congressmen in Committees* which, incidentally, is celebrating its 30th anniversary this year (see figure 1).

Less simple to measure is the impact of the work on the generations of graduate students who were influenced by it or the

innumerable undergraduates who were exposed to the ideas in their political science courses by faculty steeped in the logic of *Jigsaw*. Textbooks regularly provide students with a capsule understanding of committee dynamics with the following representative verbiage: "Members are assigned to committees by their party's leadership in the House and Senate, and they generally are given the assignments they request. Typically, members of Congress seek to be on the most prestigious committees and those that directly affect their constituents" (Rahm 2003, 16).² Significantly, the author does not cite *Jigsaw* or any related work when making this statement which is a testament to the degree to which this sentiment has become the conventional wisdom in the field; it also suggests that Professor Shepsle has probably been deprived of hundreds of citations in the last 25 years.

The 'Jigsaw Thesis'

Shepsle highlighted the importance of district characteristics in the committee requests of Democrats in the House. Democratic House members, he argued, "seek assignments to those committees in which their constituents have an important stake and toward which their own previous backgrounds predispose them" (Shepsle 1978, 231-232). In turn, the Democratic Committee-on-Committees (since renamed the Steering Committee) sought to accommodate member requests constrained by the supply of available committee slots. According to Shepsle, "the committee assignment process involves an *interest-advocacy-accommodation syndrome* in which interests are articulated, advanced, and accommodated in a highly institutionalized fashion" (Shepsle 1978, 231). This formulation, which Hinckley refers to as the "jigsaw thesis," minimizes the role of personal, ideological, or partisan considerations in the selection process,

emphasizing the conflict management above politics.

In her APSR review of *Jigsaw* Hinckley's admonished congressional scholars that "The jigsaw thesis should be regarded as tentative," she continued, "We can hope that ways will be found to...make the request data available to a wider research community. Necessary follow-up studies, with attention to measurement problems and committee variation, could then be conducted" (Hinckley 1979, 887). In particular she pointed to policy and ideological variables as warranting additional attention in future analyses. In fact, Shepsle himself highlighted the need for additional work on the thesis: "...I believe the theoretical forces at work are of a more general nature. I do hope that scholars undertake separate studies of the committee assignment process for the Republicans" (Shepsle 1978, 7).

Congressional studies accepted the jigsaw thesis as established wisdom instead of treating it as tentative. Part of the responsibility for our failure to observe the warnings of Professors Hinckley and Shepsle lies with Professor Shepsle himself. His theoretical model was so tightly reasoned and argued, and his data analysis so convincing, that further analysis did not seem warranted; he had "answered" the question, there was apparently nothing else to say. And, he had done so by relying on concepts that were almost considered truisms. Of course members of Congress were motivated by the desire to be reelected; of course members of Congress would choose committees that would help them to successfully pursue reelection; of course members would use their positions on these committees to deliver benefits to the district thereby ensuring reelection. Each of these arguments, by itself, seemed beyond reproach. As Jim Stimson put it, his

² I chose this book at random from a collection of texts on public policy.

“explanations ring true...” (Stimson 1979, 1251).³

In addition congressional scholars were hamstrung by the relative lack of reliable data to test the policy and ideological connection that Hinckley had pointed toward. By the time that significant new datasets -- such as the Poole and Rosenthal NOMINATE data that would have allowed hypotheses regarding a member’s ideology and committee assignment success, and years later Scott Adler’s district level census data -- became available, the jigsaw thesis had become the dominant understanding of the committee assignment process. Failure of the subfield to test the thesis among Republicans was a function of the continued minority status of the party and the apparent difficulty of acquiring such data, coupled with the assumption that findings similar to Shepsle’s would result from the analysis.

Son of Jigsaw: Distributive Theory

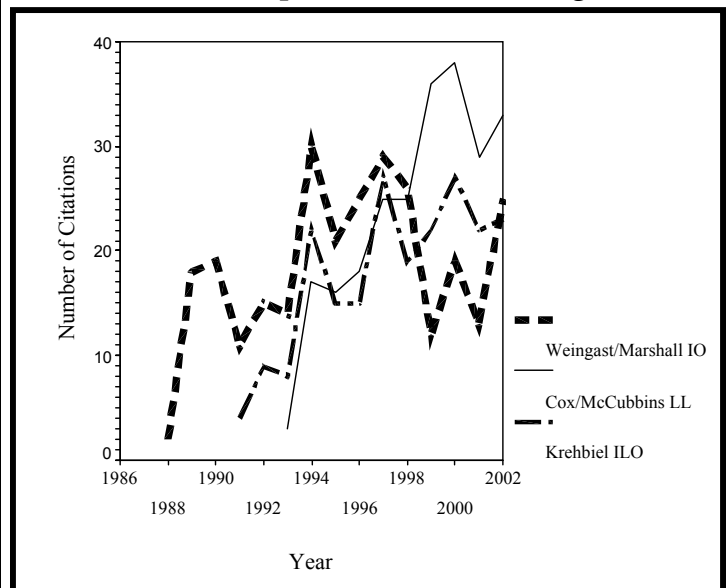
What has come to be known as distributive theory (words never uttered by Shepsle in *Jigsaw*) is founded on four pillars: 1) Members of Congress seek membership on committees that will best serve their constituency and reelection oriented goals; 2) congressional parties seek to accommodate member requests above all else; 3) committees, in turn, are composed of members with extreme preferences on policy issues under the committee’s jurisdiction; and 4) public policy is skewed in favor of the extreme positions of committee members, often resulting in an oversupply of benefits (spending) for the districts of committee members caused by institutionalized logrolling across committees.⁴

³ Indeed, they were all supported by David Mayhew’s (1974) masterful book which had come out a few years before; these findings confirmed his arguments.

⁴ For an overview of the development of distributive theory see Shepsle and Weingast 1995. For critical Legislative Studies Section

To put it mildly, the jigsaw thesis is the empirical rock upon which distributive theory is built. Pillars one through three are the core of *Jigsaw*.

The work that most clearly elaborates the distributive theory of congressional organization, the child of *Jigsaw*, is “The Industrial Organization of Congress: Or, Why Legislatures, Like Firms, Are Not Organized as Markets” (IO) published in the *Journal of Political Economy* (Weingast and Marshall 1988). Weingast and Marshall, like most of the empirical analysts in the distributive theory tradition, accept the first three tenants and build on the implications for the organization



of Congress by focusing on the benefits hypothesis that the jigsaw thesis underpins.

IO has had a significant impact in the literature (figure 2) drawing many citations every year. At the same time the figure indicates a surge in attention to work that either seeks to modify or replace distributive theory though not necessarily challenge the jigsaw thesis. Keith Krehbiel’s *Information and Legislative Organization* (ILO) only briefly addresses the issue of individual motivations and the committee assignment process (1988, 136-137), focusing instead on the organization

response and an alternative theory (informational theory), see Krehbiel 1991 and Groseclose 1994.

of congressional committees. Cox and McCubbins' work in *Legislative Leviathan* (LL) is largely an effort to incorporate political parties into a theory of legislative organization that remains essentially distributive. In short, the jigsaw thesis remains fundamentally unchallenged 25 years after its publication, and has influenced the development of the congressional literature on committees in a very significant way.

Conclusion

The essays that follow include personal reflections, plaudits, and criticisms. What unites all of these authors is deep respect for Shepsle's fine book as a model of strong research design, strong theoretical orientation, and use of original data and appropriate methodology in support of the theoretical enterprise. This consensus is a testimony to the place of this book in the canon of congressional studies; it is thus deserving of such a retrospective.

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