

WANDERING THE CORRIDORS OF POWER

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This essay discusses research concerning the reactions among members of the United States Congress to contemporary political protest. The ultimate goal of this study was to ascertain what certain elected members of the American political elite perceive to be the limits of appropriate and effective political opposition. The research involved approximately one hundred personal interviews conducted with members of both the Senate and the House of Representatives in Washington, D. C., between June and December of 1969. The respondents were selected randomly and presented with a series of open-ended questions; their replies, as recorded and transcribed, constituted the primary data for analysis.

Introduction

A cartoon in a 1969 publication of the American Political Science Association depicts a United States Congressman dashing up the Capitol steps--business suit discarded for track suit and official papers scattered in the wind--all this to escape a perplexed student who explains, "I merely said to the Congressman that I was a student taking a survey...."¹ When this appeared, I was in the process of interviewing one hundred Members of the 91st Congress, discovering for myself the truth behind the caricature: that the recent surge of scholarly interest in the Congress has become at best a mixed blessing to the Members of the Congress.

This was the primary theme which the cartoon was intended to illustrate. "Many Congressmen, Congressional staff members and researchers have perceived the corridors of the Capitol and Congressional office buildings becoming crowded with students, interns, teachers, and researchers of all kinds."² Perhaps even more than most other legislatures, the United States Congress has been blessed or damned by a number of characteristics which make it especially attractive for academic research. It has a relatively large membership of men and women who share common tasks, but often with different perspectives, for different purposes, and from different positions of power and status. Its Members tend to act independently of each other, at least to the extent that both individual behavior and collective decisions are complex enough to satiate observers with the most byzantine tastes; yet some aspects of its structure and decision-making processes lend themselves well to the search for quantifiable regularities. Moreover, the Congress is constantly involved with decisions and non-decisions which appear as if they

should be important. For these reasons (among others, no doubt), an increasing number of students, at all levels, have chosen to study the Congress and to investigate their chosen slice of Congressional reality by personally interrogating its Members.

In 1958, Charles O. Jones reported interviewing almost all the members of the House Agriculture Committee.³ During the following year, and more remarkably, James A. Robinson and his associates completed seventy-five interviews with Congressmen during one month or "approximately twenty man-days."⁴ Yet, also in 1959, Lewis A. Dexter remarked that "some Congressmen were complaining about the frequency and the 'stupidity' of some academic interviews."⁵ Dexter concluded that the increasing number of interview requests may be exhausting the time and patience of the Members of Congress, and his concern has since become more widely shared. There have even been suggestions that the research enthusiasm of individual scholars may have to be co-ordinated, if not restrained, before many more Representatives and Senators conclude that their simplest recourse is merely to refuse all such interview requests. Certainly any future student of the Congress should ask himself if he cannot rely on other primary or secondary sources of information. Still, there will always remain some questions which can only be answered on the basis of personal interviews. My experiences suggest that it is still possible to gather information directly from a rather large sample of Representatives and Senators, although the difficulties involved have undoubtedly multiplied in the last decade. A description of my research will suggest some of the problems which arise, as well as some of the strategies which may succeed or fail.

Deciding What Not to Do

Before focusing on the process of interviewing in the Congress, it might be instructive to consider an unsuccessful attempt at a more unusual research technique--an attempt at direct and intensive observation of the activities of Congressmen and their staffs. At least in the development of legislative research, personal contact by the student with his subject has come to be associated almost solely with the process of interviewing.⁶ This research strategy undoubtedly has been productive, but only within rather circumscribed limits. If the focus of study is some facet of legislative behavior, then interviews can only provide data on perceptions or recollections of behavior. Even if the focus of study is on the perceptions or attitudes themselves, they are of interest presumably because they will be reflected in action, and this crucial linkage cannot be demonstrated satisfactorily by use of the interview alone. At best, interviewing provides an acceptable surrogate when actual behavior is not available for scrutiny; at worst, it leaves open the question of whether there is any likely connection between interview responses and anything else.

One recent direction of legislative research which illustrates this problem is the attempt to define the range and distribution of legislative role orientations. From large samples of interview responses, several teams of researchers have drawn plausible conclusions about the ways in which members of state and national legislatures perceive both their responsibilities and their relationships with their constituents and other groups directly interested in legislative decisions.⁷ Originally, I sought to explore the relationship between such statements and several aspects of individual

behavior, at the same time asking to what extent different conceptions of Congressional functions were implicit in the activities of individual Representatives.

My intention was to explore the ways in which a number of Congressmen organize the activities of their staffs and allocate their own time, to the extent that both are within their control. Recent discussions of the Congress and its contemporary crisis have given new emphasis to legislative oversight and constituency service, perhaps in reaction to the Congress' apparent inability to legislate efficiently and creatively. I hoped to discover whether, in fact, the legislative function does dominate the activities of individual legislators (if not of the legislature collectively). Further, I was curious whether the interview-derived role orientations would be reflected in the work choices of different Members. For example, do Representatives who define their constituency as the entire nation devote less attention to constituency service? Or do Congressmen who perceive themselves as the "trustees" of their constituents' interests concentrate more on legislative deliberations than their other colleagues? In some respects, these questions now seem naive, but not nearly as naive as my expectation that they could be answered.

