

Extension of Remarks



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GIANT JIGSAW PUZZLE - A GIANT LEAP FORWARD

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When Ken Shepsle's *The Giant Jigsaw Puzzle* (GJP) was published in 1978 it met with a resounding...well, thud. Reviewers were less than enthusiastic about the book. Barbara Hinckley's review in the *APSR* described the data as inadequate to test the propositions, the descriptions of the committee assignment process as familiar to serious students of Congress, and ultimately hoped that the records of committee requests would be made publicly available so that others might reanalyze them with an eye toward addressing problems in measurement and committee variation. Her conclusion begins with, "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." Jim Stimson's reflections in the *JOP* are slightly more generous, though he devotes the greater part of his review to two weaknesses in the study - the data on committee requests suffer from an insincerity problem and the changes in the House Democratic committee assignment process subsequent to the book's completion. To make matters worse, the \$40 sticker price (that's \$110 in today's money!) definitely did not help sales. All the indications were that this book would quickly gather dust on the few shelves it inhabited.

Yet with 25 years of reflection it is hard to overstate the impact of Shepsle's study on the field of congressional scholarship and,

perhaps, the entire discipline. It is not that *GJP* was a riveting analysis of a fascinating legislative activity. (Let's face it, compared to other noteworthy books on Congress published at about the same time - Fenno's *Home Style* (Fenno 1978), Fiorina's *Keystone* (Fiorina 1989), or Arnold's *Congress and the Bureaucracy* (Arnold 1979)- the prose in *GJP* is not exactly James Joyce or F. Scott Fitzgerald) But what Shepsle did in those 300-plus pages was truly path breaking.

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Along with works by a small number of contemporaries (such as, Fiorina's *Representatives, Roll Calls, and Constituencies* (Fiorina 1974)] and Ferejohn's *Pork Barrel Politics* (Ferejohn 1974)], this book redefined

the institutional focus of congressional research. As Congress scholarship was moving beyond behavioralism in the late-1970s, much of the work examining the structure and rules of the institution was preoccupied with recent internal and party reforms in the House and Senate, and not particularly theoretical in its orientation. In the years just prior to *GJP*'s publication a few seminal works emerged that outlined a theoretical vision of congressional organization and purpose—most notably Mayhew's *Congress: An Electoral Connection* (Mayhew 1974) and Fenno's *Congressmen in Committees* (Fenno 1973). Though highly influential in content – they persuaded scholars of the utility of rational choice approaches to the study of Congress – these masterful works raised the bar for writing style and research methods such that few were able to imitate. Conversely, it was the melding of the rational choice framework with rigorous social science in *GJP* that later authors strived for and thus this volume set the pace in congressional scholarship. Perhaps for the first time in our field a book combined rigorous theoretical models of social choice processes in Congress, with extensive and sweeping empirical work, and sophisticated statistical techniques. Over the ensuing years, this blend of analytical techniques pushed the field of congressional scholarship, and in turn a number of other subfields in Political Science, to go faster and further in new directions than any revolution since the introduction of statistical methods in the 1950s and 1960s.

This goes without saying that *GJP*, along with perhaps more important subsequent pieces by Shepsle (and co-conspirator, Weingast; e.g. (Shepsle 1979; Shepsle 1986; Shepsle and Weingast 1981; Shepsle and Weingast 1987)), defined what is *still* the central debate in research on congressional organization. Shepsle's gains from exchange model gave depth and formal logic to Mayhew's electoral connection and its

implications for the structure of Congress. Shepsle's body of work became the standard by which other literature in this theoretical and empirical controversy would be measured. Important pieces by Gilligan and Krehbiel (Gilligan and Krehbiel 1987; Gilligan and Krehbiel 1989; Gilligan and Krehbiel 1990; Krehbiel 1991), Kiewiet and McCubbins (Kiewiet and McCubbins 1991), and Cox and McCubbins (Cox and McCubbins 1993), Aldrich and Rohde (Aldrich and Rohde 1995; Aldrich and Rohde 1997a; Aldrich and Rohde 1997b), and others must be seen as direct reactions to Shepsle's work of this period, starting with *GJP*.

