

Article: “What I Wish Political Scientists Would Teach about Congress”
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What I Wish Political Scientists Would Teach about Congress

I am delighted to be here for the American Political Science Association Annual Meeting and honored to deliver this year's Pi Sigma Alpha lecture.

Over the years, I benefitted greatly from the contributions of many APSA Congressional Fellows that worked in my office. They were very valuable to me, and are very valuable to the Congress as a whole. I know many of my former colleagues in Congress share my great appreciation for the talent, skill, and motivation that APSA congressional fellows bring to Capitol Hill. I am grateful to APSA for sponsoring the program and I am grateful to the men and women who have served as fellows and made the program a remarkable success.

by
Lee Hamilton,
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 Scholars

My purpose this afternoon is to offer some thoughts on the role that you, as political scientists, can play in improving public understanding of the U.S. Congress.

I do not know what each of you teaches about the Congress, but I do know--on the basis of several thousand public meetings over three decades--that the lack of public understanding about the institution is huge.

That lack of understanding among ordinary Americans concerns me deeply because it increases the public's suspicions and cynicism about the Congress, weakens the relationship between voters and their representatives, makes it harder for public officials to govern, and prevents our representative democracy from working the way it should.

May I suggest that you have a unique responsibility and opportunity to help combat this misunderstanding of Congress because of your roles as teachers



Lee Hamilton, 2000 Pi Sigma Alpha Lecturer.

and leading analysts of the institution across the country.

I believe you can improve public understanding of Congress by teaching several basic, and rather simple, lessons about this sometimes puzzling institution.

My concern here is not with *your* understanding of the Congress. In my experience, political scientists understand the institution very well. And I know that many of you are excellent teachers who teach many of the things that I will recommend and much more.

The point I want to make is that you, as much as anyone, have the power to influence the way Americans view our political system. That is not an influence you, or anyone else, should take lightly, because the way Americans look at politics shapes the capacity of our government to meet the needs of the country.

If Americans leave high school and college with a solid understanding of Congress, they will be better able to contribute to our nation's political life and will help make our representative democracy work better.

Ten Things to Teach about Congress

So, here are several basic lessons about Congress that I would like you to teach.

1. Congress Is the Most Important Link Between the American People and Their National Government

First, I'd like you to teach that Congress is the most important link between the American people and their national government.

Many Americans have little appreciation for the basic function of Congress in our political system. I want you to help them understand that Congress is the institution whose job it is to seek consensus out of the many and diverse views of the American people. I want you to explain that Congress performs the extraordinary task of legislating and overseeing the government in the interest of more than 275 million Americans.

For all its deficiencies--which I will get to later--Congress has three great strengths.

Representative

Congress is, by far, the most representative institution in the United States. We live in a complicated country of vast size and remarkable diversity. Our people are many, they're spread far and wide, and they represent a great variety of beliefs, religions, and ethnicities. It isn't easy for such a country to live together peacefully and productively. Although Congress does not perfectly mirror the demographics of the American people, it does help bind us together by representing the country's great diversity.

Accessible

Congress is also accessible--much more so than any other part of the federal government. Congress is the primary "listening post" of the people. If an ordinary American has a complaint or suggestion about the

government, he cannot reach the president, or the vice president, or a cabinet secretary, or even a deputy assistant secretary. He can reach his representative or senator.

Deliberative

And Congress is our nation's chief deliberative body. It is the place where the many views and interests of the American people on all manner of subjects get thrashed out. It remains the central forum for vigorous public debate, consensus building, and decision making on the most important issues of the day.

2. Congress Has a Major Impact on People's Everyday Lives

Second, I'd like you to explain that Congress has a major impact on people's everyday lives.

Many Americans believe Congress accomplishes little and is simply irrelevant to their daily lives. I'd like you to help correct that misperception.

While Congress is no longer the most powerful institution in the national government--as it was at the beginning of the nineteenth century--it is still an important shaper of national life.