Before committing myself to an extended period of research, I decided that it would be wise to conduct a brief exploratory study, pre-testing both my ideas and my research procedures. I was fortunate enough to secure the willing and gracious co-operation of the Honorable George Bush, then Representative from Texas. Mr. Bush permitted me to spend a week in his Washington office, monitoring his activities and those of his staff members. I was prepared to

collect exhaustive data on what he and his staff did during that week, and on how these activities could be distributed among categories of legislative functions. In the process, I assumed that I would become acclimated to the internal life of a Congressional office, and, as a result, that I would be able to anticipate many of the problems that would arise during my research proper.

During the course of that week, however, I learned steadily and progressively that my proposed research was impossible, or at least beyond my competence. On Monday, I discovered that the Congressional office work routine is not structured in a way which lends itself to ready compartmentalization--most staff members engage in a variety of different activities briefly and return to them only intermittently. On Tuesday, I discovered that my very presence, much less my monitoring activities, was causing some confusion and resentment (largely deserved) among the Congressman's staff whose cooperation was essential to the success of my study. I found myself unwilling or unable to accept this cost even for so short a period as a week. On Wednesday, therefore, I decided to concentrate solely on the activities of the Congressman himself. In doing so, I discovered that my predetermined coding categories were inadequate--not because they were the wrong categories, but because they implied clearer distinctions and greater structure than really existed. The problem was a basic one of conceptualization--of assuming that complex behavior could be captured, adequately and accurately, in any limited set of mutually exclusive categories. Also, on Thursday, it became clear that my observations would inevitably remain incomplete, despite my best efforts. There were conversations to which I could not be privy. Further, a really acute understanding of the

reasons for the Congressman's behavior would have required almost constant cross-examination, which would have violated my appreciation of his hospitality and my constant awareness of the status gulf separating us. Finally, on Friday, I learned that, these problems aside, my project was impractical because my several applications for financial support had been rejected. More experienced scholars apparently could anticipate the difficulties I was just encountering.⁸

Literally, then, in the course of a week, I became convinced that the demands of my planned research were unreasonable. And if for no other reason, this discovery made the pre-test experiment invaluable. During the same period, I also arranged to speak with several former Representatives still residing in the Washington area. Because my projected research plans called for a series of interviews to complement my own observations, I hoped that these sessions would point up the deficiencies of the interview protocol I had devised a priori. They did prove helpful in this way, and they also served to increase my sensitivity to the difficulties of summarizing and coding interview responses. I presented to each of my respondents all of the questions used by some of the earlier research teams to investigate legislative role orientations. This included both their primary questions, as well as other secondary and reserve questions relating to the same subject. As I probed more deeply into their role choices, distinctions which had appeared sharp and clear in principle became increasingly blurred and muddled in practice. Indeed, when these interviews were concluded, I could have defended classifying each respondent in any one of the established role categories.

If any moral might be drawn from such a limited number of interviews, it is probably that the distinctiveness of such attitudinal categories is primarily an artifact of superficial data collection. These roles might best be understood not as discrete choices nor as distinct points on a continuum, but as different demands and alternatives which each legislator reconciles for himself or herself in different ways under different circumstances.⁹ I am also struck by the fact that, as this is being written, I am much more convinced of this conclusion than I was immediately after conducting the interviews on which it is based.

Ironically, this may suggest another caveat about the analysis of interview data: as time passes after the period of data collection, what were originally merely indications or tendencies all too often gradually become transformed into empirically supported and unequivocal conclusions. Sensitivity to data is difficult to maintain--partly because it depends on the immediacy of the research experience, and partly because it imposes nagging uncertainties and residual doubts. But this sensitivity must be reflected in the presentation of research findings, especially because most readers lack the preparation to know when conclusions are over-stated and when distinctions are over-emphasized. Perhaps the canons of empirical rigor and self-discipline should demand that we re-read all our interview notes and transcripts with a scoffing eye before releasing any new truth to the world.

It is easy and comforting to imagine that the development of a research design closely resembles a common caricature of "The Scientific Method:" an engaging theoretical question, hypothesis, or model is generated; the ideal means for subjecting it to empirical

verification are sought and discovered; data are then collected and evaluated, leading to confirmation or at least to re-formulation. In this way, every adequate research design reflects the best of scientific procedure, and may eventually produce a critical jigsaw piece in the multi-dimensional construction of a science of politics.

Naturally, in practice, this "scientific" process is often honored in the breach. All research projects are subject to the influence of confining and often unanticipated limitations, of which shortages of time and money are only the most obvious. In my case, I had already committed myself to a specific period of months for research, and it was now too late to apply for massive research support. Also, I found that I had already made an irreversible personal commitment to one site for research, the Congress. In the few months between the pre-test I have just described and the beginning of the research I shall discuss, I never did seriously consider modifying this focus. Moreover, my second research attempt was conducted and completed almost exactly as it had been designed. It is usually necessary to modify, if not radically alter, research plans when once confronted with the realities of the field situation. This is an inevitable and usually desirable adaptation to new information, possibilities, and limitations. That this did not happen to me probably reflects the value of my pre-test experience, but perhaps also the rigidity of my pre-commitment.¹⁰

Deciding What to Do

Only in part does the choice of a research project reflect long-standing interests and gradually developing plans. In an ideal world, it might be possible to formulate a proposal only after care-

