

# Extension of Remarks



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## Shaping Congressional Studies: The APSA Congressional Fellowship Program at 50: Editor's Introduction

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APSA created the Congressional Fellowship Program in 1953 to provide political scientists and journalists with an opportunity to learn about Congress through nine months of participant-observation. The purpose of creating this unique program was to better communicate to the public how Congress works. The Fellowship class of 2003-2004 is the fiftieth class of Congressional Fellowship Program.

On the occasion of the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Fellowship Program it is fitting for the Legislative Studies Section, the greatest beneficiary of the Fellowship Program, to commemorate this landmark with a set of essays by former Fellows detailing the influence of the program on their careers and the development of their scholarship. I attempted to choose a Fellow from each of the last several decades to provide both a comparative frame and some perspective over time.

In this introduction I hope to provide some context for better understanding the fullness of the Fellowship experience. I also hope to suggest a unifying theme – which I discuss in two different ways – the different perspectives on Congress that the Congressional Fellowship provides; these

different perspectives are evident in the essays that follow.

### Finding an Assignment

Most APSA Congressional Fellows consider their Fellowship year to be one of the highlights of their professional careers: I certainly do. I learned about the Congressional Fellowship Program (CFP) in my first year of graduate school. Tacked to the wall next to my office was an announcement for the 1988 application cycle for the CFP. As I read it and examined the list of political scientists who had served as Fellows, I became excited: “what a terrific opportunity, I want to do *that*,” I said to myself, “and look, they’ll pay you \$20,000 to do it, what a deal!” – \$20,000 was a princely sum when I was making \$5,000 a year as a grad student!

In my first year as an Assistant Professor I applied to the program and was granted an interview in Washington, DC. That interview was the most intense 30 minutes of my professional life. Imagine, there I was less than a year after finishing my dissertation, sitting opposite Linda Fowler, Roger Davidson, Norm Ornstein, Chris Deering, and Ron Elving as they hurled good-natured questions at me in rapid fire succession. I remember two things about the experience: The interview was supposed to last 20 minutes and it lasted 30,

and I made them laugh a couple of times, both of which I thought were good signs (though I had already decided to reapply the following year if I was not successful). I will never forget the day that the fat envelope (another good sign!) arrived informing me that I had been chosen as a Fellow (a feeling I still remember better than what I felt after successfully defending my dissertation!).

The Fellowship experience begins with about a month of orientation meetings that involve talks by politicians, lobbyists, journalists, and other members of the Washington community, and a seminar on congressional procedure at the Library of Congress. Then the fun begins: Finding a position on the Hill.

Congressional Fellows are not “assigned” to offices; rather they are set loose on the Hill to find a position in an office. This is a conscious strategy aimed at teaching Fellows about the job chase on Capitol Hill (an experience that has allowed me to better advise my students about strategies for landing a spot in a congressional office). In the search for a position a Fellow has three resources: 1) the evaluations that past fellows have written about their office assignments; 2) a list of offices that have expressed an interest in hosting a Fellow, and; 3) the fact that they can offer their various talents – which are more extensive than the average college intern -- to a congressional office at no cost to the office. The latter allows a Fellow to immediately assume a responsible position in the office, which is a contrast to what most of our students will do when they intern in a congressional office.

My first impulse was to find a position for myself in a House office, preferably a leadership office or a member of the Rules Committee, which would allow me to indulge my interest in congressional parties and party leadership. I think that I was drawn to the House because of (rather than despite of) the voluminous literature on the House. As Connelly and Pitney point out in their essay,

there is a tendency for us to study those things which others have already studied, and the House was well tilled soil. As I read through the evaluations I was even more convinced that I wanted to work in the House; an evaluation by Barbara Sinclair discussing her work in Jim Wright’s office, another by Larry Dodd discussing his work with John McFall in the House Democratic Whip’s office,<sup>1</sup> Bruce Oppenheimer’s work with the Rules Committee, on and on through the pantheon of congressional scholars and then-rising stars of our subfield.

