UNDERSTANDING LEGISLATIVE PROCESS FROM THE INSIDE

Getting the "big picture" while inside the institution has been challenging at times. Some experiences reinforced what I already knew while others contradicted it entirely. For example, my introduction to the process began on an awkward foot. My first day in the office was January 2, 2013. During the next few months the operation of Congress challenged much of what I thought I knew. Throughout my graduate years I read multiple articles and books about Congress's historic levels of partisanship and polarization. Given that background, the first three days were decidedly odd. On day one, Speaker Boehner broke the Hastert rule and passed a fiscal cliff deal that failed to gain a majority of his caucus. Two days later, I watched members' swearing in and the election of the Speaker from the gallery seats—compliments of my boss—when conservative Republicans fell short in their attempt to overthrow John Boehner. In the months that followed the House passed the Violence Against Women Act and the Hurricane Sandy relief bill. Again, both bills failed to gain support of a majority of the majority party. Bipartisanship prevailed to enact three of the most important bills in 2013. From my perspective, either the previous research did not apply or a new paradigm had emerged.

However, the bipartisan "episodes" quickly disappeared and the partisanship that has defined the lower chamber for the past 30 years reemerged. After those first couple months, the leadership and Rules Committee limited debate and amendments that threatened the fidelity of the Hastert "rule." I was able to observe reciprocity between the parties dwindle as long-standing procedural norms fell. For example, I was present in May as the committee minority was not granted its customary "amendment in the nature of a substitute" on a Ways and Means bill moving to the floor. In another instance, a parade of Democrats took to the floor to offer unanimous consent agreements to stall consideration on one half of the split farm bill. Republicans responded by charging debate time against the minority. The procedural battle broke a long-standing tradition in the House: not to count unanimous consent agreements against debate time. Like most power plays in the House, the minority lost its battle to delay the bill. However, these incidents also highlighted the decaying relationship between minority and majority in the House. From a procedural standpoint, polarized politics has led to more hardnosed politics in both parties. The minority party continues to try and devise novel ways to throw a wrench in the works. Meanwhile, the majority is increasingly incentivized to clamp down on obstruction to maintain their agenda and voting coalition. We often think of polarization in ideological terms, but often it is most manifest through the House's procedural battles.

As I prepare to leave the fellowship I have gained a much better appreciation for the social aspect of politics. Of course rules and norms structure the lawmaking process but that is only part of the story. The process is also inextricably linked to the relationships that personify that process. Unspoken norms often govern members' interaction. Developing relationships, or the lack thereof, can be the difference between pushing your bill through committee and not getting a hearing. A certain level of trust between members can be the difference between striking a deal and not. As much as the rules affect lawmaking, relationships are just as, if not more, important. Congress is an extremely social institution. In its most basic form it is an institution where peers congregate to identify problems and find common ground on solutions. Socialization in Congress is not an easy dynamic to capture. As a result, it is possible that many studies in congressional research have shied away from tackling the problem. However, it may be the next essential frontier for legislative scholars and observers. ■

Congressional Fellows, Class of 2012–13

Congressional Fellows in the class of 2012–13 Amir Fairdosi and Joshua Huder made contributions to this issue of *PS*; in the July issue of PS, Anthony Madonna, also class of 2012–13, contributed to *PS*. Here they are, with the entire class of Congressional Fellows. ■



2012–2013 Congressional Fellows (left to right)

Line 1: Arlene Bierman, Joan Penrod, Nicole, Fletcher, Emily Nicklett, Barbara Damron, Rajean Moone, Amir Fairdosi

Line 2: Melanie Marlowe, Veronica Jones (Manager, Congressional Fellows Program), Joan Davitt, Christine Bishop, Ian Ostrander, Peter Sokolove, Andrew Gettinger

Line 3: Brooke Hollister, Jason Thomas, Erik Abjornson, Susan Lynch, Hassan Tettah, Tyson King-Meadows, Stephen Ferrara, Scott Gutierrez, Harry Heiman, Kevin Wozniak

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