

Richard F. Fenno

the challenge of
congressional
representation



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Harvard University Press
Cambridge, Massachusetts
London, England
2013

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Printed in the United States of America

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Fenno, Richard F., 1926–

The challenge of congressional representation / Richard F. Fenno.

pages cm

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-0-674-07269-5 (alk. paper)

1. United States. Congress. House. 2. Legislators—United States—Case studies.

3. Representative government and representation—United States. I. Title.

JK1319.F428 2013

328.73'0734—dc23 2012033728

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Introduction

There are numerous reasons why political scientists might be interested in the individual, as well as the collective, activities of our elected politicians. Whatever the reasons might be—theoretical or practical—our interest in their collective behavior patterns has dominated contemporary political science research. In our work on Congress, studies involving career patterns, roll call vote patterns, committee activity patterns, and partisan voting patterns—both cross-sectional and over time—have been dominant. And individual politicians have usually ended up as integers destined for burial in large data collections. Except for the occasional biographical reference, the activities of particular individuals have not become central objects of political science research.

In the constituency-centered study that follows, however, the activities of five US House members are singled out for sustained inspection, with the intention of strengthening the scholarly case for close-up representation-centered studies in American national politics. And, specifically, to jump-start that endeavor by examining the political activities of several US Representatives in their home constituencies.

Congressional Representation is a study of representation in single-member districts, with plurality-wins-all systems of vote counting. As with the author's earlier study, *Home Style*, the constituency focus and the individual level of analysis have been maintained.¹ But, in this study, the protective anonymity of the elected individuals has been eliminated—all with the express intention of encouraging further research.

As “more of the same,” this study is an indulgence. But it keeps afloat an important question for students of the United States Congress. What,

if anything, are we doing at the present time to study the subject, and the activity, of congressional representation? Have we done enough? Have we done our best? And how, in particular, might we undertake some further analysis of the constituency-centric world in which, for a good part of their careers, all members of the US House of Representatives live, work, and undergo scrutiny.

Previous studies of House members in their home territories have not, to date, generated a recognizable research effort or an active, collaborative research community among students of Congress. Political scientist John Hibbing, in a thorough and appreciative introduction to a 2004 edition of the author's *Home Style*, discusses several reasons why an "up close and personal" approach to representation remains outside of the scientific mainstream.² More recently, the same point was conveyed in the pages of *The Chronicle of Higher Education*. Next to a colorful picture of the *Home Style* cover, the book is described as "a classic study of 18 members of Congress on their home turf." To which the author of the article adds, "The book has become a minor classic—but it has not had many offspring." After which, a fellow political scientist is quoted: "Everyone cites Fenno but very few people do that kind of work. There was remarkably little follow through."³

The present study can be viewed as the author's own "follow through." It is the last in a line of one person's explorations into the local political lives of our elected members of Congress. It is driven by the hope that students of American politics might recognize an unfinished and a wide-open research agenda. And, that some of them might respond actively to one last "nudge" toward collaboration in that direction.

The House members portrayed in this study span a half-century of research. The first acquaintance was made in 1964; and the last was made in 2000. In sequence, there are research travels in five very different locations—Upstate New York, North-Central Florida, Downstate Illinois, Eastern Pennsylvania, and Northern California. Three visits were with men; two were with women. Three were Democrats; two were Republicans. Importantly, they shared a respect for scholarship. They are in no sense a statistical—or a "representative"—sample. They are flavorful vehicles through which to make an argument in support of constituency-centric research on the United States Congress.

The timing of constituency visits varied widely over the various campaign cycles. So, too, did the amount of time spent per House member, per visit. While many of the same questions were used in all five cases, no common, written questionnaire was ever prescribed for the research. Constituency variety and personal preference drove questions and conversations in hard-to-compare directions. The usefulness of these preliminary pairwise comparisons can be judged by the reader.

Representation is a large political idea and a consuming political activity. Neither the idea nor the activity is likely to disappear from our politics or from our political science agenda any day soon. Representational relationships promote—and depend on—continuous negotiation. And there will be a lot of negotiation-centered, constituency-based storytelling in the pages ahead. The hope is that storytelling will be a helpful—perhaps even a necessary—preparation for the production of some more definitive and more cooperative representation-centered studies of the United States Congress.

