Congressman and Constituency: Richard Bolling of Missouri

A Question

On the very last day of the Twentieth Century, the veteran political editor of the Wall Street Journal wrote a valedictory editorial: Six American Political Giants. Three had been members of the U.S. Senate; and three had been members of the U.S. House of Representatives. His House member choices were: Republican Joseph Cannon of Missouri, Democrat Sam Rayburn of Texas, and Democrat Richard Bolling of Missouri. The first two were legends. Both men had lengthy House careers. And both had been elected by their colleagues to be Speaker of the House. But how explain the editor’s third choice? Why Richard Bolling?

The Missouri Congressman was a prominent player inside Congress; and he was widely admired by observers outside Congress. He served in the House of Representatives for 32 years. And, for much of his tenure, he actively coveted a leadership position among his fellow House Democrats. In 1962, he expressed his interest in the majority leader’s job; but he removed himself from the contest before the House Democrats voted. In 1968, he renewed his quest; but he failed to win a majority of House Democrats. In 1976, he was running once again for the position of House majority leader. And we traveled together in October in his congressional district. My visit opened up an opportunity to explore the Wall Street Journal editor’s remarkable claim for Representative Bolling’s national political preeminence.

The answer here begins by turning away from Washington and looking toward Congressman Bolling’s home constituency—which elected him, sixteen times—in and around Bolling (12/31/13) - 1
Kansas City, Missouri. To my knowledge, I was the only political scientist who ever journeyed to Kansas City to accompany Rep. Bolling as he campaigned for reelection in his congressional district\textsuperscript{3}. The following story explores my two and a half days with him in his home territory in October 1976.

**Early Learning**

The Missouri trip was preceded, and stimulated, by an earlier 1963 meeting with Congressman Bolling in Washington D.C. I had been invited then, by a group of senior scholars, to help them put together a study of Democratic party decision-making in the US House of Representatives. And, in particular, to help them interview the Missouri Congressman on the subject of inside decision-making among House Democrats\textsuperscript{4}. That early 1963 acquaintance with Rep. Bolling led to occasional conversations with him in Washington and, finally, to a research visit in his Kansas constituency.

When we met early-on in Washington, the institutional context in which Rep. Bolling worked was one of considerable committee autonomy, restrictive seniority rules and weak party discipline. In that institutional context, his House Committee on Rules wielded exceptional discretionary power. And its partisan makeup highlighted an important intra-party split within the House Democratic majority—between their liberal northern wing and their conservative southern group. A Bolling case study was being written from his vantage point—as he worked behind the scenes to stop a popular-but-conservative southern Democrat from capturing a coveted Ways and Means Committee vacancy. And elect, instead, a Northern liberal committee member. The stakes...
were especially high because, at that time, the Democratic members of the tax-regulating Ways and Means Committee also doubled as the Democratic Party’s powerful Committee on Committees.

It was an education to listen to the Congressman talk to others about his close working relationship with Democratic House Speaker, Sam Rayburn—whom he described as “a quick study,” “a devious man, in a respectable sort of way,” and “a wonderful teacher.” He described his relationship as that of a “mechanic” working for “a patron,” and as “a legislative lieutenant, not a political lieutenant.” Later, in the published case study, he wrote, “I was known as the ‘Speaker’s man’... I might have argued with him in private, but almost certainly, I supported him in public.”

Rep. Bolling described himself, too, as an institution-minded inside player and educator. His daily life was shaped by the rhythms of the House. “I like to spend the first hour of every day and the last hour of every day on the House floor,” he said. “It’s something I learned from (Speaker Sam) Rayburn. You find out more about what’s going to come up, and about the flow of business at those times. This means I don’t eat lunch. (It) also keeps me from being sociable in Washington.”

