Abortion Politics in Congress

This book examines how legislators have juggled their passions over abortion with standard congressional procedures, looking at how both external factors (such as public opinion) and internal factors (such as the ideological composition of committees and party systems) shape the development of abortion policy. Driven by both theoretical and empirical concerns, Scott H. Ainsworth and Thad E. Hall present a simple, formal model of strategic incrementalism, illustrating that legislators often have incentives to alter policy incrementally. They then examine the sponsorship of abortion-related proposals as well as their committee referral and find that a wide range of Democratic and Republican legislators repeatedly offer abortion-related proposals designed to alter abortion policy incrementally. Abortion Politics in Congress reveals that abortion debates have permeated a wide range of issues and that a wide range of legislators and a large number of committees address abortion.

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Abortion Politics in Congress

Strategic Incrementalism and Policy Change

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Virtually year after year, the U.S. Congress remains the least trusted of American political institutions, and virtually year after year abortion remains one of the most complicated and volatile of issues in American politics. How does a mistrusted institution filled with electorally minded legislators handle such a volatile issue as abortion? The primary question driving our research efforts has been: “Why would legislators pursue the abortion issue given that it is so volatile?” Why isn’t abortion another third rail issue that legislators avoid at all costs? Legislators presumably gain some votes by pursuing certain legislative proposals, but abortion policy carries considerable risks because of its divisiveness.

One might also reasonably ask why scholars would explore such a volatile issue. For scholars, there are many other safer issues to explore. Writing about such a divisive issue that touches on personal politics is difficult. A lack of subtlety or poor wording when exploring some well-traveled issue is not so dangerous. However, writing about abortion, war, gun control, immigration, or some other volatile issue might raise eyebrows in one’s family, one’s circle of friends, and even among one’s professional colleagues. Why should scholars pursue topics that might make them stand out in an unpopular way? Although abortion is worthy of independent study, we strongly believe that by exploring abortion policy making we can understand the workings of Congress and the strategic reasoning of legislators better. As much as we focus on abortion and abortion policy making, we also focus on the U.S. House of Representatives and its members.

John Lapinski (2008, 235) laments that “Congress scholars have focused nearly all of their intellectual energy into studies of rules, procedures, and
institutions, leaving the study of policy outputs, particularly the study of specific policy issues, to other subfields.” Lapinski argues that congressional scholars need to explore policy. We would go one step further – congressional scholars need to explore the most politically charged issues of the day. Charles E. Merriam, an early president of the American Political Science Association, wrote that it was essential for the health and growth of the political science discipline that scholars study politically charged issues. Merriam (1921, 177) noted, “in many instances the counsels of professional students of politics ... would be divided ... but in many other instances they would be united.” Indeed, if we continually eschew the most politically charged topics, we highlight the weaknesses within our discipline. Merriam (1921, 177) wrote, “if professional students of politics cannot come together to discuss ... the fundamentals of political [understandings] ... should not that circumstance itself cause sober reflection ... might it not suggest [the] remodeling and reorganization of ... methods.” When scholars ignore the most volatile issues of the day, those issues are not ignored – they are defined and discussed by everyone and anyone save scholars. If our methods are valuable, they should be widely applicable, and we should not let lamentations about policy crowd out careful social science research.

We have spent many more years on this project than either of us imagined. Over those years, many friends and colleagues have helped us find our way. So many folks have helped us over the years that we are bound to overlook the assistance of some. For that, we apologize. We should also note that all errors in fact or interpretation are our own. Collecting data on abortion-related proposals over a three-decade period is daunting. Janna Dietz, Wendy Gross, Jessica Taverna, and Austin Clemens provided invaluable assistance with those data collection efforts. Janna Dietz, associate professor at Western Illinois University (and graduate school colleague with Thad), was also very helpful early on in helping us identify important issues associated with the abortion debate.

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