Not long before I left Congress, a group of constituents visiting my Indiana office told me that Congress was irrelevant. So I asked them a few questions. How had they gotten to my office? On the interstate highway, they said. Had any of them gone to the local university? Yes, they said, admitting they'd got some help from federal student loans. Did any of them have grandparents on Social Security and Medicare? Well sure, they replied, picking up on where I was headed. Their lives had been profoundly affected by Congress. They just hadn't focused on all of the connections before.

Americans pay more attention to Congress as they understand the impact congressional decisions have on the fabric of their lives. When Congress funds basic research in science, it's helping create the future cures for deadly diseases. When it raises the minimum wage, it's enabling people to rise out of poverty. When it protects national parks, it's preserving our natural heritage.

I want Americans--I want your students--to appreciate that nearly every aspect of their lives is touched by the decisions of Congress.

It's remarkable how quickly we forget that Congress has been involved in some big things in recent years:

- Erasing the federal deficit.
- Overhauling the welfare and public housing systems.
- Rewriting telecommunications laws.
- Approving billions to improve roads and bridges.
- Liberalizing international trade.

Although we may not all like what Congress did on each of these issues, after debating policy options and gauging public sentiment, it acted.

I'm amazed every year by the headlines that come out, especially in the summer, saying that Congress is drifting, or deadlocked, or dysfunctional, or dead in the water. This talk of a "do nothing" Congress is almost always misleading and off the mark.

Even when Congress is not producing blockbuster bills, members are typically working on scores of other, less-publicized matters that sustain and improve the quality of life here and abroad. Every year, Congress passes appropriations bills that fund hundreds of billions of dollars worth of important federal programs. It also spends time overseeing those programs and laying the groundwork for future action on matters that take more than one Congress to resolve. The Clean Air Act and Immigration Reform Act, for instance, took multiple Congresses to complete due to their inherent complexity.

The pundits like to judge Congress midstream, during the middle of a session or when it is struggling to reach consensus on an issue. These judgments are usually premature. If we look at the record of Congress at the end of a session, we will usually find that it has accomplished more than we might have expected, and a lot more than was predicted by the pundits in August.

3. Congress Was Not Designed to Move Quickly and Efficiently

Third, I'd like you to emphasize that Congress was not designed to move quickly and efficiently.

One of the most common complaints about Congress is that its members are

always arguing and bickering. I must have heard the complaint a hundred times: "Why can't you guys ever agree?" This perception is a major factor in the public's lack of confidence in the institution.

Why is it so difficult for Congress to reach agreement? Part of the answer involves politics. The struggle for partisan or personal advantage, particularly in an election year, can stall the work of Congress substantially.

But there is much more to it than that. Our system of government was intentionally set up with many checks and balances to prevent hasty action. Legislative dispute and delay, while frustrating, are not necessarily signs of democracy in decay.

The task of achieving consensus is made especially difficult today because the issues before Congress are so numerous, complex, and technical, and they come at members with staggering rapidity.

In the *Federalist Papers*, Madison wrote that a member of Congress must understand just three issues: commerce, taxation, and the militia. To a member today, that observation is a bit quaint, to say the least.

List the 10 most difficult issues facing our country and you can be sure that Congress will take each of them up in some form over the coming year.

New, complex issues are constantly being added to the congressional docket. A few years ago, I sat down with the Speaker of the House to discuss what bills should be placed on the House calendar in the closing days of the session. The Speaker noted that most of the

Good politicians must know how to listen in order to find out what people want. . . be able to build support for their ideas with colleagues, constituents, and key individuals . . . search for common ground across parties and among people with diverse interests . . . and be able to compromise while preserving core beliefs.



issues we were discussing would not even have been on the agenda 15 years earlier.

Many Americans think that reasonable people agree on the solutions to major national problems, and they see no good reason for Congress not to implement such a consensus. Yet, the truth is there is far less consensus in the country than is often thought. Survey after survey shows that Americans don't even agree on what are the most important issues facing the country, let alone the best way to solve them.

