

Concluding Observations

Thanks for all those comments, or at least most of them! I will touch on a few of the points briefly, then close with two observations.

Yes, parties would need to be handled differently in an updated *Electoral Connection*—possibly as devices for “bundling” individual members’ electoral drives to meet the challenges of today’s electoral environment. John Aldrich portrays parties in such a way. Yes, nineteenth-century careers were different, but I wouldn’t want to give up on an electoral incentive back then. Many politicians—consider Abraham Lincoln—did pursue lifetime careers in electoral politics, even if not consecutively in Congress. Performance during a stint on Capitol Hill could bear on what might happen in a politician’s future elections for various offices. Yes, the book doesn’t begin to deal adequately with changes in Congress’s party or leadership structure over time, except perhaps to allow that “reform” is always available as an option. Larry Dodd’s work pursues that subject. No, I do not have any trouble imagining

that many people would like to be members of Congress, period—regardless of downstream rewards having to do with power or policy. There is such a thing as status. Many people

might kill for a U.S. Senate seat. Yes, the “institutional maintenance” part of *The Electoral Connection* might be its weakest part. Also, I liked Alan Abramowitz’s point about “zero-sum” contestation, which is certainly more abundant on Capitol Hill than it used to be as formal party control has come into question.

Beyond pork-barreling, why do members of Congress take an interest in policy at all? My answer is Downs’s, discounted by the fact that in a multimember legislature the credit-claiming and position-taking impulses both carry the weight and shape the result. That is the thrust of my argument in Part II of the book. (Those impulses both do carry weight—for example, in an instance where Ralph Nader or the Heritage Foundation follows a committee process closely and tells a sizable public which members deserve to claim credit for what; or in an instance where all one hundred senators face the C-SPAN cameras in a roll-call budget showdown.) Yes, R. Douglas Arnold has presented a creative “traceability” connection between

policymaking and electoral accountability. I wish I had thought of it.

On another point, I am surprised to hear that my position-taking idea has had a “subtle and insidious impact”—not least because I hadn’t been aware of much impact at all. Again, I probably miscrafted the argument, but consider President Clinton’s Saturday morning radio addresses. What are we to think of them? Wasn’t the payment chiefly for positions rather than effects? Who could keep track of whether promises, ongoing actions, or achievements were at issue? Who will ever know? As an electoral matter, has it made much difference? One of Clinton’s accomplishments was to fine-tune a position-taking apparatus at the White House level.

At a conceptual level, I do not think that we can escape the idea of electoral payment for positions rather than effects—even though some of that concept’s empirical manifestations are, most of us would probably agree, unedifying and others are quite edifying. Finally, it is the public’s tough job to figure out whether legislators’ positions make sense or are backed up by action. As I argue in *The Electoral Connection*, it probably takes an electorate of considerable sophistication—one that is reasonably attentive and has a pretty good grasp of instrumental rationality—to sustain an assembly rooted in individual-member electoral incentives. Otherwise, people can end up continually conned and aim for a dictator or some other solution.

The first observation: For most or all the above commentators, *The Electoral Connection* leaves Capitol Hill activity somehow or other underexplained. Where are the party leaders and their exertions? Where are the policy wonks? Where are the institutional maintainers? Is it really true that a “Don’t volunteer” attitude invests all members? What about Newt Gingrich as progenitor of the Contract with America in 1995 or Henry Hyde as progenitor of impeachment in 1998? I have a stock answer: The book is spare and not geared to illuminating everything—certainly not everything in detail. That having been said, I am unhappy myself with the underillumination, and I have been trying to make up for it recently in a different sort of writing enterprise that centers on member “actions” rather than on member “incentives.”

Finally, let me react to Patricia Hurley’s comment that *The Electoral Connection* “may easily be read as an indictment of

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electorally- or constituency-motivated behavior,” and that “the normative implications of a critique of Congress that faults the institution for being too representative [by which she means too democratic?] are disturbing.” This is discerning and well-said. Indeed, the book can be read that way, but I hope it is not. As with markets, to argue that electoral accountability has downsides is not to argue or imply that anything has been found that is better. James Madison adopted a similar stance toward the House

of Representatives in *The Federalist*: That body needs to be honored for its electoral accountability but also worried about and hemmed in by other institutions partly because its very accountability can cause problems. In the case of representative assemblies, it is also true that party-centered bodies like the British House of Commons may be preferred to individual-centered ones like the U.S. Congress, but I am not attracted to that argument.