Constituencies, Connections, and Representation

A Research Focus

“It’s hard to tell the depth of the well by the length of the pump handle.”

(OKLAHOMA POLITICAL WISDOM)

Politics, Places, and Patterns

The United States Congress is both a representative and a legislative institution. Its members are elected individually; and they legislate collectively. By conceptualizing, packaging, and studying vote strategies and vote patterns inside Congress, political scientists have gained remarkable explanatory purchase in studying the organizing and decision-making activities of our elected representatives—when, that is, House members (and senators) calculate and act inside the legislature. At the same time, however, we have been remarkably slow to study the connecting- and support-building activities of our elected representatives when they calculate and act outside the legislature. The result is a marked inside/outside political science research mismatch.

Policy-making activity in Washington is, of course, the accepted business of Congress. On the other hand, representational activity outside of Washington is the accepted strength of Congress.

At present, however, the study of legislation tends to overshadow, or to drive out, the study of representation. The study of representation—and of representational strength—opens up for scrutiny the political world outside of Congress. It begins with ambition and ends with accountability. And it is especially inviting territory for political scientists.

The US House of Representatives is our most representative national political institution. Its members lead complicated political lives moving between Washington and their single member-constituencies. As

yet, however, political scientists have not paid much close-up attention to House member activity patterns in their home places. And certainly not in comparison to our interest in political maneuver and policy outcomes inside the legislature in Washington.

Our literature overflows with studies of legislator preference patterns, partisan governing coalitions, individual voting strategies, and substantive policy outcomes. But we do not yet have a robust constituency-centric scholarship. Given an apparent disciplinary mismatch it will be argued here that we ought to pay more close-up attention than we presently do to House member activity in their constituencies. And, in so doing, that we direct more of our research to the representational underpinnings of our national legislature.

In the 1960s and 1970s, students of American politics discovered Capitol Hill. In steadily increasing numbers we journeyed there. And we collected a treasure trove of information and ideas about the legislative activity of House members and senators in that central meeting place. Since then, we have developed numerous theoretical formulations and measurement techniques to put our years of institution-centered research to good use.

We have, for example, strengthened our working knowledge: of chamber rules, of procedural tactics, of member vote strategies, of partisan and issue-centric vote patterns, of committee and party decision-making activities, of organizational adaptations, and of shifting policy outcomes.

The result is a voluminous, fast-growing, theory-rich, statistically sophisticated, and notably cumulative body of knowledge—about legislator preference patterns, partisan governing activities, voting strategies, and substantive policy outcomes. Our discipline-wide research record—probing, explaining, debating, and theorizing about decision making inside the House and Senate—has been pathbreaking. And to our great benefit, a large proportion of it has been both collaborative and cumulative.

Viewed comparatively, however, that impressive body of work stands also as a measure of how much less data gathering, how much less analytic precision, how much less collaboration, and how much less theorizing has been devoted to the study of House member constituency connections. To the study, that is, of House member support-seeking

and support-building activities and patterns in their home places outside of Congress. In a nutshell, we know a lot more about the vote patterns of our “legislators” inside their Washington chambers than we know about the connection patterns of our “representatives” in their home constituencies.

Our analytic interests and our research capabilities in the study of legislative politics inside Congress have outpaced our interest, our work product, and our collaborative ingenuity in thinking about representational politics outside of Congress.

The elementary study that follows focuses on five members of the House of Representatives. And it examines congressional connection politics in each of their five constituencies. It can be read as one small-step effort to help redress a research imbalance. It is not an argument for any less attention to political activity on Capitol Hill. It is, instead, an argument in favor of more attention to the constituency lives and activities of our elected House members. And to the varied “home places” in which those lives are rooted.

Every member of Congress lives a separate and distinctive constituency life in a separate and distinctive congressional district. At present, however, we know a lot more about their voting patterns inside their legislature in Washington than we know about the connection patterns that carried them, and kept them, there. Hopefully, this study will begin to redress that imbalance as manifested in the House of Representatives. Hopefully, too, the study of representation will open up, for increased inspection, the political world outside of the legislature.