People misunderstand Congress' role if they demand that Congress be a model of efficiency and quick action. Congress can work quickly if a broad consensus exists in the country. But such a consensus is rare--especially on the tough issues at the forefront of public life today. Usually, Congress must build a consensus. It cannot simply impose one on the American people.

The quest for consensus can be painfully slow, and even exasperating, but it is the only way to resolve disputes peacefully and produce policies that reflect the varied perspectives of our diverse citizenry.

4. The Legislative Process Is Dynamic and Complex

Fourth, I'd like you to highlight the great dynamism and complexity of the legislative process.

When I visit with students in American government classes, I make a point of flipping through their textbooks to see the diagram illustrating "How a Bill Becomes a Law." The diagram usually explains that a piece of legislation, once introduced, moves through subcommittee and committee, then to the House and Senate floors, then to a House-Senate conference, and finally to the president for his signature or veto.

In a technical sense, of course, these diagrams are generally accurate. But my reaction to them is: "How boring! How sterile!" They fail to convey the challenge,



Cynicism is the great enemy of democracy. It is very difficult for public officials to govern when their character, values, and motives are always suspect.

the hard work, the excitement, the obstacles to overcome, the political pressures, the defeats suffered, and the victories achieved to enact legislation. They give a woefully incomplete picture of how complicated and untidy the legislative process can be, and they barely hint at the clash of interests and the multitude of difficult things a member must do to shepherd an idea into law.

One of the most important and time-consuming aspects of the legislative process is conversation: the scores, even hundreds, of one-on-one talks that a skillful member will have with col-

leagues to make the case for a particular bill, to learn what arguments opponents will use to try to block it, and to get a sense of what adjustments might be needed to move it along.

These conversations end up posing difficult dilemmas to a member pushing a bill. For instance, should the member alter the proposal to broaden its appeal, or keep the bill as it is and hope to defeat the opposition?

How should the member use the media to rally public support behind the measure, put pressure on opponents, and advance the legislation? Making news is now a key part of making law.

The increased size and scope of individual bills today makes the legislative process still more complicated. Almost half of the major bills are referred to more than one committee in each chamber. Ad hoc caucuses are sometimes created to address new concerns. As the number of actors involved proliferates, the possibilities for conflict over a bill increase.

All of this adds up to a process that is extremely dynamic, unpredictable, and messy. There are ways for astute members to get around nearly every stage in the traditional model of the process.

As chair of the House Foreign Affairs Committee, I was sometimes surprised to see a bill that I had submitted to the Rules Committee returned to me with many

provisions I had never seen before, because the House leadership, or someone else, had intervened to alter it. That same bill might then be altered further before it moved to the floor.

Even for members, it can be difficult to know when and where the key decisions on a bill will be made.

5. The Country Needs More Politicians

Fifth, I'd like you to teach that what this country needs is more, not fewer, politicians.

Members of Congress are, first and foremost, politicians. Their number one objective is to get reelected. Yet, the art of politics does not often get high praise these days. When the federal government was almost shut down a few years back, that was considered "politics." When Washington, DC, was consumed by the impeachment of President Clinton, and the rest of the people's business had to take a back seat, that was attributed to "politics."

Showing skill as a "politician" has come to mean demonstrating the ability to raise campaign funds, to engage in the tit-for-tat exchange of negative advertising, to fudge your positions, or to jockey for public support based on polls and focus groups.

But the fact is that good politicians are vital to the success of our representative democracy. When I say "politician," I mean someone who knows how to practice the art of politics.

This art involves an assortment of important, but often underappreciated, skills. Good politicians must know how to listen in order to find out what people want. They must be able to build support for their ideas with colleagues, constituents, and key individuals. They must search for common ground across parties and among people with diverse interests. They must be able to compromise while preserving core beliefs. And they must get results--achieving passage of legislation that meets people's needs.

