The American Congress: Modern Trends

Congress is an exciting place. Real power resides in its members, real social conflicts are tamed or exacerbated by its actions, and thousands of people, most of them good public servants, walk its halls every day. Much good work is done there. In recent years, Congress has passed widely applauded bills that have, among other things, approved new security measures for airports and funding for the war against terrorism, granted important civil rights to women, minorities, and the disabled, given parents job protection so they can care for sick children, forced states to reduce barriers to voter registration and supported reforms of voting processes, expanded funding for college students, and limited what lobbyists can give to legislators.

Congress is a frustrating place as well. It is not easy to understand. Its sheer size – 535 members and more than 25,000 employees – is bewildering. Its system of parties, committees, and procedures, built up over 200 years, is remarkably complex and serves as an obstacle to public understanding. Perhaps most frustrating is that its work product, legislation, is the product of a process marked by controversy, partisanship, and bargaining. Even some members of Congress are uncomfortable with the sharp rhetoric and wheeling and dealing that are hallmarks of legislative politics.

But Congress is also important. No other national legislature has greater power than the Congress of the United States. Its daily actions affect the lives of all Americans and many people around the world. It checks the exercise of power by the president, the courts, and the bureaucracy. If you want to understand the forces influencing your welfare, you must understand Congress.

Congress is always changing. It changes because it is a remarkably permeable institution. New problems, whatever their source, invariably create new demands on Congress. Elections bring new members, who often alter
the balance of opinion in the House and Senate. And each new president asks for support for his policy program. Members of Congress often respond to these demands by passing new legislation. But as lawmakers pursue their personal political goals, compete with one another for control over policy, and react to pressure from presidents, their constituents, and lobbyists, they sometimes seek to gain advantage or to remove impediments to action by altering the procedures and organization of Congress itself. The result is nearly continuous change within the institution.

Explaining the ongoing changes in Congress is the central focus of this text. We begin in this chapter by highlighting several developments in American politics that have changed congressional politics. These developments – including changes in the way Congress is covered by the media, evolving standards for public ethics, the rise of plebiscitary politics and new information technologies, new forms of organized efforts to influence Congress, new kinds of issues, and the war on terrorism – have altered the context of congressional policy making in basic ways.

Low Public Confidence

The popularity of Congress ebbs and flows with the public’s confidence in government generally. When the president’s ratings and trust in government improved after the tragic events of September 11, 2001, Congress’s approval ratings improved, too. Still, Congress’s performance ratings are almost always below those of the president and the Supreme Court. Its ratings are often very low. The legislative process is easy to dislike – it often generates political posturing and grandstanding, it necessarily involves compromise, and it often leaves broken promises in its trail. Also, members of Congress often appear self-serving as they pursue their political careers and represent interests and reflect values that are controversial.

Scandals, even when they involve a single member, add to the public’s frustration with Congress and have contributed to the institution’s low ratings in opinion polls. Some of the highlights are provided in the box on page 3. A consequence is that Congress is a never-ending source of comic relief, like the joke about the senator who dozed off during a roll-call vote, was jerked awake when his name was called, and reflexively yelled out, “Not guilty.” There also is the joke about the member who kept referring to the presiding officer as “Your Honor.”1 But seriously… it seems fair to say that a large majority of today’s members behave ethically. It is even reasonable to argue that today’s cohort of members is at least as ethical as any past cohort. No doubt the ethical standards applied by the public, the media,
HIGHLIGHTS OF RECENT CONGRESSIONAL SCANDALS

- In 1989, House Speaker James Wright (D-Texas) resigned after Republicans charged him with ethics violations for receiving extraordinarily large royalties on a book.
- In 1991, Senator David Durenburger (R-Minnesota) was condemned in a unanimously approved Senate resolution for a book deal and for seeking reimbursement for expenses for staying in a condo that he owned.
- The disclosure that many House members had repeatedly overdrawn their accounts at the House disbursement office led people to believe that members enjoyed special privileges.
- Questions about the propriety of campaign contributions were raised in the “Keating Five” affair, which concerned the relationship between five senators and a prominent savings-and-loan owner seeking to block an investigation of his financial dealings.
- In 1995, a long investigation of sexual harassment charges against Senator Robert Packwood (R-Oregon) led to his forced resignation from office.
- In 1995, Representative Dan Rostenkowski (D-Illinois), former chairman of the House Ways and Means Committee, was found guilty of illegally receiving cash for personal use from the House post office. He later served a prison term.
- In 1995, Representative Enid Waldholtze (R-Utah) retired after her husband was charged with felonies in conjunction with raising funds for her campaign.
- In 1997, Speaker Newt Gingrich (R-Georgia) agreed to pay $300,000 in fines based on charges that he used nonprofit organizations for political purposes and misled the House Committee on Standards of Official Conduct.
- In 1998, Representative Jay Kim (R-California) pleaded guilty to charges involving over $250,000 in illegal campaign contributions.
- In 2002, Representative James A. Traficant, Jr. (D-Ohio) was convicted of receiving bribes in exchange for helping businesses get government contracts and of engaging in a pattern of racketeering since taking office in 1985.
- In 2004, House Majority Leader Tom Delay (R-Texas) was issued letters of admonition by the House ethics committee for improperly promising to endorse the son of Representative Nick Smith (R-Michigan) in exchange for Smith’s vote on a bill and for attending a fundraising event with lobbyists for a company that was lobbying him on pending legislation.

