

CONNECTIONS

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Understanding the Nature of Representation in a Democracy

By John Cavanaugh

How to study legislative behavior is a question that does not yield a consensual answer among political scientists. An ethic of conceptual pluralism prevails in the field, and no doubt it should. If there is any consensus, it is the point that scholarly treatments should offer explanations — that they should go beyond descriptive accounts of legislators and legislatures to supply general statements about why both of them do what they do. What constitutes a persuasive explanation? In their contemporary quest to find out, legislative students have ranged far and wide, sometimes borrowing or plundering explanatory styles from the neighboring social sciences.

— David R. Mayhew,
Congress: The Electoral Connection

The most obvious and perhaps largest disconnect between citizens and institutions is the one that separates “We, the People” from what is perceived as “They, the Government.” The public’s generic dissatisfaction with their relationship with government officials strikes at the heart of the Kettering Foundation’s key research questions in the Public-Government program area: *How can citizens and officeholders relate more productively in addressing public policy issues?*

Our research to date shows that the means officials and citizens typically use to interact with each other (public hearings, for example) are often quite unsatisfactory, to the point of making a bad relationship even worse. Hence our studies have attempted to identify the causes of the poor working relationship. One root cause seems to be the inability

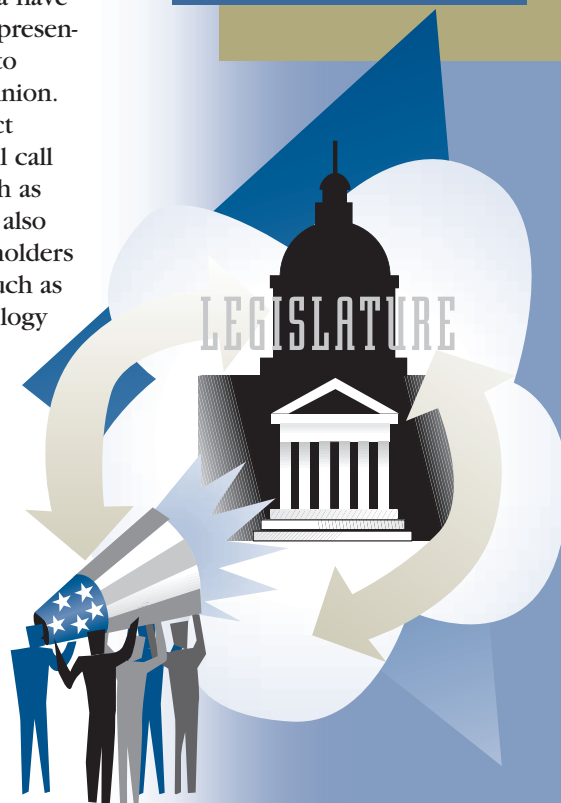
of citizens to appreciate the problems facing officeholders in their sworn duties as political representatives.

In the academic literature on this topic, scholars have created various theoretical frameworks to describe the nature of political representation in a democracy. For example, Hanna Pitkin provides four approaches to the study of representation. The first involves a purely functional description of the composition and membership of legislative bodies. The second looks at the formal rules and procedures by which officeholders are chosen and how legislatures operate. A third focuses on how legislators act on behalf of various interests in society. A fourth framework highlights the symbolic qualities of legislatures as they relate to other concepts such as authority and accountability.

Early empirical studies by political scientists who specialize in this area have attempted to study the nature of representation by comparing roll call votes to measurements of district public opinion. This research has found that, district opinion is strongly correlated to roll call votes on certain types of issues such as civil rights. However, these studies also show that personal views of officeholders were more influential on matters such as social welfare policy. This methodology is limited to the extent that it is purely descriptive in that it simply paints a picture of how legislators make decisions. These studies do not provide us with clear explanations of why legislators act the way they do, nor do they address the normative questions raised by democratic theory.

Hence, Kettering Foundation research has great potential to build upon established theories of representation and address normative questions as to how

The deeper sources of the troubled relationship between the public and the government are fed by tensions arising from the complex nature of representation in a democracy.



Kettering Foundation research has great potential to build on these established theories of representation and address normative questions as to how officeholders might act in a different way.

officeholders might act in a different way. Typically, discussions such as this bog down into debate over two models: The Burkean trustee model versus the Instructed delegate model. The trustee approach suggests that election victories authorize officeholders to use their own best judgment when making legislative decisions. Terms of office provide regular opportunities for citizens to retain or remove their legislators based on evaluations of their conduct in office. The instructed delegate approach suggests that officeholders simply reflect the will of their constituencies. Economists have found this model of particular interest and several studies use a market metaphor in an attempt to explain the relationship of members of the legislature to the electorate. However, this can be problematic as it is nearly impossible to determine accurate measures of what a particular district collectively “thinks” about every issue that may come up for a roll call vote in the legislature.

