The Future of Congress

Introduction

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At a roundtable at the American Political Science Association annual meeting in September 2009, congressional scholars took on a challenge uncommon to the discipline: scenario planning. As chair of the roundtable "Congress and the 21st Century: Future Challenges and Development," I asked each participant to identify factors to take into account if one were to project what Congress would look like as an institution in 2030. I am pleased to introduce the following articles that resulted from this effort. The authors are Frances E. Lee, University of Maryland; Matthew N. Green, Catholic University of America, with coauthor Daniel Burns; Kathryn Pearson, University of Minnesota; and Colleen J. Shogan, Congressional Research Service.[1]

It behooves those who serve and study the Congress not only to observe the changes in the institution's operations and functions, but to anticipate the future trajectory of those developments. The Congressional Research Service (CRS) undertook such an exercise in 1996 and identified six trends that continue to result in significant changes in congressional legislative needs. Many of these six trends are echoed in my colleagues' articles.

The first trend we identified in 1996 was that more and more issues traditionally addressed in the authorizing process were being addressed in the appropriations process, and as a result CRS had to revitalize its efforts on issues taken up in appropriations bills. We have seen that trend in a number of instances in the past decade, and it seems like the only major legislation passing both chambers in selected sessions has been funding measures.

The second development we identified was increased partisanship, which many would argue has continued at an accelerated pace. In response, the CRS reinforced its statutory obligation to adhere strictly to policies of nonpartisanship and objectivity. In their articles, Green and Lee address the consequences of heightened partisanship today and in the future.

A third trend is the high turnover of members and congressional staffs, which prompted CRS to reinvigorate initiatives to support newly elected members and their staffs as they assumed their duties, as well as returning members and staff as they took on new committee assignments. High turnover continues, and in her article, Pearson addresses the implications of a rapidly changing demographic profile for the Congress.

In 1996 we also observed the devolution of federal responsibility to the states. At that time it was expected (and it did happen) that Congress would shift responsibility for many programs from the federal government to the state level. CRS responded by addressing the challenges in the systematic categorizing, collecting, and maintaining of state data. The devolution of federal responsibilities may be reversing. However, Congress will be addressing the policy legacies of this past trend, which include the current debate about the impact of health-care reform on the states and the upcoming reauthorization of Temporary Assistance to Needy Families.

The fifth development is decreasing resources. CRS focused on the decline in resources for legislative-branch agencies by examining existing processes and eliminating lower-priority activities. In her article, Lee notes that this trend has resulted in a decrease in policy expertise as committee staffs have declined and an increase in political-communication expertise as leadership staffs have increased. Lee notes the adverse effects of Congress's perceived decline in institutional substantive knowledge relative to that in the executive branch.

The final trend CRS identified in 1996 remains front and center today: the impact of technology. In 1996, CRS was systematically examining digitization, the Internet, changes in information-seeking behavior, data storage and manipulation, and congressional communication. In her article, Shogan describes how new communication technologies, such as e-mail and social networking tools, have affected how Congress operates as an institution. She observes that perhaps the most significant change may be in how members engage their constituencies and the public.

Two of the scholars focus on institutional trends in the House and in the Senate that may have a significant impact on what the Congress of 2030 will look like. "What Might Bring Regular Order Back to the House?" by Green and Burns underscores the importance of regular order for maximizing the participation of all legislators. The authors identify prerequisites for regular order to be established in the future: (1) a decline in party polarization, (2) a shift in the norms of individual conduct and expectations of party behavior, and (3) new initiative from within Congress to change existing rules and practices.

Lee, in "Senate Deliberations and the Future of Congressional Power," writes that if the Senate's internal deliberative processes continue in their current trajectory, they will not only affect the Senate's internal power structure but will

potentially have negative consequences for the balance of power between the executive and legislative branches of government.

Shogan and Pearson examine two reliable indicators of future developments: technology and demography. In her article "Blackberries, Tweets, and YouTube: Technology and the Future of Communicating with Congress," Shogan observes that throughout Congress's history, new technologies have transformed the institution's operations and communications. With e-mail and social networking tools, she writes, the lawmaking body is reinventing the ways it communicates with each other and engages the public. Shogan identifies certain social networking technologies as potential change agents in congressional and constituent communications.

The population of the United States is changing in significant ways: it's becoming larger and older, with greater racial and ethnic diversity. In "Demographic Change and the Future of Congress," Pearson demonstrates that demographic change has significant implications for the representational role, the legislative agenda, party alignments, and diversity of the chambers. She notes that the projected congressional district population will be 710,000 by 2020 and 920,000 by 2039. Surely this growth will be consequential to the representative whose office was constitutionally designed for a population of 30,000.

As one who serves the Congress, I am grateful that my fellow political scientists were willing to step out of the discipline's traditional comfort zone and speculate on the future of this beloved institution. Green and Burns and Lee address the long-range functioning of the Congress from the perspective of the chambers' capacity to manage a complex range of policy problems—noting the importance of regular order in the House's capacity to represent and aggregate diverse interests and the critical capacity of the Senate to reach decisions. While they express concern that majority domination in the House may not allow adequate public debate, they express equal concern that the Senate's deference to the *fait accompli* of a 60-vote majority may enable the minority to diminish the Senate's overall ability to govern.

The Pearson and Shogan articles address more specifically what the future may hold. While technology may offer the means to reach many more constituents, technology may also alter the notion of representation as members exploit social networks to foster national followings (and campaign support) outside district boundaries. The demographics of an older nation—with almost one in five persons 65 and older—are likely to have a significant impact on congressional agenda setting, as is the fact that over the next two decades, the U.S. population is projected to grow from 307 million to nearly 374 million. The sheer magnitude and diversity of the citizenry to be governed is a growing challenge for the House and Senate. It is my hope that the discipline of political science will continue examining ways to ensure that our representative institutions are up to the future challenge. ∎

NOTES

1. Two of the original participants are not included here: one colleague, John Hibbing, felt that his earlier comments on the future look of Congress had already been published in an editorial in The Hill, January 20, 1999. Another colleague, Tom Mann, although quite helpful in the initial planning of the roundtable, could not participate due to the need to undergo major surgery, from which, thankfully, he continues to recover with his characteristic good humor and focused energy.

SYMPOSIUM AUTHORS

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Frances E. Lee *is associate professor of government and politics at the University of Maryland, College Park. Her interests focus on American governing institutions, especially the U.S. Congress. She is author of* Beyond Ideology: Politics, Principles and Partisanship in the U.S. Senate *and coauthor of* Sizing Up the Senate: The Unequal Consequences of Equal Representation. *Her research has also appeared in the* American Political Science Review, American Journal of Political Science, Journal of Politics, *and* Legislative Studies Quarterly. *She can be reached at Flee@gvpt.umd.edu.*

Daniel P. Mulhollan *has been director of the Congressional Research Service since 1994. He has published in a number of journals on the organization and processes of Congress. As a member of the American Political Science Association, he has served on the association's Centennial Campaign Executive Committee.*

Kathryn Pearson *is an assistant professor of political science at the University of Minnesota. She received her Ph.D. in political science from the University of California, Berkeley in 2005. Her research has appeared in* The Journal of Politics, Legislative Studies Quarterly, Perspectives on Politics, *and in several edited volumes. Her current research focuses on parties in the U.S. Congress in the contemporary era and from the 1930s to 1970s, and gender dynamics in Congress and congressional elections.*

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