and Congress itself are higher today than at any other time. Yet, there is no denying that the disclosures and charges of the past few years have been unusually numerous and have harmed Congress’s standing with the American people.
Congress suffers generally from low ratings, which some observers believe represents a long-term trend. Political scientist Norman Ornstein notes that changes in the electronic and print media have led to a greater emphasis on the negative and sensational side of Congress. He refers to this as the “tabloidization” of media coverage:

The drive to emulate the *National Enquirer* and the *Star* has spread to the most respectable newspapers and magazines, while network news divisions have begun to compete with tabloids like “Inside Edition” and “Hard Copy” with their own tabloid shows like “Prime Time Live” and “Dateline: NBC,” and with changed coverage on the nightly news.

Stories or rumors of scandal – both individual and institutional – have dominated news coverage of politics and politicians in recent decades more than at any time in modern history, and not just in terms of column inches or broadcast minutes but in emphasis as well:

The expansion of radio and cable television talk shows also seems to have increased the speed with which bad news about Congress is disseminated and the frequency with which bad news is repeated. On many of these programs, there is a premium on a quick wit and a good one-liner and little time for sober, balanced commentary. ²

Groups supporting term limits for Congress and other reforms probably have influenced public opinion, too. They argue that congressional incumbents are a privileged class. Incumbents, in this view, have created a system in which various benefits of office – including biased districting, free use of official resources, fundraising leverage, cozy relations with lobbyists, and so on – give them an unfair advantage that can be overcome only through radical reform. The more extreme versions of this argument suggest that incumbents have been corrupted by their experience in Washington. Incumbents are said to have developed an “inside-the-beltway” mentality – reference to the freeway that encircles the District of Columbia and its inner suburbs – or suffer from “Potomac fever” – presumably a condition brought on by proximity to the famous river.

Politicians, of course, quickly latch on to themes that resonate with the public. As a result, running for Congress by running against Congress, an old art form in American politics, has gained an even more prominent place in recent campaigns. Indeed, many recent arrivals on Capitol Hill promised to end “business as usual” in Washington and to push through reforms to “fix” Congress – to end the system of congressional perks, to stop the influence of special interests, and so on. The repetition of anti-Congress themes
contributes, no doubt, to the low ratings for Congress and its members in public opinion polls.

The public’s generally low evaluations of Congress have been observed for years. The *Gallup Poll* has regularly asked the question, “Do you approve or disapprove of the way Congress is handling its job?” Figure 1.1 shows that less than a majority of the public approves of Congress’s performance most of the time. In the last few decades, the only time Congress’s approval rating reached significantly above 50 percent was in the first few months following the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, during which anti-terrorist legislation was quickly approved.

While Congress languishes with mediocre approval ratings, individual members of Congress continue to do quite well. Typically, Gallup finds that about 70 percent of the public approves of the way its own U.S. representative is handling his or her job. Running for Congress by running against Congress works well.

**Plebiscitary Politics**

Political scientist Robert Dahl argues that Congress suffers from the increasingly plebiscitary nature of American politics. By a movement toward
plebiscitary politics, Dahl is referring to the trend toward more direct communication between the public and elected officials and the demise of intermediaries – such as parties and membership organizations – that once served to represent or express public opinion to elected officials. Directly observed, rather than mediated, public views are more important than ever – which could not be further from Madison’s aspirations for the national legislature.3

Plebiscitary politics is facilitated by new technologies. Advances in transportation allow most members of Congress to be back home in their districts or states most weekends. Public opinion polls, which allow the public’s views to be registered with legislators, have become more affordable because of advancements in telephone and computer technology. Leaders and parties sponsor focus groups to learn about nuances and shadings in public attitudes. Radio and television call-in shows enable nearly every constituent to talk directly to a member of Congress from time to time. Satellite technology allows members to communicate easily and inexpensively with groups in their home state or district from Washington.

