Chasing Politicians

I have been asked to talk to you about my research; and I am happy to do so. In a capsule—as you can tell from the title—I study politicians. That immediately stamps me as a little weird. Politicians are definitely not among America's favorite people. And the politicians I study, members of the United States Congress, are the least favored of all. In public opinion polls asking people about their trust in various occupations, the occupation "member of Congress" regularly falls near the bottom of the list—21st out of 28 occupations in a 1998 poll—making them barely more trustworthy than real estate salesmen, insurance salesmen, car salesmen and lawyers. In polls inquiring about public confidence in major American institutions, the Congress as an institution also
ranks near the bottom--15th out of 16 U.S. institutions in another 1998 poll. The only institution in which the public registered less confidence was "the criminal justice system." To which the public response would doubtless be: "a perfect match." And so it goes. Little trust; little confidence. Individually and collectively, they are distinctly out of favor.

So, why would anyone devote 40 years, as I have, to studying such a beaten-down, unloved, untrustworthy group of people. To my non-academic friends, the obvious answer has to be some kind of character flaw--which may be true in the sense that, at some level, all scholarly researchers are driven by an exaggerated--even crazy--curiosity about something. More rationally, perhaps, I study members of Congress for two reasons. First, American government is a representative democracy. And, love them or hate them, our
elected representatives are central and crucial to the operation of our representative democracy.

Second, among all the elected representatives in this country, the most influential are U.S. House members and Senators. And it is their power, their visibility and the scope of the public problems they deal with that attracted me to them. Explaining them and their actions to other students of American politics--like yourselves--has been my central research preoccupation.

To put my interest in perspective, we need to remember that representative democracy involves at least two sets of people--the elected representatives and the voters who elect them and hold them accountable at the polls. My research involves only one side of this connection; I do not study voters. Lots and lots of political
scientists do, however, since elections lie at the heart of
democracy. In the terminology of political science, these scholars
study mass politics and I study elite politics. In the end,
however, we must and we do lean on one another as we try to
understand and explain representative democracy.

Now, as all of you know, research ideas and research projects have
a history. So before I speak about some current research, a little
personal history is relevant. My research on the U.S. Congress
began in the late 1950's--right here in Rush Rhees Library. I had
become interested in tracing the changes Congress makes in the
President's budget; and I was spending my time reading everything
there was to read in the library's government documents section--
sixteen years of congressional committee hearings, committee
reports, floor debates, and voting records--to help me explain
congressional budget decisions. Not satisfied, however, that my reading fully explained the content of these decisions, I decided--after two years in the library--to go to Washington to talk with members of Congress whose opinions and judgments I had been reading on the printed page.

I began with the most important legislators in the budget making process--the fifty members of the Appropriations Committee in the House of Representatives. And in three weeks of interviews in June 1959, I interviewed forty-nine of the fifty. That adventure opened up a whole new world for me--the world of Capitol Hill. It changed my main research method from documentary analysis to interviewing. And it triggered a shift in my immediate research focus from budget making to the internal politics of the Appropriations Committees. My proposed study of congressional budget making turned into a

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study that centered on the inside workings of the House and Senate Appropriations Committees. After that, I decided to write about congressional committees generally, which I did by comparing those two Appropriations Committees to five other pairs of committees in the House and Senate-committees devoted to foreign affairs, education, environment, taxes and post office.

The 1950's and the 1960's were a high water mark of actual committee power in Congress. Committees were the central policy-making institutions inside Congress, and scholars had to understand their activities if we were to make any sense out of congressional performance. Capitol Hill power was committee power; and for 15 years, my own research centered on understanding how that power was exercised, by whom and with what results--and writing about all that for political science students. My understanding was heavily
dependent on interviews with committee members, and with the political people with whom they worked. So, for 15 years, a lot of my vacation time was spent in Washington—a major switch from Rush Rhees centered research to Capitol Hill centered research.

In the 1970's, my research took another turn. And here is where the "chasing" part of my "chasing politicians" title came into play. As every political science student knows—or is told—the job of an elected representative has two parts—legislation and representation. They make laws and they represent constituents. Now, I had watched House members make committee decisions that were influenced by their individual constituencies. But I had very little understanding of the process by which constituent wishes got translated into House member votes.
I could, of course, look at Census statistics in the library to get descriptions of member constituencies and correlate them with roll call votes. But I wanted to know what the politicians themselves thought of their constituencies--on the theory that their votes would be more influenced by their own pictures of the district, than by Census Bureau's statistics. And I decided that the best way to get at their pictures of their constituencies was to talk with them while they were at work in their home districts. For legislation, the politicians' work place is Capitol Hill. But for representation, their work place is the constituency.