As I scanned the list of offices that then-Director of the CFP Kay Sterling handed out I did not see many member offices or committees that I had an interest in working for; what did stand out was something called the Senate Democratic Policy Committee (DPC). The name was only vaguely familiar to me, but after a little research I discovered that it was an arm of the Senate Democratic leadership and, fighting against my bias toward the House (I did not want to work in the obstructionist and elitist Senate with its silly unanimous consent rule and its filibusters, how disorderly!) I decided to contact them. In the meantime I left resumes and cover letters in the offices of the Democratic members of the House Rules Committee, and several House party leaders.

During my first interview with the DPC Chief of Staff I sensed that she was not quite sure what to make of a political scientist; I got the sense that she could not quite figure out how a generalist could help them; I think that they were hoped that I would be a policy specialist.<sup>2</sup> I managed to convince them that I

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<sup>1</sup> Dodd’s which laid out the themes that were repeated in his classic essay (1979) on the structure and function of the evolving roles of the Whip’s office.

<sup>2</sup> President Clinton’s health care reform legislation had just been introduced to Congress and health care was expected to dominate the Senate’s agenda during my time there. I suspect that they would have liked it if I had been a health policy specialist. Through my Fellowship experience I learned a great deal about

was a quick study and that I understood “real politics” and, after several days of not having my phone calls returned, managed to get an invitation for a second interview. This was one that I will never forget. I was invited to attend a DPC Lunch to which all Democratic Senators are invited to discuss the order of business on the Floor and listen to presentations by Administration officials and policy experts. The presenter at this particular Lunch was James Carville, and the Senators were intensely interested in what he had to say – this was in 1993, about a year after the 1992 election – so most of the Democratic Senators were present and engaged. As I sat at the edge of the room (just like a real staffer!) George Mitchell, Ted Kennedy, Chris Dodd, Tom Daschle, and others who I had only witnessed on C-SPAN or the Sunday talk shows walked past me (clearly not noticing my presence, though I have never been so happy to be ignored!). I was as impressed as I could be by the spectacle, mostly by the thought that a position at the DPC could provide some insight into *Senate* leadership a field that was (and still is) under tilled in the congressional literature.

When I was offered the position I answered “yes” immediately, and I have always considered myself to have been lucky to *not* serve in the House. By remaining with the Policy Committee I was able to observe the leadership of an institution that is notoriously resistant to leadership and, in some small way, participate in that leadership effort. I also gained an appreciation for the seeming “disorder” of the Senate; and, through force of circumstance, I became something of a policy “specialist.”

### **Observing Participants and Participant-Observation**

One issue that is not directly addressed in the essays that follow, but is aptly illustrated by the experience of these Fellows, is the difference between observing participants in

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health policy and have subsequently taught the subject from time-to-time.

the political arena and participant-observation. I believe that there is a fundamental difference between the two that these essays make apparent.

At some point in our graduate training – some more directly than others -- we have been exposed to Richard Fenno’s support of participant-observation as a methodology. Fenno rightly argues that,

Political scientists ought to learn about politicians by talking to them, watching them, and following them around. Some research can be done by bringing politicians – aspiring, active, or retired – to the academic work place. But most of it must be done in the setting in which politicians operate, in their natural habitats. The aim is to see the world as they see it, to adopt their vantage point on politics. For it is precisely this view, from over the politician’s shoulder, that is now missing from academic research (Fenno 1990, 2).

In *Homestyle* (1978) Fenno describes the methodology simply as “soaking and poking” and “just hanging around.”<sup>3</sup>

I suggest that the Fellowship experience is significantly different – not better, simply different – from Fenno’s conception of participant-observation. As a Fellow one is engaged *with* the politician. In contrast to interview methodology and/or observational research, in which the researcher looks over the shoulder of the politician, the Fellow is *shoulder-to-shoulder* with the politician, adopting not only his or her values but trying to advance his or her interests; that is a part of the job. When I went to work for the DPC I became an *advocate* for the party leadership and the positions of the Democratic Party just like the other staff at the DPC.