We know, of course, where to find members of the House when they are not in Washington. They are at home in their own single member districts. And we know what they are doing there. They are at work on their separate and distinctive playing fields—assessing and strengthening constituent support and constituent trust. Those member-constituent relationships are not “given.” Every supportive constituency “fit” is a negotiated fit.

In a diversity of places, within accepted boundaries and through a variety of channels, 435 House members are negotiating positive and sustainable connections with a diversity of constituents. It is very largely a home place negotiation. It is related to, but it is very different from, the Capitol Hill activities of organizing and legislating. On the available

scholarly evidence, House member inside vote patterns have been easier to aggregate and to analyze than House member outside connection patterns have been. And therein lies a research challenge. To date, the 435 home place connections have remained largely beyond the observations and the contemplations of the political science community.

Standing alone, our research—examining and explaining congressional politics inside the institution—has been path-breaking. Viewed comparatively, however, that same body of research stands as a measure of how much less data gathering, how much less analytic precision, how much less collaboration, and how much less theorizing have been devoted to member/constituency connections, and to member support-building patterns within their home places outside of Congress. Our analytic interest and research capabilities in the study of legislative politics inside the Congress have outstripped our interest, our work product, and our collaborative activity in analyzing representational politics outside of Congress.

The Challenge of Congressional Representation argues for increased attention to political activity in the countryside beyond. It aims to encourage more scholarly attention to the bedrock, constituency-centric strengths of the nation's most representative political institution.

On disparate home place “playing fields” and at varying distances from Washington, DC, House members can be found building and/or protecting connections with their constituents, one by one and in groups. They are working to win, strengthen, and protect constituent support and to build constituent trust.

Representing begins with the election of an ambitious politician. And it ends with the politician's accountability to the people in his or her constituency. Representing is related to—but it is very different from—organizing and legislating on Capitol Hill. Vote patterns among House members inside Congress are easier to describe, aggregate, compute, and manipulate than are House member connection patterns outside Congress.

The representational practices of our House members open up for us 435 separate research windows on 435 political worlds beyond the national legislature. “Out there” “on the ground,” in a home constituency, we can locate and match a person to a party and to a place. Indeed, we know them and we “tag” them broadly in that way: as (D-NY) or

(R-TX). Once tagged, we can then begin to describe each representative's connections and relationships in his or her home place.

"All politics is local" has long been a popular aphorism. But it has yet to stimulate a locally driven body of research on Congress. As a discipline, we have produced very little self-conscious "member-in-the-district" research, much less a comparative cross district literature. And we have yet to develop a set of guidelines—much less a metric—to help us observe, compare, and generalize across the variety of representational motivations, practices, and patterns of House members.

Representing a constituency requires work by each elected politician in identifying problems and in negotiating relationships that are attentive to, and supportive of, constituent habits, expectations, and preferences. House member negotiating activities of this sort point our scholarship toward the considerable diversity of constituency preference patterns and playing fields beyond Capitol Hill. On playing fields in different parts of the country, a considerably variety of House member activities can be observed, examined, and explained.

In sum, to our path breaking studies of House member vote decisions and vote patterns in Congress, students of American politics can usefully add studies of House member connection decisions and connection patterns in their home districts. This book suggests, by example, how such observation-based studies, when undertaken at the point of member-constituent contact, might proceed and enlighten.

A Cautionary Proviso

A member's vote inside the House is, we assume, partly a representational activity. As such, his or her vote can be—and typically is—viewed as a response to the preferences of a home constituency. We might, therefore, be tempted at the outset to draw inferences about member voting connections at home directly from our studies of member voting behavior in Washington. That would be a mistake. It would tempt us to ignore the "Oklahoma wisdom" of "the pump handle" and "the well."

Vote patterns organized and sustained inside the House cannot serve as reliable indicators of connection patterns organized and sustained outside of the House. A member's vote can be viewed as a

forward-looking effort to build or retain support in the home constituency. But, inferences about constituency preference patterns drawn indirectly from House member votes—in committee or on the House floor—are not a valid substitute for direct, in-the-constituency research. Political scientists cannot talk constructively about constituency-centered politics without some of us “going there” to observe and to inquire for ourselves. As with the “pump handle” and “the well,” there are no shortcuts.

