

Extension of Remarks



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Jigsaw Puzzle Redux

Kenneth A. Shepsle
Harvard University

I am pleased to have this opportunity to revise and extend my remarks made at a recent APSA panel devoted to my book. At the outset here I need to reiterate what I said at the outset there, namely how grateful I am to Sean Kelly for having organized this little enterprise. No matter how senior one is in our profession, there is no gainsaying the sheer pleasure of having attention lavished on you! Second, I need to reiterate what I said as part of my concluding remarks at the APSA panel. The comments, observations, praise, and criticism offered by panelists Scott Adler, Rick Hall, Keith Krehbiel, David Rohde, and Garry Young were thoughtful, thought-provoking, and deeply appreciated by me. To think hard about something I have written is to pay me a great compliment. I'd like to think the praise offered about the book after all these years is as much a comment on the vibrancy of congressional scholarship at that time, and an acknowledgement of the unparalleled cross-fertilization among soakers and pokers, history jocks, quants, and rat choicers. The congressional scholarship field has always been a methodological rainbow.

I will refrain from breaking into a chorus from "We Are the World" by also noting that the criticisms offered (painfully felt even after all this time!) sounded mostly right to me (alas). In 1978 I was not particularly sensitive to, nor did I anticipate, what would become dominating debates in the congressional institutions literature about preference outliers

(in my book I called them *interestededs*, a term invented by Chuck Bullock), parties (where are they, anyhow?), conditional party government, informational rationales for legislative organization, legislative leviathans and cartels, and pivotal politics. Arguments during the 1980s and 1990s about all these things, and more besides, drew and built on some of the materials in my book. Had I the wisdom to anticipate the manner in which the scholarship would grow in the next several decades, I might have done a better job of preparing the soil in my book. As I indicated, criticisms taking me to task during the APSA roundtable sounded mostly right and, were I to revise this study, I would surely try to take greater care in a number of ways, but especially with regard to unpacking the concept of "interestededs" (or "preference outliers" as they came to be known). In particular, a propos of Krehbiel's generous written remarks in this newsletter, I think I would have tried to develop the idea of *heterogeneous* policy preferences (owing to heterogeneous jurisdictions at least for some of the major committees) going hand in hand with shared salience. Members of a committee, that is, may differ on views about policies coming before their committee but not on the *importance* of those policies for their districts. This is what often distinguishes them from non-committee members. They are *salience outliers* – a view consonant with that expressed by Hall in his provocative and intelligent

essay. Indeed, the table in Krehbiel's essay effectively makes this point.

Sean Kelly asked for some history, so let me provide that now. Twenty-five years ago, when *The Giant Jigsaw Puzzle: Democratic Committee Assignments in the Modern House* (Chicago, 1978) appeared, I could never have anticipated a panel dedicated to it at the meetings of the American Political Science Association a quarter century hence. This prospect would have been even more mind-boggling nearly thirty years ago when, as a National Fellow at the Hoover Institution in 1974, I spent a summer in the stacks of the Stanford Library reading *every* paper ever published in the *APSR* and the (then-called) *Midwest Journal of Political Science* on the U.S. Congress as my preparation for writing this book.

Remember, I thought of myself as a formal modeler, not a Congress scholar. As a graduate student at the University of Rochester working mainly with William Riker, I had taken a single seminar on Congress. It wasn't just any old Congress seminar, mind you, for it was taught by the master – Richard Fenno. For his course in the spring of 1968, I had written a paper on assignments to the exclusive committees. It was a quantitative exercise, using limited dependent variable statistical methods (probit) then quite novel in political science, to test various hypotheses concerning successful assignments to Appropriations, Rules, and Ways and Means. Fenno gave me an A-, thanked me for having done it since he said he actually learned something from the exercise, and alluded to some data to which he and John Manley (then a professor at Syracuse) had access.

Dave Rohde, my closest colleague in graduate school and a lifelong friend in the profession, and I made a beeline to Fenno's office to find out more about this collection of data. Dick told us that Manley, during his research on the Ways and Means Committee,

had gotten hold of several Congresses worth of committee request data. (The Ways and Means Committee until 1975 was the Democratic Committee on Committees in the House.) Dick promised Dave and me that we could have these data if a year from that very moment, he and Manley had not used them. A year (to the minute) later, Rohde and I were knocking at his door. We made off with the Democratic request lists for 87th, 88th, 89th, and 90th Congresses. I then took up residence at Washington University where the dean of congressional committee assignment scholars, Nicholas Masters, hung his hat from time to time. Nick provided me with the request book for the 86th Congress (on which basis he had written his classic paper on committee assignments in the early 1960s). (For the *Giant Jigsaw Puzzle* I was able to obtain requests for additional congresses – see below.) With these data, Rohde and I spent the summer of 1971 preparing a paper for the upcoming APSA meetings, a paper that ultimately appeared in the *APSR* in 1973 and was reprinted in various collections on congressional politics.

