

Your Name: _____

Congress: The Electoral Connection

David Mayhew
From Lanahan Readings

Background Vocabulary

- 1) *electoral politics: decision making and public policy influence driven mainly by voting and elections.*
- 2) *congressman/congresswoman: if used in the lower case, this could be an elected official of federal or state legislative branches, either in the House of Representatives or the Senate*

Directions: After reading the article, answer the following questions on your own paper. You do not need complete sentences but do need enough detail to show understanding. Only above average answers will earn full points.

QUESTIONS TO ANSWER (up to 3 points each)

1. Mayhew poses the question in the intro, “is it true that the US Congress is a place where members wish to stay once they get there?”. Based on the reading and examples you can find in today’s modern Congress, explain your answer to this question.
2. Mayhew raises concerns with the idea that if congressmen seek reelection as the main goal. Explain how you believe this goal can corrupt the process of a representative democracy in America?
3. Choose any two current congressmen or women in today’s current Congress... of any party. For each, describe which of Fenno’s “three prime goals” you believe the congressman is most concerned with. Also be prepared to share yours with the class.
4. In pages 18-19 of the reading, the author argues two viewpoints. One is that political parties are the “prime movers in electoral politics” versus the politicians seeking reelection themselves. Which do you believe? Explain.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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