Constituency Politics: Politicians and Playing Fields

Constituency politics is connection politics. And the logic of this study begins with connections in the constituency. To each constituency, the researcher brings House member-constituency connection questions that will help to elicit connection patterns. Our path of inquiry begins outside of the House, not the other way around. This study is in no way dependent on any prior analysis of legislative vote patterns. As argued elsewhere: “Getting connected is not simply a matter of getting elected. Negotiating a constituency fit is a different process, and it requires a separate scrutiny.”¹

The study of individual House member activities in their home districts centers on “connection politics.” Member vote patterns in Washington are matters of public knowledge and are available to anyone outside of Washington. But House member connection patterns with their constituents at home are not matters of public knowledge. Home connections, it will be argued here, cannot be inspected, known, and fully understood without some hands-on personal investigative experience in and around some specific, identifiable congressional constituencies.

For now, and to begin with, personal observation is the basic research prescription. The assumption is that representational activities observed and examined in a few home constituencies will give substance and shape to a growing research base. And that several firsthand, point-of-contact reports might persuade—or at least acclimate—other political scientists to a stronger research notion: that political connections which develop in home constituencies outside of Washington can be,

and should be, observed and examined on the home ground where they occur. And, further still, that collaborative efforts among political scientists to observe and to study such clusters of representational activity can be imagined and should be encouraged.

House member vote patterns in Washington are matters of public knowledge. They are readily available for study by anyone outside of Washington. But House member connection patterns with their constituents at home are not matters of public knowledge. The study of individual House members at work in their respective home districts centers on connection politics. And connection politics cannot be identified, inspected, and fully understood without some personal investigative experience in and around some congressional constituencies. Or, so it will be argued in the research reports to follow.

The Challenge of Congressional Representation begins with a couple of general questions about our elected members of Congress. What are they like? And what are their ambitions, their preferences, and their connections? Other questions follow naturally about the constituency from which each House member has been elected. How does each member characterize his/her home place? Or, how does each member connect with the people who live there? To pose these questions and to search for answers is very likely to expose the parlous state of political science research on congressional representation.

What, for example, do we political scientists presently know about congressional constituencies as active political places? Where would we go to find the relevant political science research? How, to date, have we gone about observing, examining, sorting, and codifying the constituency connection patterns of diverse individual representatives in their own home territories? How have we conceptualized, and where have we examined empirically, the varieties of constituency connections—either cross-sectional or over time? Where can inquiring students go, at present, to find a disciplinary overview of representation-centered, constituency-based investigations? Where can students go to find—or to develop—a sampling frame to expedite multimember, cross-constituency analysis? Where, in short, is our constituency-centered body of literature?

These baseline questions do not yet have useful answers. And for good reason. Congressional constituencies and member-constituency

relationships have yet to attract concentrated and sustained scholarly attention from students of congressional politics. From the constituency-centric viewpoint adopted here, there can be no adequate answers until more political scientists embrace the idea that home place activity matters in thinking about congressional activity. And not until students embrace the value of undertaking on-the-scene research from inside a variety of constituencies. And finally, not until a few students of constituency politics find ways of sharing, debating, and actively collaborating with one another on the subject.

The basic argument for “going there” rests on the simple assumption that place is—and places are—central to the representational side of American politics. And further, that it might be possible to describe, for every elected House member, a home place—a constituency playing field. And to describe, further still, a set of connective activities and relationships that have been developed in and around that particular home place. And finally, to convince multiple investigators to collaborate with one another in mapping, collecting, collating, and theorizing about their home place research.

In each home place, the operative question will be: How, and with what effect, does this representative connect with these sorts of people in this sort of constituency? And ultimately perhaps, how do these types of representatives connect with these types of constituents in these types of constituencies?

It is a tall order. And to the degree that scholars become interested in answering representational questions, the message of this study is that they should begin by spending more start-up time learning about congressional constituencies as distinctive playing fields. And, most important, that they should learn by going to those playing fields—to think about the ways in which, the extent to which, and with what effect each representative connects with his or her constituents. After (or during) which activity, it will be important for our discipline that scholars begin to compare and cooperate, and that they devise common, workable interview schedules that can be shared and applied to a range of connection patterns on a range of playing fields.

From a national perspective, congressional constituencies are among the most important testing and proving grounds of American political life. At present, however, they draw scholarly attention only when their