To avoid coming apart at the seams, our country needs people who know how to practice the art of politics. That is what good politicians do: They make democratic government possible in a nation alive with competing factions.

Politicians may not be popular, but they are indispensable to making representative democracy work. That's why we need more politicians, not fewer.

6. Members of Congress Behave Better than People Think

Sixth, I'd like you to teach that members of Congress behave better than people think.

The perception that members are corrupt, or immoral, or enriching themselves at the taxpayers' expense, takes a serious toll on our system of government.

Several years ago, I was watching the evening news on television when the anchorman announced the death of Wilbur Mills, the legendary former chairman of the House Ways and Means Committee. There was a lot he could have said about Mills. He could have recounted

the central role Mills played in creating Medicare, in shaping the Social Security system, or in drafting the tax code. But he didn't. Instead, he recalled how Mills' career had foundered after he'd been found early one morning with an Argentinean stripper named Fanne Foxe.

Now, one of the perks of being chairman of an influential committee in Congress, as I was at the time, is that you can pick up the phone and get through to television news anchors. Which I did. I chided him for summing up Mills' career with a scandal. Much to my surprise, he apologized.

The fact is, though, he wasn't doing anything unusual. Americans of all stripes like to dwell on misbehavior by members of Congress. People look at the latest scandal and assume they're seeing the real Congress. But they're not, not by a long shot.

Don't get me wrong. I'm not proposing my former colleagues for sainthood. But, as the press lauds two vice presidential candidates, Republican Dick Cheney and Democrat Joe Lieberman, for their probity in Congress, we should remember that probity is the rule, not the exception.

Some members, of course, do engage in improper conduct--and our system of financing elections degrades politician and donor alike--but my experience is that most members are remarkable people who care deeply about our country and seek to better it through their public service. Most could make far more money on the outside, but choose to serve in Congress because they want to contribute to their country.

Let me tell you one other story. Back in the early 1970s, I made an argument in a committee hearing one day favoring military aid for one of our allies. When I got back to my office, I found a delegation from that country waiting for me. They wanted to thank me with a fat honorarium, a trip to their country, and an honorary degree from one of their universities. I declined.

The point here is not my purity. It's that at the time this happened, there was nothing improper about their offer. Today, there would be.

When I entered the House, gifts and the use of campaign contributions for personal use were unrestricted, financial disclosure was not required of members, there was no written code of conduct, and no standing House ethics committee existed to police the membership. All that has changed.

Certainly, Congress still has major strides to make in this area. The role of the House ethics committee, for instance, has not yet been fully worked out, and its performance has been disappointing over the last few years.

But the ethical climate at the Capitol is light years ahead of where it was a couple of decades ago. And, I might add, light years ahead of the common wisdom.

7. Members of Congress Do Pay Attention to Their Constituents

Seventh, I'd like you to teach that members of Congress do pay attention to their constituents.

Often, I hear that members of Congress only pay attention to power brokers and big-time donors and don't care about ordinary citizens. That simply is not true.

Sometimes when I stood in front of a roomful of voters, I could feel a curtain of doubt hanging between them and me: I took the positions I did, they believed, because of this or that campaign contribution, not because I'd spent time studying and weighing the merits of issues. They had given themselves over to cynicism, and cynicism is the great enemy of democracy. It is very difficult for public officials to govern when their character, values, and motives are always suspect.

Of course, members of Congress are influenced by special interests--often too much, in my view--but they are even more influenced by their constituents.

Members are, for the most part, very good politicians. They know what their constituents think. They hold numerous public meetings, poll their districts regularly, talk on the phone with constituents frequently, and answer hundreds of letters and email messages daily. They are constantly helping to solve constituents' problems.

Members really do believe that constituent views are important; during all my years in Congress I never heard a member say otherwise.

My view, in fact, is that members are sometimes too close to their constituents, particularly when they risk reflecting their constituents' views at the expense of their own judgment. It was Lincoln who said that the art of democratic government is to be out in front of your constituents, but not too far out in front.