In *Homestyle*, Richard Fenno documents the dual role of representatives as both “delegates” and “trustees” in detailed case studies of members of Congress. Thus, members are instructed delegates when they follow the majority will of their districts and informed trustees when they rely on their personal judgments. A key finding from Fenno’s work relates to the two different worlds officeholders must operate in: “Washington and home are different milieus, different worlds. But they are not unconnected worlds....

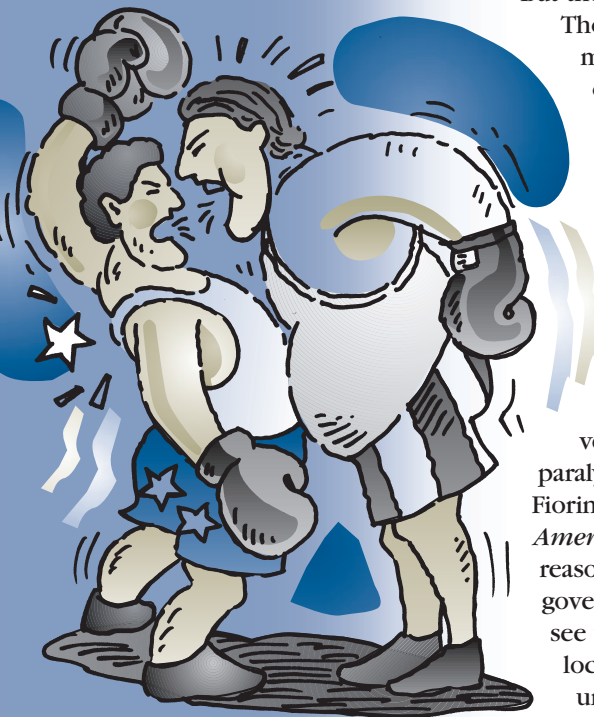
Though a Congressman may be immersed in one, he remains mindful of the other.” In essence, Fenno finds that legislators have difficulty navigating between these two different worlds. Recent changes in the makeup of legislative bodies have made this task even more difficult. More and more officeholders are expressing concern that legislatures have become so hyperpolarized that there is a hostile atmosphere which prevents cooperation, which essentially paralyzes these institutions. As Morris P. Fiorina says in *Civic Engagement in American Democracy*, “In sum, another reason people are frustrated with government is that all too often they see the participants in government locked in battle over unattractive or unrealistic alternatives. The result

is unnecessary conflict and animosity, delay and gridlock, and a public life that seems to be dominated by ‘quarrelsome blowhards.’”

Critics of Fenno’s methodology say his approach overlooks the supremacy of the electoral connection between legislators and citizens. As David Mayhew notes, the most powerful explanation of legislative behavior rests on the assumption that officeholders are interested in nothing else beyond re-election. He argues, “What justifies a focus on the re-election goal is the juxtaposition of these two aspects of it — its putative empirical primacy and its importance as an accountability link.” Supporters of this school of thought point to modern indictments against the power of incumbency and the lack of voluntary turnover of political offices, which have been the driving force for successful ballot initiatives imposing term limits on some state offices.

Our current research on this topic suggests that there is a different way to critically examine political representation in a democracy. As Richard Harwood explains, “We sometimes get stuck, because we can only imagine dependent or independent relationships, not *inter*-dependent relationships.” This would suggest that our future research strategy should focus on the newly forming critical mass of officeholders within the National Issues Forums network who have developed interdependent relationships with their constituencies. These cases demonstrate the possibilities of a more constructive relationship between officeholders and citizens. For example, Gulf Coast Community College in Panama City, Florida, now provides public space for bipartisan legislative delegations to conduct townhall forums prior to the opening session of the Florida State legislature. Likewise, the University of Hawaii has been conducting citizen forums on topics such as Money & Politics and Gambling concurrently while there is pending legislation on the same issues. Future research in this area might include a major collaborative study with the National Conference of State Legislatures that would attempt to synthesize the findings from these case studies. Another possible line of research might be to encourage more experiments that introduce public deliberation to newly elected state legislators such as the program within the Drummond Center at Erskine College.

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