Observations on *Congress: The Electoral Connection* A Quarter Century After Writing It

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Twenty-five years after writing *Congress: The Electoral Connection*, what are my thoughts about it? Here are five observations of various kinds that I hope might be interesting. The first two belong under the heading, "What kind of work is it?" The last three address the question, "How have I come to think of the book in light of events and scholarship of the last quarter-century?"

What Kind of Work Is It?

First, the book is a theoretical work that obviously "goes too far." It is a caricature. I knew that at the time, and I planned the book that way on the assumption that pushing a simple argument to its limits can have explanatory utility. I realized in 1974, as I do now, that political reality is very complicated, that no one kind of move can explain everything, and that moves other than this one pointing to an electoral incentive can also have considerable utility. In fact, I have been trying to make another kind of move now in my current work (Mayhew 2000). But in the mid-1970s I was taken by the idea of using the electoral incentive as an explanatory lever. *The Electoral Connection* had a clear origin. One day I was preparing to teach Anthony Downs's *An Economic Theory of Democracy* (1957) in a graduate seminar, and I toyed with the idea of relaxing Downs's assumption of point-source parties so as to accommodate the sorts of electoral incentives impinging on individual members of Congress. That led on the spot to the distinction I draw in *The Electoral Connection* between "credit claiming" and "position taking"—a complication of Downs, but still a caricature.

Second, I derived the book empirically as well as theoretically. Absent my experience as an APSA Congressional Fellow in 1967–68, there is not the slightest chance I would have conceived or written *The Electoral Connection*. Before that year, I knew the relevant literature but I did not know the congressional context or possess the confidence to write about it. The book is largely a sketch of what I thought I saw on Capitol Hill. In general, I believe that seeing is a good preface or accompaniment to theorizing.

How Do I Think of It Now?

Third, to switch to post-1974 developments, the book's idea of credit claiming has gotten a considerable workout, but I have been disappointed by the reception of position taking in the academic community. My writing on this point may have been unclear or confused, and I have not tried to improve on it since, but I remain convinced that politicians often get rewarded for taking positions rather than achieving effects. This happens a great deal. One key result is that popular, as opposed to scientific, concepts of cause and effect often become embodied in lawmaking processes and laws. It may look good back home to favor "gun control" or "saving social security," even though laws bearing those labels might not amount to much according to strict standards of instrumental rationality. Congress is not a research bureau, and as long as electoral incentives keep impinging on individual members it is not likely to come to resemble one. In regard to position taking, note also how that impulse limits the degree to which members of Congress are likely to engage in strategic behavior in roll-call voting. A member needs to take defensible positions all the time, not just on a bill's final passage. This is an idea I have not seen expressed very often. In general, my guess is that position taking has not been examined much since 1974 because its importance exceeds its modelability: It is tough to address.

Fourth, *The Electoral Connection* is often simplified to say that members are induced to cater directly to their home-district voters by way of pork-barrel projects, pleasing positions, et cetera. But I presented a somewhat different argument: "What a congressman has to do is to insure that in primary and general elections the

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resource balance (with all other deployed resources finally translated into votes) favors himself rather than somebody else" (Mayhew 1974, 43). That entails catering to "relevant political actors," defined as "anyone who has a resource that might be used in the election in question. At the ballot box the only usable resources are votes, but there are resources that can be translated into votes: money, the ability to make persuasive endorsements, organizational skills, and so on" (39). This is not a minor distinction. For example, if I were crafting *The Electoral Connection* today, I would probably make more out of members' campaign finance networks as collections of "relevant political actors." That would be true to the 1974 definitional language. Today, a member may need to cater to a cross-country finance constituency in order to keep scoring with a home-district voter constituency. Southern Democrats running for the Senate, for example, seem to need to raise money in Hollywood. It is a dual-constituency pattern. Also on the campaign finance front, an incumbent may stock up enough campaign money to scare off strong challengers; that is a perfect instance of acting so as to influence "relevant political actors," even if home-district voters know nothing about it.

Fifth, let me admit that if I were writing *The Electoral Connection* today I would back off from claiming that "no theoretical treatment of the United States Congress that posits parties as analytic units will go very far" (27). From the perspective of 2000, it is easy to see that the congressional parties bottomed out in importance around 1970, and that they have grown considerably more important in various ways since that time. That much is clear. Still, I have not seen any evidence that today's congressional party leaders "whip" or "pressure" their members more often or effectively than did their predecessors 30 years ago. Instead, today's pattern of high roll-call loyalty seems to owe to a post-1960s increase in each party's "natural" ideological homogeneity across its universe of home constituencies. Also, even in an era of stronger party leadership and high party loyalty, there are limits. A key finding of recent research is that members of a House majority party can profit individually in the next election through what might be called "centrist defecting"—that is, by voting with the minority party on roll calls where their own party's stance is risky back home. Possibly we all knew this, but I had not seen the effect measured in sophisticated fashion until recently. The phenomenon has been observed on roll calls on showdown budgetary questions in general during the 1980s and 1990s (Jacobson and Bovitz 1998, 20–22), on the Democratic party's 1993 budget, NAFTA, and crime measures during 1993–94 (Jacobson 1996, 218–21), and on the Republicans' Contract with America in 1995 (Ferejohn 1998, 64–67).

This being the case, what do members actually do? "Loyalty is evidently calculated; the general rule seems to be that, when the pulls of party and constituency conflict, go with the party only if the expected electoral penalty will not significantly increase your chances of losing your seat" (Jacobson and Bovitz 1998, 21). To be sure, it is arguably not in line with *The Electoral Connection* for members to stick with their party on vote-losing enterprises, as many of them often do. This behavior arguably amounts to "shirking" (although the allegedly intense preferences of a party's activist core ordinarily intrude into an argument like this one at this point). Yet, from the standpoint of parties as analytic units, note that the findings cited above point to a powerful engine of dissension and defection. There are many facts to match. In the 1990s, expected member gains from centrist defecting probably figured in the Democrats' inability to field House floor majorities for their healthcare reform and crime measures in 1994 (no roll calls at all took place on the first of these items) and the House Republicans losing out to cross-party floor coalitions on, for example, campaign finance reform and HMO reform in subsequent Congresses. The member-centered electoral drive seems to be alive and well on Capitol Hill.

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