Luncheon Talk - University of Oklahoma

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I have been invited to say a few words about research on Congress. And I must say that coming from the people at the Carl Albert Center, that is both a flattering invitation and a tall order. For you, here at the University of Oklahoma, are among the leaders in the country in thinking about and defining the field of congressional research. Still, you have given me the opportunity to sing my song, and I shall not pass it up.

I want to talk about research on the members of Congress. And I want to talk about research on the members of Congress within a little larger rubric—research on elective politicians. I realize that what I have to say will be a little like preaching to the choir, but I do so in the belief that a little reenforcement may encourage the choir to sing louder if not better. I want to make two general points. First, that there is a special need to study and to understand our elective politicians—among whom members of congress are the most prominent. Second, that there is a special need to study them by personal observation at the closest possible range.

There are a couple of arguments I would make on the matter of need. One is an academic argument. It is this: that America's elective politicians—
especially members of Congress—are the most talked about and yet the least understood elements in our political system. They are the subject of stories in every daily newspaper and on every nightly television newscast. But they are not the subject of academic research. If we take into account all the research that has something to do with our politicians, this is an exaggeration. But if, however, we take into account only those studies based on some personal contact with politicians, it is not an exaggeration. In either case, the proportions of the argument are correct; and it is the matter of proportions that underlies the academic case for devoting more attention—much more—to elective politicians.

The argument can be put more broadly. Elective politicians get talked about in the news because they are so crucial to the operation of the political system. Indeed, their election, their presence, their decision-making is what makes us a representative democracy. There is, then, a huge mismatch between the central importance of elective politicians to our system of government and their peripheral importance in our scholarship. There are probably a lot of reasons for this mismatch. But one of them, I believe, is the reluctance and/or the inability of political scientists to observe elective politicians personally and at close range. I believe we should close that academic
distance by undertaking more observation-based research on elective politicians.

There is another argument in support of the need for research. It derives more from the perspective of the citizenry. After all, it is the relationship between elective officials and citizens that is the hallmark of a representative democracy. And this relationship is not now a healthy one. For some years, nation-wide polls have registered low, and increasingly lower, levels of citizen trust in government and citizen respect for institutions of government—such as Congress—inhabited by elective politicians. Parents, when asked, do not want their children to pursue careers in elective politics. Negative attitudes of this sort, when widely held, undermine the everyday operation of representative government and threaten its ultimate acceptance by the people to whom it is responsible.

Carried into higher levels of government, these attitudes can cause serious disability and breakdown. The Iran-Contra investigation revealed the high cost to our political system when non-elected officials hold elective officials in low regard. The disregard, in some executive circles, for the intentions, values, interests, prerogatives, perspectives and legitimacy of the elective politicians in Congress lies at the heart of the problem. This attitude of
disdain, as practiced and expressed at high levels, reflects the negative attitudes expressed, if not practiced, by the citizenry at large. The point is simply that a good deal of negativism toward elective politicians is present throughout our political system. Its presence is not a sign of good health.

My argument here is that better understanding might have a beneficial effect on the attitudes of citizens toward their elected politicians and, hence, improve the health of our political system. Of course, we cannot predict what, if any, effect more close-in research might have—or on whom. But when I speak of "citizens" I mean to include not just voters but—even more important—the non-elected officials who work with our elective politicians and the media people who interpret the activities of our elective politicians to the rest of us.

We cannot know, either, whether the effects will be beneficial. But we do know that the present unhealthy relationship between citizens and politicians exists side by side with a knowledge gap, or an understanding gap, on the part of citizens. And I believe that as we fill the knowledge gap it is quite likely that we will also bring about a new appreciation of, if not more positive attitudes toward, our elective politicians. That may not happen. If it does not, the present relationship will most likely deteriorate. And while
the American political system can doubtless withstand a good bit of distrust, disrespect and disregard for its elective politicians, just as surely its tolerance has limits. From that perspective, any prospect for improvement deserves nourishment.

I am advocating both a research idea and a research method. The idea is that elective politicians have not received the kind of academic attention they deserve. The method is one of close personal observation. We ought to learn about them by talking to them, watching them and following them around. Some of our research can be done by bringing politicians— aspiring, active or retired—to our place of work. But most of it, I believe, must be done in the setting in which they operate, in their natural habitats. The aim is to see the world as they see it, to adopt their vantage point on politics. For it is precisely this view, from over the politician's shoulder, that is now missing from academic research.

Journalists, of course, regularly adopt this perspective. And to a large degree, therefore, our present-day opinions of elected politicians are theirs. That is, up to now, journalists have been doing our work for us. But their interest tends to be episodic rather than sustained; and their writing tends to stress idiosyncrasies rather than regularities. (They may also be inclined
toward negativism.) If we do not increase and improve our observation, however, we will remain hostages to the views of the journalists. That situation, too, seems unsatisfactory; and it provides another incentive for academics to proceed. The aim is to produce a more complete, more reliable, and more general picture of our elective politicians than either academics or journalists have yet produced.

What would our research look like? Well, the aim would be to look at both the personal side and the contextual side of the politician's world. On the one hand, we need to incorporate their ambitions, goals, motivations, experiences and values; and on the other hand, we want to investigate the several environments in which they work, both electoral and governmental, in the constituency and at the capitol. We want to learn about how they run for office and how they govern in office. We want to understand the opportunities and the constraints that face them when they act in both settings. We want to understand what they think their job is, and what they think about their job. We want to understand the resources they have available, how they husband, expend and, in general, utilize them in doing their job. We want to understand the institutional structures within which and around which they must work, as well as the kinds of people from whom they must learn and with whom they must
We want to investigate how and why and when they make their important choices within these various contexts—whether or not to run, how to campaign, which policies to support, which policies to push for, what coalitions to build, what image to present, what privacy to protect, how to spend their time, whom to trust, with whom to incur obligations, what values to uphold, etc. We want to examine the decisions that carry people into elective politics. Are there normal paths that elective politicians follow? If so, what is the logic that propels them along such paths? If not, are people propelled into elective office randomly, by accidental opportunity? If so, what motivates people to seize the opportunity? How important to the decision to seek (or not seek) office are matters like previous experience, circumstances of the moment, family conditions, likelihood of winning, alternative careers, probable support, etc? This is but a sample of questions we need to answer—for particular politicians, for particular types of politicians, in particular institutional settings at particular points in time.

And one more thing. We will need to find ways to connect our research effort to a complementary teaching effort. What is needed, eventually, is a teaching program that trains people to do the kind of research I am advocating.
That means alternating people between immersion in the field and instruction in the classroom. One reason political scientists do so little observational research is because they are not trained to do so and because they believe, therefore, that such research is a less legitimate form of political science than that which is done by manipulating second hand data at a comfortable distance from the real world of politics. But participant observation has a large set of interesting problems—of data, of method and of ethics—which need to be discussed in conjunction with practice. Only as people actually combine the two, will the kind of research I am advocating take hold as a legitimate enterprise in political science circles.

Since the Carl Albert Center program has been one of the pioneers in the kind of classroom-real world research relationship I am talking about, perhaps you could help the rest of us to figure out how to do it. If that were to happen, perhaps all of us could sing louder and better.