“When I began as a technician”, he said, “I limited myself to two bills a year...and when I’m doing something, I do nothing else. I eat with it, sleep with it and think about nothing else. If I go to a party, I think of nothing else. I’m a real bore.” And, “too many things around here happen casually. You have to get the clue. If you miss it, you’re in trouble.” “I don’t do a darn thing until I can count. You have to reach your decisions on a rational basis and then make sure you are protected.” Or, “I have never operated through a quid pro quo. I am not a vote trader. I have always worked through second or third parties”. “At one time, I knew "the number" of every

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Democrat,” he added, “but I never traded votes. I could not have kept track of them.” “Speaker Rayburn”, he said, “urged me to become popular and, to move into a formal leadership position.” But Bolling’s view was that “I couldn’t go around breaking arms off all the time and be everybody’s buddy.” He was a strong advocate of party government and of helping the majority party to run the House of Representatives.

The Missourian’s close working relationship with Speaker Rayburn, I learned, was certified by his regular attendance at Speaker Rayburn’s legendary—and selective—late afternoon “Board of Education” meetings to gossip and talk strategy. He described the “atmosphere” as one of “formal informality” whereby Rayburn sat in a certain chair and only certain others could take a drink before he did. He said, too, that he endured lengthy stories about Texas by the Speaker and his pals because the afternoon meetings helped him with his inside legislative job. He emphasized the regular presence too, of House Parliamentarian, Lewis Deschler. “Lew can find you ten precedents on one side and ten precedents on the other. What does the Speaker have when he has a man like this working for him? He has a jewel--a man to whom he is a slave.”

Rep. Bolling’s assignment to the Committee on Rules placed him at a strategic pivot-point in the legislative process--between decision-making in committee and decision-making on the House floor. And he owed that sensitive assignment to Speaker Rayburn. He replayed the moment. Rayburn: “You are going on the Ways and Means Committee.” Bolling: “No, Mr. Speaker.” “What?” “No, Mr. Speaker.” “Why not?” “Oil depletion. [tax breaks for oil
companies] I’d have to argue against it. You know that.” “You’ve got something there. What committee do you want?” “Rules.” “Go tell (Majority Leader John) McCormack that I say you are going on Rules."

“I’ve never played my position on the Rules Committee as a personal hoard”, he said. “I suppose I could; but I’m for or against on the issues.” “And, I wouldn’t go on the Appropriations Committee on a bet,” he added, “because I’m interested in legislation.” As a member of the Rules Committee, the Missourian saw himself as strategically placed to influence legislation. As he put it later, “By 1956-57, it was generally known that because I was so close to (Speaker) Rayburn, that I ran the Rules Committee even though I was the seventh man on an eight-man committee.”

Political scientist Burdett Loomis, Bolling; generalized. “In the end, the things the House needs most is legislators. What’s important is getting things through--then you’ve done everything... Running the House is the only thing that makes a difference.”

In time, Richard Bolling became the most prominent inside proponent of congressional reform, advocating a strengthened speakership, and a strengthened majority within the Democratic party--in matters of governance such as committee assignments and internal committee organization. In time, too, the thrust of his majority party- strengthening reforms, would be adopted by both parties. Profile writers gave admiring notice to his intellect and to his knowledge as the leading politician/student of the House. National Journal congressional

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editor, Richard Cohen, summed it up. "(Richard) Bolling probably did more to shape the House as an institution than did any other member in the last half of the twentieth century." That was the most probable view, too, of the admiring Wall Street Journal editor.

Constituency Travels

We traveled together--and talked in the Congressman's Missouri constituency for two-plus days at election time in late October, 1976. As a matter of biography, Dick Bolling was neither native to the Midwest nor to city life. He had landed in Kansas City by accident--"stranded in the middle of a history PhD by an old war," he said. And without any ties to that place prior to his discharge there from the Army. He grew up in TVA country in northern Alabama. He attended "Sewanee College: The University of the South" in Tennessee, in another region of pro-government TVA liberalism. He taught a little high school English, began a Ph.D. in history, enlisted in the Army in World War II, served in the South Pacific, and was honorably discharged in Kansas City, Missouri. He was from the district, but he was not of the district. He talked about learning "local speak." "I made two concessions when I went into politics in Missouri. I say 'Mizzoura' and 'tomater.'"

He went to work as a veteran's counselor at the University of Missouri at Kansas City. And he sharpened his liberal views and toughened his political tactics in the post-war ideological/organizational conflicts among the area's veterans groups. He was a founder of the liberal American Veterans Committee (AVC); and he became a Vice President of a...
national liberal political organization, Americans For Democratic Action (ADA).