The difference of perspective is both important and potentially problematic. As a

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<sup>3</sup> Of course Fenno’s methodology involves more than simply hanging around and is described in some detail in the Appendix to *Homestyle*.

participant-observer – one who is engaged in the mission of the organization – the barrier between subject and object mostly disappears. One has much deeper access to the organization; the Fellow is treated as an insider, and colleagues do not censor their behavior and observations the same way that they would in interviews, or when they are being observed as objects.<sup>4</sup> For a short while a Fellow “goes native” which inevitably will have tangible benefits for their research; hopefully during the CFP period a Fellow reflects on the experience with other Fellows or others firmly anchored in the outside world.

From this perspective “going native” is an important part of the participant-observation experience that the CFP makes possible. A problem arises when one “stays native,” and a few political science Fellows (and even more journalism Fellows) have been “lost” on the Hill. Getting out often is not easy. Fellows returning to “civilian life” often find the transition somewhat difficult (see the Wirls essay below for a description); this is a result of emerging from being fully engaged in the Fellowship experience, and returning to one’s own “native habitat.”

In short, the Congressional Fellowship experience provides a different, a truly unique, opportunity to immerse oneself in the world of the politician, to experience the world from the vantage point of the politician and other political actors. This is perhaps a subtle distinction from the position that Fenno establishes, but it is an important one, one that makes the CFP unique (I would argue indispensable) for the congressional scholar.

### **Collective and Individual Behaviors: Where You Stand Depends on Where You Sit**

A second issue not directly addressed in these essays is also a matter of perspective. Though I do not have the data to support this I am willing to bet that the majority of political science Fellows served in the personal offices of members. This makes sense. Through most of the period of the CFP’s existence the subfield has been dominated by methodological individualism. The true classics of congressional studies (e.g., Mayhew 1974; Fenno 1978) over the last several decades focused on the behavior of individual members of Congress, and most Fellows followed suit by spending their time in the personal offices of members and observing many of the behaviors described by Mayhew and others (see Wirls essay).

Several of the essays below (especially those by Sinclair, and Pitney and Connelly), I suggest, indicate that Fellows who served in leadership offices – or committee offices – developed a different perspective on the institution than those who served in member offices. Sinclair, and Pitney and Connelly primarily experienced the institution through the lens of party leadership. Their essays highlight the importance of party and the potential of observing behaviors that are not often highlighted in the member-centered literature, and are often not fully consistent with our view of members of Congress as narrowly self interested and obsessed with district specific issues. Sitting in a member’s office one may not observe the degree to which a member is a part of a larger organization (a party, a committee) that extends beyond the parochial concerns of district or state, and beyond the narrow interests of the member-enterprise. Working as an agent of the member-enterprise may heighten the perception that the member is “all about the district” while other interests may be playing out beyond the view of the observer. By the same token, sitting in a party leadership office

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<sup>4</sup> Having been a Fellow and having conducted dozens of interviews in the ensuing years the barrier between interviewer and interviewee is palpable. A couple of years ago I interviewed someone that I had worked with at the DPC as a Fellow and had a friendly relationship with, even under those circumstances I could observe him self-censoring as he spoke; the bond of trust built through common experience was gone.

may overemphasize the place of the party in the world of the individual member.

Considered this way there are a number of perspectives that the Fellowship experience can generate: House versus Senate, as discussed by Dan Wirls; Republican versus Democrat, as touched on by Connelly and Pitney; individual member versus collective enterprise as experienced by Frances Lee. Somewhere in between these perspectives lies greater understanding of the institution we study. The Congressional Fellowship Program provides a mechanism for better understanding the balance between them; and the congressional studies literature is richer for the existence of the Congressional Fellowship Program. Happy Anniversary CFP!

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