8. Citizens Play an Essential Role in Making Congress Work

This leads me to the next point I'd like you to emphasize in your teaching: that citizens play an essential role in making Congress work.

The American people bear more responsibility for the success of our representative democracy than they realize. If people don't participate in the political process, their views cannot be effectively represented. This is not just a matter of voting. Our system depends upon open and trusting interaction between representatives and the people who elected them.

Let me give you an example of what I mean. Back in the late 1970s, I was meeting with a group of constituents in Switzerland County, a deeply rural, tobacco-growing county in the far southern corner of Indiana. It was not a place I expected to come for enlightenment on international politics.

While talking with the group, though, the subject of the Panama Canal treaties came up. This was well before the media had focused on the issue, but a man I'd never met suddenly stood up and laid out the clearest, most evenly reasoned argument for ratification that I ever did hear on the matter, even after the treaty debate mushroomed into a raging national issue. I was flabbergasted, but took it as a humbling reminder that

as a member of Congress, you can always find constituents who can teach you a thing or two about an issue.

My constituent in Switzerland County understood that the relationship between a citizen and a representative requires more than a quick handshake, or a vote, or a moment's pause to sign a computer-generated postcard. He understood that there must be a conversation, a process of mutual education, between citizens and representatives.

Many Americans have given up on the conversation. They must understand that they need to get involved if they want our system to improve.

They need to know that the nature of this relationship between the representative and the represented--and the honesty of the exchange between the two--shapes the strength of our representative democracy.

9. Congress Needs a Lot of Improvement

Ninth, I hope you teach that Congress needs a lot of improvement to make it more accountable, transparent, responsive, and efficient.

I urge you to be unrelenting critics of the Congress--but in the context of everything else I've said so far.

I won't go into detail here because you are familiar with these problems.

Money chase: The incessant money chase to fund increasingly costly campaigns diverts members' attention from their important responsibilities and leads to a growing sense that access is bought and sold.

Perpetual campaign: Many members (especially members of the House) operate today in a state of perpetual campaigning. Rather than trying to develop consensus and pass laws, they view the legislative session primarily as an opportunity to frame issues and position themselves for the next election.

Ease of reelection: It is extremely difficult to defeat incumbents in Congress. Their financial advantages are great and they use the redistricting process to create districts that are heavily partisan in their favor. Less than 10% of congressional seats--perhaps as few as 12 seats--will be competitive in this November's election. Competitive elections in many House districts would do more to improve the Congress than any other single reform.

Partisanship: Bitter partisanship and personal attacks have become all too common in Congress, poisoning the atmosphere and making it harder to meet the needs of the country.

Influence of special interests: Special interest groups have too much influence over Congress. They play an important role by representing the views of different segments of the population, but they often have tunnel

vision, advancing narrow interests at the expense of the national interest.

Weakening of committees: The committee system has been eroded and is close to collapse. Authorizing committees may not even be needed anymore. Legislation is regularly drafted in informal settings outside the authorizing committees and brought directly to the House or Senate floor. The result is that the main sources of policy expertise are excluded, deliberation is cut short, and decisions are more tightly controlled by the congressional leadership.

Failure to think long term: Congress devotes too little attention to some of the country's major long-range challenges. How can we ensure that we have adequate food, energy, and water supplies well into the future? How do we maintain a prosperous and open economy? What domestic and international environmental challenges will we face? Congress spends so much of its time struggling to pass its basic spending bills that these kinds of long-term issues are simply set aside and not dealt with.

Decline in oversight: Congress doesn't perform adequate oversight of government programs. Oversight of the implementation of laws is at the very core of good government. But congressional oversight has shifted away in recent years from the systematic review of programs to highly politicized investigations of individual public officials. These investigations reduce the time and political will available for rooting out flaws in public policy.