Members of Congress, and certainly candidates for Congress, find the new information technologies irresistible and contribute to the trend. Members love to demonstrate their commitment to keeping in touch with their constituents by being among the first to use a new innovation in communications. To be sure, members face real problems reaching constituents in districts and states with ever-growing populations. The average member of the House now has about 600,000 constituents, up from about 300,000 in 1940 and 400,000 in 1960. Still, the political value of appearing to be connected to constituents drives elected officials to exploit new technologies. One Pennsylvania legislator even proposed that Congress create a bipartisan Congressional Office of Public Opinion Research and Assessment to help members gauge national opinion. The idea was not pursued.

On its face, plebiscitary politics might seem to be a good thing: It seems better to have public opinion influencing members’ decisions than to have highly paid lobbyists representing organized interests swaying their votes. But as Dahl notes, the effects of direct communication between the people and their representatives on Capitol Hill may not be so desirable. For one thing, elected officials and special interests might manipulate direct communication to their advantage. If the politicians are the ones who choose the time and place for direct communication, the process may create nothing more than a deceiving appearance of responsiveness.

More important, plebiscitary politics may undermine both representation and deliberation in legislative policy making. With respect to representation, the “public” that is likely to communicate directly to members may not be
representative of members’ larger constituencies. They will be people who are intensely interested in politics generally or in a single issue and can afford and know how to use new information technologies. If so, then members’ impressions of public opinion may be distorted by such communication.

With respect to deliberation, direct communication with more constituents could lead members to make premature public commitments on more issues and reduce their flexibility in negotiating compromises in the legislative arena. The possible result is that demagoguery and grandstanding would take precedence over resolving conflicts and solving problems. Public opinion may win out over the public interest, just what Madison sought to avoid.

Governing as Campaigning

A close cousin to the rise of plebiscitary politics is the weakening distinction between governing and campaigning. Of course, we hope that there is a strong linkage between governing and campaigning. Elected officials’ desire for reelection underpins our ability to hold them accountable. Broadly speaking, campaign promises are (and should be) related to governing, and election outcomes are (and should be) shaped by performance in office. Inevitably, then, the line between governing and campaigning becomes blurred.

In recent decades, campaigning has become more fully integrated with governing. No longer is governing done in Washington and campaigning done at home. The daily routines of members and top leaders are now geared to the demands of campaigning.

Few members retire from Congress without complaining about how much it costs to mount a campaign for reelection. Returning members may not have time to complain. In recent years, the average victor in a Senate race spent close to $7 million, and the average House victor spent over a million dollars. Many races were far more expensive. For an incumbent seeking reelection, that is an average of more than $22,000 for each week served during a six-year Senate term and almost $10,000 for each week served during a two-year House term. These sums do not include the millions spent by parties and independent groups on congressional campaigns. Competitive pressures, between incumbents and challengers and between the two parties, have produced a never-ending search for cash.

Congressional leaders have changed their ways, too. To assist their party colleagues, most party leaders spend many evenings and weekends at fundraising events. Many leaders have developed their own political action committees (leadership PACs, they have been called) to raise and distribute
Congressionally Speaking...  

Each Congress has a two-year life span. Federal law sets the date for federal elections, but the Constitution specifies the starting date for each Congress. Before 1935, congressional elections in November of an even-numbered year preceded the convening of a new Congress the following March. Since 1935, after the ratification of the Twentieth Amendment to the Constitution, a new Congress convenes on January 3 unless Congress otherwise provides by law, as it often does to avoid weekends. Each two-year Congress is given a number – the 109th Congress convened in January 2005 – and is divided into two one-year sessions. Congressional documents are often number 109-1 or 109-2 to combine the Congress and session numbers.

money. Leaders have formed public relations task forces within their parties, and the campaign committees of the congressional parties have greatly expanded their activities. Perhaps most important, congressional leaders now often use technology developed for campaigning in legislative battles. Professional consultants and pollsters help fashion legislative priorities and tactics. Opposition research – digging up dirt on your election opponent – is now conducted against congressional colleagues of the opposite party. Media campaigns are now planned for major legislative proposals, with the assistance of television advertising specialists. Money, media, and partisanship feed on each other.