With Rohde busy finishing off books and articles on the Supreme Court (he started life as a court scholar) and about to commence on a Congressional Fellowship in Washington, I flew solo on committee assignments. I secured an NSF grant to study "assignment problems" – a class of models in mathematical programming – knowing that I would ultimately return to the world of congressional committees but, as a mathematical modeler in a profession in which modeling was novel and cutting-edge, wanting to explore the problem in a general fashion first. I produced a paper (*Public Choice*, 1975) in which I characterized committee assignments as an optimization problem with institutional constraints. I then headed off to Stanford and the Hoover Institution to learn about congressional scholarship (hence that summer in the stacks of the Stanford Library), to collect a large data set

(on punch cards that I still have in my office), and to begin doing empirical analysis (bicycle rides from Hoover to the Stanford Computing Center, probit program and data decks strapped to the back of the bike, to submit jobs that would run overnight and output retrieved in the morning – sounds ancient and primitive, doesn't it?). The book manuscript was completed shortly after my year at Stanford.

One of the most exciting parts of the research was going to Washington to interview congressmen. I had a great teacher, of course, Dick Fenno, who wrote out five or six pages for me on how to interview members. The

The main lesson I remember from Fenno's instructions has to say in an interview with a congressman that I was an ivory-tower type who knew what I knew mainly from books and that I had come to Washington to get the true picture straight from the horse's mouth. This was the Fenno Modesty Theorem. A second Fennoism – call it the Not-Too-Modest Corollary – was not to let the subject of the interview get away with too much.

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the *Not-Too-Modest Corollary* – was not to let the subject of the interview get away with too much. You needed, from time to time, to remind the subject that you actually knew *something* about the subject at hand and so would not stand for inconsistencies, bs-ing, or abstract generalities. Because I still did not regard myself as a congress scholar, and thus did not feel the need to invest for the future in the Washington community, I felt quite liberated in interviewing congressmen – I was relaxed, enjoyed myself, and was fairly successful in getting my subjects talking. I interviewed all but one of the Democratic members of the Ways and Means Committee who had returned to the 94th Congress – the one being Wilbur Mills. I have a letter from him dated October 7, 1974, agreeing to an interview. But that was the day he fell into the Tidal Basin and, when I came to Washington that December, he was still at Bethesda Naval Hospital. I interviewed members in their offices, in House cafeterias, and one in the Ways and Means committee room just off the House floor. (He said, "You sit there and pretend to be Wilbur Mills and I'll sit right next to you and pretend to be Al Ullman.")

One of the luckiest contacts I made was with Jim Healy, the administrative assistant to Dan Rostenkowski. Rostenkowski was a powerful member of Ways and Means and Healy was very available to academics and sympathetic to their needs. Healy took me into Congressman Rostenkowski's inner sanctum, introduced me to the boss, and told him, "This here professor wants to look at the committee assignment request files. He promises to keep the names confidential." Rostenkowski pointed to a file drawer, told me to sit behind his desk, and said that he was leaving for Chicago and that I had the run of his office for the rest of the afternoon. And that was how I was able to obtain the committee request books for the 92nd, 93rd, and 94th Congresses. (For some reason, neither my efforts nor those of

anyone else I knew could turn up the data for the 91st Congress.)

I have revised and extended my remarks about the history of the project, as Sean Kelly requested. I am tempted to respond to each and every one of the thoughtful essays with which I share space here. But on reflection I am impressed with the extent to which these represent refreshing views and new research agendas that need to be developed and fleshed out, not analyzed and criticized as already completed work. So I will refrain, except once again to note the constructive quality they possess. (At the Philadelphia APSA meetings in which the present roundtable occurred, there was also a celebration of the career of my teacher, Richard Fenno. Mo Fiorina remarked there that the constructive and progressive agenda of the Congress field is in large measure a reflection of the generosity of spirit of this man. I concur.)

It should be evident that it was a good research project because it allowed me, as a young scholar, to learn so many new things. I learned to write down a formal model about a real political process. I learned how to collect data and came to appreciate the intense effort required to do empirical work. I experienced the manic and the depressive side of interviewing congressmen (and thus came to appreciate not only Dick Fenno's energy and wisdom, but also his view of the world as being divided into good interviews and bad interviews). I was permitted to read and read and read about Congress – literatures drawn both from history and political science. The pleasures, in short, were many. It is a real bonus that the product of all these wonderful experiences seems to have made a small difference in the legislative field and is still of sufficient interest to produce a panel at APSA.