So, in the fall of 1970, I asked four House members if I could come to their home districts and follow them around while they were at work there--two in New York, one in Ohio, and one in Georgia. They all said OK, and I did. I never completed the original study
I had planned--connecting member perceptions of their constituencies with their actual roll call votes in the House. Instead, I became totally absorbed in studying the full range of things they did when they were at home, and in trying to figure out how it all blended into the larger political activity we call representation.

In combination, these two research projects--about committees and about constituencies--tell you something very basic about my kind of field research. In both cases, I went out into the real world of politics with a definite political science research question in mind. And in both cases my research question changed as a result of my on-the-spot experience. I first went to Capitol Hill to explain the content of budget decisions, and I ended up explaining the behavior of House members and senators in their committees.

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Then, I went to the constituencies to explain constituency influence on House members roll call votes, and I ended up explaining what House members do and why they do it when they are at home in their constituencies. I changed because the research question that I had formulated here at the University seemed less intriguing than a research question that hit me between the eyes once I came face-to-face with the politicians involved. And I could only hope that the new question and my efforts to answer it would be helpful to both colleagues and students.

And that comment leads to another research thread linking my study of committee activity in Washington to my study of member activity at home. In both cases, I worked as part of a large and hyper-active community of political scientists interested in the U.S. Congress. And in both cases, my research focused on questions that...
were emerging within that larger community. If the 50's and 60's brought a scholarly focus on the power of congressional committees, the 70's and 80's brought a scholarly focus on the independent influence of the individual politician.

Politicians were winning elections as independent, self-starting, self-promoting, fund-raisers and entrepreneurs instead of relying, as they had for so long, on the political party. They were stepping out to champion a variety of public policy issues inside Congress and in the media without depending on their seniority or their committee positions. My focus on some individual politicians at home was, therefore, part of an emerging scholarly focus on a new generation of politicians in a new post-1960's political environment. The lesson is simply that, as you all know, most scholarly research does not go on in isolation, but is constantly
nourished by the related research of others. And this may be particularly true in a field like political science, since we all live in the same political world and take a big chunk of our research agenda from it.

Since 1970, the bulk of my research has been conducted out across the country. My original 1970 "gang of four" House members grew to 18 members in 18 constituencies, and I wrote about their activities in a study called Home Style. After that, my state-wide travels with 20 U.S. senators produced five studies of individual senators and a campaign-time study of ten senators. That adds up to a lot of politicians, a lot of countryside and a lot of chasing--since 1970. So what is it like "chasing politicians?"

It is altogether an inelegant research method--to which I have
given the equally inelegant description “soaking and poking.” That term may well be my lasting legacy to political science. But if you wish something a bit more stylish, participant observation will do nicely.

It is time consuming, physically tiring, and psychologically nerve-racking. It is labor-intensive work—unglamorous, blue collar, data grubbing work. It requires a high tolerance for ambiguity—since you have to feel your way through a maze of personal relationships that differ from event to event, and from place to place. It requires persistence, patience, adaptability, and a fairly modest ego. I ride around in a lot of back seats, stand around at a lot of functions, sit in the back rows of a lot of meeting halls, eat a lot of junk food and absorb a variety of indignities and a lot of teasing at the expense of my profession.
I try to stay out of the way and, as a scholar, to maintain a certain distance from the people I’m with—"up close, but not too personal." I have sometimes described my only real professional talent as the willingness and the ability to listen. I am a professional listener who from time-to-time leaves academia and immerses himself in the work-a-day political world, and who then reports back as carefully and helpfully as he can to those fellow political scientists who have not as they say, "been there" or "done that." And are not likely ever to do so.

In my research, the object is to see the world the way politicians see it by watching them from over their shoulders, by listening and talking to each one when he or she is at work in his or her natural constituency habitat. In that respect, I am sometimes compared
to the jungle anthropologist Jane Goodall--though I’ve never been quite sure whether the key comparison there is to me or the chimpanzees!

For the past three years, I’ve been traveling around with a small number of House members in their districts in order to see if, and how, member/constituency relationships might have changed in the quarter century since I had begun chasing them in the early 1970’s. My current research effort has been to consider that question in a part of the country where we know American politics has changed the most--the South--and to explore for changes in patterns of House member representation that might have accompanied the much heralded change from the Old South to the New South.

My exploration has centered, so far, on a single district in west
central Georgia, just south of Atlanta. I first visited there with Democratic Congressman Jack Flynt, a member of my original "gang of four" in 1970--and twice more, in 1972 and 1976. Because southern politics has changed so much, I was curious to see what had happened over 25 years in that one district. So I went back there three times from 1996 to 1998 to travel around with its current Congressman, Republican Mac Collins. And there's one important indication of change right there--from Democrat Flynt to Republican Collins in the same district. Moreover, that change is a virtual microcosm of what has happened throughout the South--as once solidly Democratic strongholds have become equally strong Republican strongholds.

