

Extension of Remarks



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The Backseat Boys

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Apart from the pop-culture reference, the title of this article has more than one meaning. "Backseat" was Dick Cheney's Secret Service codename during his tenure as Gerald Ford's chief of staff (Medved 1979, 336). Both of us served as Congressional Fellows with Cheney: Pitney in 1984, Connelly in 1985-86.

At the time, Cheney held Wyoming's sole House seat and chaired the House Republican Policy Committee. We worked in the committee's office, one of several GOP leadership staff offices on the sixth floor of the Longworth House Office Building. The location symbolized the "backseat" status of the House minority. It sat along a dark, dingy corridor, far from the heart of the Hill. Its windows overlooked something that looked like a prison yard. House Democrats found it easy to ignore "permanent minority" Republicans.

For two years after his Fellowship, Pitney stayed on the sixth floor of Longworth to work at the now-defunct House Republican Research Committee. When Connelly arrived, we began discussing what the discipline could learn from House Republicans. The discussions continued after Connelly went to the Senate side to serve the second half of his Fellowship with Richard Lugar (R-IN).

Our academic instincts naturally led us both to search for the recent literature, but we

learned that there was none. The last book-length treatment was Charles O. Jones's *The Minority Party in Congress*, in 1970. Since then, studies of congressional party politics had focused on the Democrats, relegating the House GOP to the backseat of legislative scholarship.

Why? Political scientists study power, and the House Democrats obviously had most of it. Moreover, most political scientists were (and are) Democrats. While there were few signs of deliberate partisan bias, their personal interests and professional contacts tended to lie on the Democratic side of the aisle. And as is usually the case in any discipline, people wrote on topics that others have written about. By the 1980s, as Richard Fenno later wrote, legislative scholars had become "victims of our Democratic diet" (Fenno 1997, 2).

So we resolved to fill the gap with our own writing. The Congressional Fellowship Program -- Cathy Rudder in particular -- helped us by encouraging us to work in both houses of Congress. (Pitney had worked for Al D'Amato, R-NY). From this point of departure, we reflected that what we saw in the House was dramatically different from what we experienced in the Senate.

As all students of Congress know, individual senators have more clout than their House counterparts. In the mid-1980s, Lugar

and D'Amato had the added advantage of belonging to the majority. When we were on the Senate side, then, our principals were real players who could actually write legislation. In the House, by contrast, the Republicans could uphold Reagan vetoes and attack Democratic proposals, but they could do little to advance their own agenda. After decades in the minority, few of them had ever sponsored a major law, and none had ever chaired a House committee.

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In one way, majority status is like tenure. If you have it, you might take it for granted. If you do not have it, you are always thinking about it. In another way, however, the two things are quite different. Tenure belongs to the individual while majority status is a collective good. At the time, much of the political science literature suggested that rational politicians would focus on their individual reelection goals, and give short shrift to collective party goals.

That generalization clashed with what we witnessed at Policy Committee meetings and other Republican gatherings. Most members desperately wanted their party to win the majority, and some would take personal risks to advance that cause. None

was more willing to live dangerously than Newt Gingrich. Cheney was the House GOP leadership's liaison to the Gingrich faction, the Conservative Opportunity Society. We both helped in that liaison work, which is how we got to see Gingrich in action.

Gingrich gained national media attention in 1984, when he had a bitter floor exchange with Speaker Tip O'Neill. When the parliamentarian ruled O'Neill out of order, Gingrich became a hero both to younger House Republicans and conservative activists watching on C-SPAN. (A myth has grown up that O'Neill was a jovial figure who generated warm feelings on both sides of the aisle. That is nonsense. O'Neill had little use for Republicans, who in turn resented his hardball tactics.) Such activities did Gingrich scant good with rank-and-file voters in his home district, and they guaranteed that national Democrats would target him for defeat.

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We did draw some insights from political science literature, albeit from different subfields. According to international relations scholar Robert Jervis (1976, 327): "Domestic groups in conflict see the other side as more unified than it is. In local labor-management disputes each side is apt to believe incorrectly that the other is controlled from above. Both Democrats and Republicans in the House of Representatives see the other party as the one that is more organized and disciplined."

Jervis got it exactly right. Democrats thought of the Republicans as monolithic "Reagan Robots." But up close, we saw a kaleidoscopic array of party divisions: moderate v. conservative, young v. old,

confrontational v. accommodationist, party v. committee. Even if it had wanted to, the minority party leadership had no means to impose discipline. House Republicans wanted majority status yet lacked consensus on how to achieve it.

Democrats were not the only ones who misread the House GOP. Connelly attended bicameral GOP staff meetings, and later interviewed Policy Committee staffers in both chambers. He found that Senate Republicans knew little of their colleagues in “the other body” and tended to assume that the House Republicans were a disciplined party. This misunderstanding both stemmed from and contributed to the frequent conflicts between Senate and House Republicans.

Conversely, the Jervis principle explains House Republicans’ attitudes toward Democrats – and perhaps House Democrats’ attitudes today toward majority Republicans. On every controversial roll-call vote, Republicans assumed that the Democrats were using strong-arm tactics to keep their members in line. Some GOP lawmakers and staffers even saw a partisan hand in late mail deliveries to the sixth floor of Longworth.

