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There at the Creation: Learning About Congressional Leadership From the Inside

Barbara Sinclair
University of California, Los Angeles

When, as a graduate student at the University of Rochester, I took Dick Fenno's Congress seminar, he turned me onto interviewing members of Congress. I walked into his office to talk about my paper for the course with some sort of idea about studying southern Democrats from afar, probably via roll call analysis, and I walked out having agreed to do an interview-based study of the Texas congressional delegation. Dick came up with a little money; I went to Washington for about a week and interviewed most of the then-21 members of the Texas delegation. What a way to make a living! Talk to usually interesting, and always colorful people about politics. So I continued and expanded that research for my dissertation, spending a number of months in Washington but on my own, not as a Congressional Fellow. I don't remember for sure but I think I didn't apply for a congressional fellowship because the timing was wrong.

My first job after grad school was in California and distance dictated doing research that could be done without spending a lot of time in Washington and that meant non-interview based research.

This was the 1970s and fascinating things were going on in Congress; the House

was changing in all sorts of ways. I was reading about the reforms and teaching about them. And I wanted to see for myself how much and in what ways the body had changed. Specifically I was interested in if and how the rules changes giving the Democratic leadership new powers had changed the exercise of party leadership. Some of the papers presented at meetings by young scholars who had been congressional fellows whetted my appetite. I remember especially a couple of superb papers on the Rules Committee by Bruce Oppenheimer. So after I got tenure, I decided to apply for a Congressional Fellowship. Dick Fenno, the good angel of my entire career, was on the selection committee and, while anyone who knows Dick knows he is always fair, I assume it can't have hurt.

For me, doing a fellowship at that point (early mid-career, it could be labeled) worked well. I knew more about the institution from reading and especially from my previous research than I would have had I done it sooner in my career. Also I was much clearer about what I wanted to learn. I wanted to study party leadership and specifically I was interested in if and how the rules changes giving the Democratic leadership new powers had changed the exercise of party leadership. I

knew that one of the intentions of the Democratic reformers was to strengthen the party leadership; yet whether that in fact the result was at best unclear. A paper by another Congressional Fellow Sid Waldman argued that the reforms *in toto* had had the opposite effect.

To study House party leadership, I needed to get into a Democratic leadership office. Figuring that a political scientist should be able to practice a little politics, I calculated that my best bet was Jim Wright's Majority Leader office since I had grown up in Texas (anyone who knows anything about Congress knows that geography is a key tie) and that I would be most likely to succeed if I could find someone who knew Wright's people to speak for me (personal relationships are key as well). Bob Peabody had done the Jim Wright part of a research project on the close 1976 leadership contest and I asked him to intercede for me. Very kindly, Bob went to talk to Craig Raupe, Wright top staffer in the Majority Leader office and a close friend of Wright's since Wright had run for mayor of Weatherford at the beginning of his political career. Craig agreed to talk to me and, when he asked me if I wanted to attend the freshmen orientation session that weekend and my response was to light up like a Christmas tree at the prospect, I was in.

Getting into that office and what I learned during my fellowship year set me up for a career of studying party leadership in Congress. I was lucky to be there almost "at the creation;" that is, I saw from the inside the kinds of problems and opportunities the reforms created for the majority party leadership and some of the leaders' early attempts to cope. So, for example, I saw how O'Neill used task forces of members to handle the uncertainly the reforms created and to give energetic junior members a way to participate that helped rather than hurt the party. I heard about and got a copy of the letter a group of Democrats sent O'Neill urging him to use more

restrictive rules to bring the chaotic floor sessions under control. I saw how central the budget resolution was becoming to the majority party. And, as I was able to attend whip meetings, I heard members talk (and gripe) and got some sense of what their expectations were. And, of course, the conversations I had with Craig and with Jim Wright were of inestimable value; both were keen observers and had a perspective on the House that went back to the 1950s.

The contacts I made that year were also essential to my research in the following years. Most importantly, Jim Wright and his staff continued to be extremely helpful both in giving me their time and in providing a place where I could hang out when I went to the Hill to interview. My first book on House party leadership was a direct product of the research I did during the fellowship year and of interviews I conducted in the succeeding couple of years.

I was lucky to be there almost "at the beginning;" that is, I saw from the inside the kinds of problems and opportunities the reforms created for the majority party leadership and some of the leaders' early attempts to cope.

Over the next decade I spent a lot of time in Washington and I continued to maintain my contacts with Wright and his staff. So, when Jim Wright became Speaker in 1987, he knew me well and I knew a lot about party leadership and how it had evolved over the previous years. I wrote Wright asking if I could come to Washington and do a sort of informal congressional fellowship. He said 'yes' and I spent from June 1987 to December

1988 hanging out in the Speaker's office. Because Wright and his senior staff knew me, I got enormous access – to talk to Wright himself and to attend many of his meetings with members. During this period in Washington, I saw first hand how the Speakership could be used to drive policy.

Again, contacts I made during that period stood me in good stead when I returned to do a great many more interviews over the next decade, allowing me to write my second book on party leadership in the House and then a number of pieces on House Republican leadership. My understanding of what was going on in the 1990s was immensely enriched by having witnessed the evolution of party leadership and of the two parties in the House since my fellowship year.

Could I have done the same work without the Congressional Fellowship? Possibly, but it would have been really difficult. One of the things I learned during my fellowship year was that being on the Hill in a congressional office day-in and day-out is extraordinarily valuable for understanding Congress and its members. I got a “feel” for the rhythms of congressional life and the concerns of members that I had not gotten even from the extensive interviewing I did for my dissertation. (It completely convinced me that a solely reelection based model of Congress is wrong not just in the sense of being too simple but also in the sense of being seriously misleading.) Getting a real sense of what goes on a day- to-day basis in a leadership office would, I suspect, have been even harder. One of the signature features of congressional life is the crisis-a-day (it actually becomes addicting); of course, that is even more so in a leadership office. Another, related and particularly severe for leaders, is the sheer number of things going on at the same time. These facts of congressional life can be understood on an intellectual basis without the experience of spending considerable time in a congressional

office, but I don't think their impact can be fully appreciated.

The Congressional Fellowship specifically provides another valuable learning experience – the trip home with a member. There one gets to experience the other half of the member's life. Anyone who thinks most members of the House are out of touch with their constituents should follow a member as he or she makes the rounds of everything from graduation ceremonies to senior citizens centers to heart association award dinners. And anyone who thinks most members get a true cross sectional view of their constituents should do the same.

So here's to the Congressional Fellowship program on its 50th anniversary!! It has made an enormous difference in the careers of many scholars; it has contributed greatly to research that truly furthers our understanding of Congress; and the experience is SO MUCH FUN!