Moreover, the debate over theories of congressional organization for many years *somehow* has turned on Shepsle's primary focus in *GJP* – committee assignments. Shepsle certainly wasn't the first to examine the composition of committees (see works by (Bullock 1976; Fenno 1973; Gawthrop 1966; Gertzog 1976; Goodwin 1970; Masters 1961; Uslander 1974)). In fact, the book's title is derived from chapters 4 and 5 in Goodwin's, *The Little Legislatures*. But Shepsle recognized that the process and product of committee seat allocation could serve as a testing ground for broader notions of congressional organization. That is, if certain propositions about congressional structure are to be believed, then we should observe a committee composed of "x" kind of legislators. Thus, for the next two-and-a-half decades we saw a wide array of interesting and sometimes innovative explorations of the composition of House and Senate committees (see many of the pieces cited above, as well as (Groseclose 1994; Londregan and Snyder 1994; Poole and Rosenthal 1997; Adler and Lapinski 1997)).

Of course, twenty-five years after its publication, some of the arguments and conclusions in *GJP* have been overtaken by events and changes in political circumstances. Like all good works of social science (or any kind of science, for that matter), it warrants

reconsideration with time (see Fiorina 2001). To be sure, Sean Kelly, the editor of this newsletter, and his co-author, Scott Frisch, are in the final stages of an examination of fifty years worth of data on congressional committee requests and assignments. No doubt other authors in this special issue have offered their own assessments of how well *GJP* has stood the test of time. Let me simply speak to one element of the study -- the metaphor of the jigsaw puzzle.

Using the jigsaw puzzle as a representation for the process of committee assignments conjures up specific meanings. While on the one hand it captures nicely the complexity of fitting numerous and varied individuals into an intricate web of committee options, it does have one major drawback – it suggests a process with only one clear solution. At the time *GJP* was written this might not have been an unreasonable proposition. Though Congress in the mid-1970s had just undergone some fairly substantial reforms, parties were still relatively weak; “property rights” to committee seats largely prevailed; and despite some violations to the “seniority system,” it had not yet been toppled (I make these claims with some trepidation since all of these assertions address key debates in the literature). Nevertheless, Congress has evolved in the intervening years – parties and their leaders are stronger, assignment to committees is now a somewhat more open and democratic process and committee leadership positions are not nearly as inheritable as they used to be. Furthermore, the literature on committee assignments and composition has evolved – we no longer see self-selection as the single most important factor, party electoral and policy objectives play a key role, and informational needs lend importance to prospects for low cost issue specialization on committees.

Perhaps it is time we conjure up a better metaphor that fits our growing knowledge and the increasing complexity of influences on the

committee assignment process. (I was initially drawn to another important silver anniversary as a useful metaphor for the contemporary process of assigning members of Congress to committees – the film “Animal House.” However, other than it’s obvious, and some would say fitting, description of behavior in Congress it probably doesn’t provide much useful insight.) The critical element of a new metaphor is that it describes a process that has multiple solutions – there isn’t just one configuration of committee membership that will work. To accurately capture the means of acquiring committee seats today we must consider numerous options and the possibility that legislators can fit well and thrive in various committee positions. A better analogy, therefore – sticking with the puzzle theme – might be the tangram. Tangrams are the ancient Chinese puzzle consisting of 7 pieces of differing geometric shapes, which are used to make various figures and characters – people, animals, kitchen appliances, etc. Then again, I’m not sure that I would recommend anyone title their book, “The Giant Tangram.”

Despite its inauspicious beginnings, *The Giant Jigsaw Puzzle* and Ken Shepsle’s research have had a profound effect on the way scholars examine Congress, the behavior of its members, and its structure. We should all be so fortunate as to have our work still stand as a seminal moment in social science twenty-five years after publication.

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