Then again, such perceptions were not entirely wrong. As David Rohde later showed, House Democrats did indeed have higher rates of party unity than Republicans throughout the 1980s (Rohde 1991, 153). In the 1990s, a scandal erupted at the House Post Office, and people went to prison.

We learned much from Cheney himself. In *Home Style*, Fenno warned of “going native” during participant observation research (Fenno 1978, 275). Still, it was hard not to find Cheney impressive. Connelly's subsequent optimistic writings on a “Boy Scout” view of Congress derived directly from his time with Cheney and Lugar. (Pitney did not write a “Boy Scout” account of his time with D’Amato.)

Some of the literature tries to reduce legislative leadership to institutional context. That is, leaders are purportedly just the creatures of procedures, colleagues, and parties in the electorate. Watching Cheney reminded us that there is more to leadership than followership. When Cheney spoke, people listened. What the press now calls his “gravitas” caused other House Republicans to heed him. He was both a creature and creator of his context.

The Civil War historian Douglas Southall Freeman once explained a source of gravitas: “First, know your stuff. Know your stuff, just that. Know -- know your own branch, know the related arms of the service; you can't know too much if you are going to be a successful leader. And know the yesterdays” (Freeman 1979, 4). Colleagues deferred to Cheney because he knew his stuff. His executive experience gave him a profound understanding of “the related arms of the service.” He knew policy. And from his academic background and research on the speakership, he knew “the yesterdays.” Cheney’s example offers evidence that knowledge is power on Capitol Hill.

During party meetings, we noticed other members who triggered the opposite reaction. Long of wind and narrow of mind, people such as Mark Siljander (R-MI) and Joseph DioGuardi (R-NY) caused their colleagues to roll their eyes and head for the exits. As deGaulle once observed, “Men instinctively distrust an officer who is prodigal of speech” (deGaulle 1960, 59-60).

Cheney was no “pander bear.” At different times, we both traveled with him to Wyoming, and heard him tell constituents what they did not want to hear. Pitney watched him explain to people in the small town of Rawlins that he opposed federal subsidies for rail service to southern Wyoming. Connelly saw him take on a bunch of angry ranchers who were losing grazing

land to DOD needs. In a conversation with Connelly, Cheney manifested his familiarity with political science, explaining why he was not acting as a single-minded seeker of re-election. He said he did not want the job if it entailed pandering.

He also noted that Wyomingites respect independence, something both of us witnessed. They respected him even when -- and perhaps because -- he did not pander to them. Clearly Congressman Cheney was a "trustee," not merely an "agent" for constituent interests. He was more than willing to engage in blunt talk with constituents and colleagues alike. Economic theories of legislative behavior fail to capture such leadership. As James Q. Wilson noted, "whereas economics is based on the assumption that preferences are given, politics must take into account the efforts made to change preferences" (Wilson 1980, 363).

On the Hill and among Congress scholars, Cheney had a reputation as a House institutionalist and something of a thoughtful academic. He was both. Of course, reporters also described him as a "moderate" even though his voting record was quite conservative -- as the press reported during the 2000 campaign. Thus we learned that "style" and ideology are two different things.

As a House institutionalist, Cheney understood the need for bipartisan cooperation. But he also knew that "learning to govern" meant more than learning to play the politics of accommodation and compromise. Sometimes, like Gingrich, he thought it was necessary to confront the majority. He tangled with Speaker Jim Wright, once publicly calling him a "heavy-handed son of a bitch." Coming from Cheney, such a comment gained widespread attention -- precisely his point.

The role of institutionalist had an internal conflict. Cheney was loyal to

the House but also loyal to the Republican White House. He consistently sided with the president on national security issues, even though there was no real electoral payoff either for him or the party. (For instance, polls showed skepticism about aid to the Nicaraguan Contras). On domestic issues, though, he showed a willingness to take on the White House, as in the case of the 1985-86 tax bill. For both of us, this episode crystallized the "government v. opposition" dilemma we later analyzed in our study of the House GOP.

There is a direct line from our Fellowship experience in the House and our subsequent scholarship. In general, our journey on the Hill helped us understand the limits of rational-choice theory and quantification. While roll-call data are important, we learned that they supply only a glimpse of congressional life. That is especially true when floor rules keep many proposals from reaching a vote in the first place. Moreover, floor votes miss many dimensions of behavior. As we have pointed out, Gingrich and Republican Leader Bob Michel (R-IL) had nearly identical voting records but had fundamentally different approaches to leadership.

More specifically, we both gained enormously from working in a leadership office instead of a member office. In the latter, we might well have focused on self-interested district-leaning behavior. In the former, though, we grasped the reality of collective action.

Finally, our scholarly agenda would not have been possible without the trust of Dick Cheney. Nearly two decades ago, we were amazed to find ourselves in leadership meetings and working on leadership projects. We still draw upon those experiences, which would not have been possible without Cheney. The respect political scientists have shown him is well deserved.

In 1994, we published our major book on the House GOP. We titled it: *Congress' Permanent Minority? Republicans in the US House*. Shortly after the publication date, of course, House Republicans won the majority. Colleagues still tease us about it. That's okay, since we were able to supply the discipline with an analysis of the House GOP at the precise moment when it was most useful. Dick Cheney is no longer in the backseat, and neither are the House Republicans.

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