My current interest, then, is in changing patterns of representation in Congress. And I have begun by investigating the
change, if any, from the Flynt pattern of representation to the Collins pattern of representation. My general idea is that there are three main ingredients of any elected politician's pattern of representation. First, the personal goals of each representative. Second, the constituency context in which each person works. And third, the ongoing process of negotiation between representative and constituents.

By **goals** I mean such things as getting elected, making public policy or achieving personal satisfaction. By **context** I mean such things as the socio-economic, demographic and political characteristics of the constituency and the expectations of the various constituents. By **negotiation** I mean the constant interaction between member and constituents through which their relation to one another gets worked out or does not. As I think of
it, every representative deliberately chooses his or her own strategy of representation, and that choice, that strategy, is shaped by the personal goals of the representative, by the constituency context in which the representative works and by the impact, over time, of a never-ending process of negotiation between representative and constituents to work out a relationship that is satisfactory to both.

When I am in the district, I am trying to dope out a member’s representational strategy. Most of what I observe when I am there is a snapshot of this continuous, bit-by-bit, repetitive process of negotiation through which a particular representational pattern is--or is not--established, adjusted and maintained. By observing this process over time, through several visits, I hope to get not just a snapshot of a politician’s representational strategy, but
some moving picture of the strategy and of the durability—or the vulnerability—of each set of constituency relationships.

So, has the pattern of representation changed in my one Georgia district between the 1970's and the 1990's. Yes it has. My soaking and poking in this district has led me to conclude that its two representatives pursued quite different representational strategies. Flynt’s I call a person-intensive representational strategy and Collins’ I call a policy-intensive representational strategy. Flynt’s ambitions and negotiations centered on his personal relationships with constituents. Collins’ ambitions and negotiations center on his policy relationships with constituents. Their goals as politicians were different; their constituency’s context had changed and was, therefore, different; and the way they negotiated their relationships at home, as I observed them, were
different. At the very least, therefore, I can put a human face on one of the most profound changes in American politics over the last quarter century.

Jack Flynt’s goal gets revealed in the story of his career. He was a lawyer who got into politics early—as his grandfather and father before him—because he loved the sheer involvement with others that is a part of the political life. Politics was the only career he ever wanted or ever had; and he was never defeated during his climb up the political office ladder. His district was—with the exception of its 25% black residents—homogeneous. It was a rural, small town district of 16 counties dominated by agriculture and textiles. It was a one-party Democratic district—in which for a long time the Democratic primary was the only meaningful contest. So long as he kept the economic and political elites of his 16
counties—the county seat elites—happy, he was safe. And this he did, binding them to him through the constant cultivation of his personal relationships with them, one-on-one, one-at-a-time.

In my three visits, we walked the main streets of seven different county seats, as he shook hands, gossiped and schmoozed, in and out of every office and business establishment. We visited in numerous individual homes and country stores. Indeed, he insisted I stay in his home during my visits—all evidence of his preoccupation with personal relationships. He had an incredible gift for names, faces, places, families, events, history—for all the associations that link one person to another. Once, after a Rotary Club dinner, he proceeded to name everyone of the 40 people who had been there, table-by-table, describing each one by occupation and by level of political support. His representational strategy, then, was one of
personal contact, personal service and personal accessibility. "In this district," he said, "only a person-to-person campaign will work." His negotiations were intensely personal--and for at least nine of his 11 elections, they seemed to fit the expectations of his active constituents like a glove.

What he did not do in any of his home activities I observed was talk about matters of public policy--issues. He had opinions, strong opinions. He was a segregationist on racial matters and equally conservative on all fiscal matters. His active, supportive constituents knew his views--especially on race--and those views were essential to his political success. They were a necessary underpinning of his representational strategy. And any representative of that district at that time would have had the same policy views. But Jack Flynt's stock in trade and his
passion, was his network of personal relationships and he was not about to jeopardize those personal ties by plunging into potentially unsettling policy discussions. My central point here is not that he avoided policy discussions on race. He did. But my point is that he avoided all policy discussions--period.

In his speeches, he talked not about policy, but about the community to which they all belonged--that is, to which all whites belonged--and how perfectly he represented that community because he and they were so much alike. He wanted his constituents to think of him as a good representative because they saw him as "one of us." His talks were designed to create that common community feeling. All-in-all, I think of this as a person-intensive representational strategy. And that strategy got him elected 11 straight times--till he retired in 1978.
His strategy was sorely tested in his two campaigns against Gingrich—both of which he won narrowly. He was redistricted in 1972—to reflect Georgia's population growth—into a much less rural, more suburban district close to Atlanta—strange territory for someone whose stock in trade was longstanding personal association with small town elites. The change virtually paralyzed him; he could not adjust; he was a fish out of water in the suburbs; luckily, his small town core strength carried him through to retirement in 1976—whereupon Gingrich—a consummate policy-centered politician—carried the district.