Scheduling practices: Current scheduling practices make it difficult for Congress to carry out its responsibilities. Many members are now in Washington only between Tuesday and Thursday, spending the remaining time in their districts. The resulting two-and-a-half or three day legislative workweek makes it impossible for members to attend all of their committee meetings and conduct all their other official business.

Appropriations process: There is a severe lack of accountability in the appropriations process. Congress increasingly turns to omnibus legislation, combining hundreds of different provisions into one huge bill, tacking on unrelated riders and wasteful earmarks, and allowing only one up-or-down vote on the entire package. Not a single member can know all that is in these bills--and most are familiar with only a small part of them. Simply put, they are abominations.

Restrictive rules: The rules for the consideration of bills in the House are often too restrictive. Although there has been some improvement in the 106th Congress, the House leadership has tended over the years to design rules that sharply curtail debate, restrict the opportunity for the average member to participate, and

limit the amendments and policy options that can be considered.

Senate confirmation of appointments: The Senate regularly fails to consider presidential nominations for key judicial posts and cabinet positions in a timely manner. Sometimes, senators hold up nominations by tying them to unrelated partisan demands. This practice blocks appointments that are critical for the effective functioning of our government.

Ceding too much power to the president: Congress often weakens its own power by acting too timidly. Consider its record in foreign policy. It regularly fails to authorize the use of military force as it is mandated to do by law, and frequently passes the buck to the president by enacting sanctions legislation that only he can decide whether or not to enforce. When Congress fails to measure up to its constitutional responsibility, it cedes power to the president.

Congress must take its own reform seriously. It should work on reform every year, not every 10 years, as has been its pattern.

10. *Our Representative Democracy Works*

Finally, I'd like you to teach that in spite of these many problems with Congress, our representative democracy works. It may be slow, messy, cumbersome, and even unresponsive at times, but it has many strengths, and continues to serve us well.

Some say our institutions of government, including the Congress, create more problems than they solve. In the past decade, we experienced an intensified assault on government from some quarters, and "government" and "Washington, DC" became bad words, symbols of the worst kind of corruption and waste. My hope is that we are now beginning to move away from that kind of extreme antigovernment rhetoric. The more positive tone of the present presidential campaign would suggest that we are.

Representative democracy, for all its faults, is our best hope for dealing with our nation's problems. It works through a process of deliberation, negotiation and compromise--in a word, the process of politics. Politics is the way we represent the will of the people in this country. At its best, our representative democracy gives a system whereby all of us have a voice in the process and a stake in the product.

I don't for a moment agree with those who think that our representative democracy has failed or that the future of the country is bleak.

Just consider the condition of America today. In general, I think it is a better place than it was when I came to Congress some 35 years ago.

The Cold War is over, and we are at peace.

Our economy is thriving and is the envy of the world.

We have greatly improved the lot of older Americans with programs like Social Security and Medicare.

Women and minorities have had new doors opened to them as never before.

The Internet has brought a world of knowledge to the most remote classrooms and homes.

And, most of all, this is still a land of opportunity where everyone has a chance, not an equal chance unfortunately, but still a chance, to become the best they can be.

Of course, our country still faces serious problems--from reducing economic inequality to improving access to health care to strengthening our schools--but overall we are doing quite well.

We must be doing something right.

Churchill's remark that "democracy is the worst system devised by the wit of man, except for all the others," still rings true.

I would hope that when each student leaves your class, he or she would appreciate that this representative democracy of ours works reasonably well.

Conclusion

I've spoken today about what I would like you to teach about the Congress. Most--perhaps all--of what I have said is elementary and obvious to you. But it is not obvious to ordinary Americans. They perceive only dimly what the Congress is all about.

I know some veteran political scientists, long since tenured, who still insist on teaching an introductory government course to freshmen. They appreciate that their most important duty is to teach their students to understand the political process and to be good citizens.

Your job--and mine, too--is to help Americans understand government, including the Congress, better. I do not know of anything more important for you and me to teach.