New Forms of Organized Influence

The number of interest groups in Washington and the rest of the country multiplied many times over in recent decades. By one count, the number of groups increased from about 1,000 in the late 1940s to well more than 7,000 in the early 1980s. This increase is primarily a by-product of the expanding scope of the federal government’s activity – as more interests were affected by federal programs, more interests sought representation in Washington. Technological developments in transportation, information management, and communications have enabled scattered people, corporations, and even state and local governments to easily organize, raise money, and set up offices and staff in Washington. The process feeds on itself, with new groups forming to counter the influence of other recently formed groups. The result has been a tremendous increase in the demands placed on members of Congress by lobbyists from organized groups.
Not only have interest groups multiplied, they have also become more diverse. In addition to groups associated with economic interests, many of them representing new industries, “citizens’” groups sprouted in the 1960s and 1970s and continue to grow in number. These groups are often outgrowths of national movements – such as those for civil rights, women’s rights, children’s rights, the elimination of hunger, consumers’ rights, welfare rights, gay rights, environmental protection, the homeless, and so on. Many of these groups now enjoy memberships numbering in the hundreds of thousands.

Along with their increasing number and diversity, groups have become more skilled in camouflaging their true identity. For most major legislative battles, coalitions of groups and corporations form with all-American names, pool their resources to fund mass media campaigns, and often dissolve as fast as they were created. Many of the coalitions are the handiwork of entrepreneurs in law firms, consulting outfits, and public relations shops who are paid to coordinate the activity of the coalitions they spearheaded.

Campaign finance reforms in the early 1970s enabled all interest groups, including both profit and nonprofit organizations, to create political action committees and become active contributors to legislators’ election campaigns. Needless to say, campaign contributors have an edge over others in gaining the attention of legislators. More than that, the availability of money from political action committees has greatly reduced candidates’ reliance on parties for the resources critical to winning elections. In the last decade, unregulated contributions – called soft money – to parties and other political entities exceeded direct, regulated contributions to candidates. Soft money contributions to parties have been banned, but money has flooded into independent groups, many with strong partisan connections, that have mounted large media campaigns for and against candidates for office.

The roots have been taken out of grassroots lobbying. New technologies provide the ability to make highly targeted, highly efficient appeals to stimulate constituency demands on Washington. By the late 1980s, computerized telephone messages allowed groups to communicate with many thousands of people within a few hours. Technology now allows a group to telephone its own members, a targeted group (such as one House member’s constituency), or the general public; briefly interview the respondents about their views on a subject; and, for respondents who favor the group’s position, provide a few more facts to reinforce their views, solicit them to write letters to members of Congress, and quickly transfer the calls to the appropriate Capitol Hill offices before the respondents hang up. Several groups have developed television programs – some shown on the many cable television...
channels that are available in most communities – as a way of reaching specific audiences. Lobbyists are already planning ways to take advantage of electronic mail and interactive video technologies to flood Congress with constituents’ messages. As a result, for a group with money, the absence of a large membership is not much of an obstacle to generating public pressure on members of Congress.

New Issues

New issues – such as the war against terrorism – always present some difficulty for Congress. They often create problems for congressional committees, whose official jurisdictions were defined years earlier when the new issues were not anticipated. Committees scramble to assert jurisdiction, and committee leaders or the parent chambers are asked to referee. After some amount of infighting and delay, committees eventually manage to adjust. In the view of some observers, however, new issues are surfacing at an increasing rate of speed, and Congress’s ability to adjust in a timely way is becoming more and more strained.

Beyond the velocity with which issues now appear, it is also fair to say that the issues facing Congress are becoming more technical and complex. Increasingly, expertise in science, engineering, economics, or other fields is required to understand policy problems and alternatives. Congress often solves this problem by setting broad policy goals and delegating the power to make the necessary technical decisions to experts in the executive branch.6 In this way, Congress is able to respond to demands for action – but it does so at the cost of enhancing the executive branch’s power over the details of public policy. At other times, Congress seeks to legislate the technical details, but the cost then is that only a few members and staff assistants can understand the legislation and participate effectively in making important decisions. Scientific and medical research, defense programs, environmental protection, the regulation of financial institutions, international trade, and many other fields of public policy are no longer within the common experiences of elected officials. Thus, most members must look to competing interpretations of proposed legislation offered by staff specialists, lobbyists, and a wide array of outside experts.

The new policy challenges result from an increasingly complex American society coupled with the integration of international and domestic economies. Fewer major policies can be debated in isolation from other major policies. Health care reform, for example, concerns employer-employee relations, economic growth, welfare reform, and tax policy, among other things. This complexity leads Congress to craft unwieldy bills, often written by