When curiosity led me back to the district in 1996, I found that three-quarters of its constituents lived within the boundaries of Flynt's 1976 district, and that 79% of the total 1992 vote and 81% of Collins' own vote came from the old Flynt district. So while

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the district was not "the same," it was close enough to explore for change. And the main change in that "same district," is that Mac Collins' personal goals, by sharp contrast with Flynt, center on his ideas about good public policy. His goals were shaped, too, during his pre-political career--as a businessman. Collins entered politics as a successful small businessman, the owner of a trucking business. And it was a business he entered right out of high school. He did not go to college. Almost the first words out of his mouth when we first met was "I'm not your typical Ivy League congressman. I came from the school of hard knocks. I've spent my life close to working people." He came to Congress with the policy attitudes of a successful entrepreneur--with the feeling that "I did it without the government, you can too. Let's get the government off our backs." He was a Democrat by reasons of birth, but like so many other southerners, he became a Republican by
reasons of policy.

During my first trip with him in 1996, he gave six speeches. Compared to Flynt, it was a total turnaround. Every speech was about the country's fiscal problems—the budget, social security and medicare. Driving around in the car, most of what I call "travel talk" was about tax and trade policy and about the trade policies of the Republican candidates for the Presidency—Pat Buchanan and Bob Dole. Most all of his policy preoccupations were stimulated by his background and by his position on the House Ways and Means Committee—a position which he had ardently sought because of his longstanding businessman's interest in tax policies.

In 1998, my three day visit was consumed primarily with a variety of negotiations devoted to current policy problems— with EPA
officials on county water problems, with regional officials on transportation, with the Atlanta Chamber of Commerce on air quality problems, with hospital officers on long-term health care and with an organization policing child custody payments. I neither heard nor saw anything like this with Jack Flynt. Collins is a policy-oriented congressman. Any one-on-one negotiations he had with individuals were dwarfed by his policy discussions.

What about his constituency? Has it changed since the 1970's? In one sense, no--it is still as conservative--socially and fiscally as it ever was. And Collins' voting record is indistinguishable from Flynt's. Neither man, for example, has reflected the interests of his black constituents--25% to 30% in Flynt's day, 19% to 23% today.

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But in other ways, it is a vastly different district. It is now a suburban district, younger, better educated, more mobile, more business and reform-oriented. It is no longer dominated by agriculture and textiles and court house cliques, but rather as Collins' put it, by "people who drive to Atlanta to work every day." The one-party South has been transformed by demography and the civil rights revolution. It has become much more Republican as outsiders and cross-over white conservative Democrats--have swelled the party's ranks. Furthermore, the constituency has doubled in size, from 280,000 in Flynt's day, to 700,000 today. And the proliferation of advocacy groups plus the communications revolution has increased the flow of policy demands coming from the constituency. Jack Flynt signed every letter personally; he never got more than six letters against a vote. In 1997, Collins got 14,000 communications all told; one vote brought 190 individually
written letters of criticism. The ratio of personal touch to technological touch has changed enormously.

Taken together, these changes make it more difficult for a representative to adopt a Flynt-style person-intensive representational strategy and much easier to adopt a policy-intensive strategy--if the representative is so inclined. And Collins is--deliberately so. He was elected in 1992 and reelected three times since, in 1998 without opposition.

Does this mean that Mac Collins does not cultivate personal relationships? Of course not. Here, my point would be that each representative has a central, dominant strategy--one emphasizing personal, the other policy relationships. But for each one there is also a necessary supplemental strategy. For Flynt, that
involved his policy positions; for Collins, it involves personal contact and service. All politicians must pay some attention to both. But the proportions differ. And it is the difference in the proportions I take to be a measure of representational change in that district--vague though it may be. I have no desire to generalize much beyond this case except to say that it might help students of southern politics to understand political change, by learning about change at the grassroots in one southern district. And it might help all students to understand the district-level changes that lie behind the increased polarization of the two parties as policy makers inside the House in Washington.

My research in this one district may tell us something about representational changes in the South, but certainly not in other parts of the country. So, if this study is of some interest to my
colleagues, I hope to pursue others. I have been working on two other possible changes involving my original "gang of four" from 1970. Ben Rosenthal of Queens, New York was one of them. And I’ve been hanging out with his successor, Gary Ackerman, in a rapidly changing, heavily Jewish district. Louis Stokes of Cleveland was another one of the four, and I’ve been tagging along with a second black congressman, Chaka Fattah in Philadelphia and looking at representational changes from first to second generation African-American members of Congress.

So, why, then, am I still enduring the wear-and-tear and uncertainties of this kind of research? As fellow researchers, you know the answer to that question. Because I’m having fun; and I can’t imagine anything I’d rather do. And that, of course, is my real character flaw.

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