"I had no intention of running for office," he recalled, when we met in his district. "I tried to convince ten people to run for Congress. When no one would, I did." His veteran/civic activities had led to cooperative relations with various liberal groups. With these "do-gooder" supporters (his term) and $3,000 of his own money, he won an upset grassroots victory in the 1948 Democratic primary. "I was a stranger in town," he said, "and I won election as a carpetbagger--or so they told me." He won, he explained, because the dominant, but declining, political force in the city--the Democratic Pendergast machine--had other priorities that year. And, equally crucial, the area's most prominent politician, President Harry Truman, had lent only pro forma support to Bolling's Democratic primary opponent.

He described Kansas City as "a rackets town," with an active Mafia and a Democratic, Pendergast machine. In his first race, "I raised all the money myself--$3,000." And, "Since nobody would talk to me, I walked the streets." The newcomer slipped in beneath the party radar to win the primary; and, therefore, he carried the party label in the congressional election. "I was elected by the party," he said, "by the do-gooders and the hoods." However, "the chief of the hoods had already picked out my successor, because (they found that) I wouldn't be controlled. They had been too busy with other offices when they first endorsed me; and they hadn't bothered to put strings on me." "I lucked in", said Bolling, "I was a fluke, an accident."

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In his second race two years later (as Bolling told it), the Democratic organization attacked their uninvited freshman Representative with a vengeance—but failed. In that reelection year, President Truman actively supported the incumbent. And Bolling credited Truman's support for his reelection. "I could not have survived the 1950 election if it hadn't been for the President," he told another interviewer. “He just plain saved me.” Interestingly, his early, life-saving protection had come directly from Washington, and only indirectly from his constituency. Dick Bolling, a self-styled “flukey” congressman settled in for an incumbency that would last for three decades.

Of special future importance in 1950 was the active support of Walter Evans, a prominent Kansas City businessman and close friend of President Truman, who signed on as Bolling's campaign finance manager at this critical juncture. “I had one group that was really key to everything,” Bolling said later, “and it was composed of two people. One of them was named Evans and the other one was named Truman...Evans raised the money. I was spared all of that.” Walter Evans served indispensably in that capacity to the end of Dick Bolling's career.

On the Road

When I joined the Congressman in Kansas City in late October, 1976, we were greeted by a supportive editorial in the Kansas City Star.
Over the years, Dick Bolling has maintained close ties and an active influence for good in the 5th District while developing nationally. Not many members of Congress have been able to do both. Either their ear is so embedded in home ground that they are nullities in Washington, or they roam the federal landscape at the expense of the home district.\textsuperscript{11}

Bolling’s reaction: “I got the best endorsement from the \textit{Star} I ever had. They say I do the national and the local job both. I couldn't have done better if I had written it myself.” He was a secure incumbent going through the motions of his \textit{fourteenth} reelection campaign. He had not experienced any electoral difficulty in a dozen years. The day before I arrived, he had gone to suburban Independence for a leisurely visit with Bess Truman, the President's widow. His stamp was on the district.

I knew, from our previous encounters, that he enjoyed talking politics. And we had two and a half campaign days together to do that. Meals were leisurely. We lunched each day with his district manager, Larry Bodinson, with his campaign manager, and another old friend or two. And I spent part of an evening visiting with him and his politically savvy wife in their high rise apartment. (“If ever there was a mom and pop business,” he said, “it’s being a member of Congress.”) At home, as in Washington, his conversation was both personal and analytical. He enjoyed talking about what he did; and his talk was forthright.

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Washington politics was very much on Representative Bolling's mind—and for good reason. He was actively waging his second all-out campaign to become House Majority Leader. And the crucial Democratic Caucus vote (among four contenders) was only six weeks away. I was determined to stay away from that subject. His extra-territorial vote-gathering strategies and his speculations did pop up now and then. And they will be noted. Mostly, however, he kept our focus on his constituency relationships.

Of the fourteen events on his schedule, only two had any relationship to the ongoing campaign in the district. One was a nighttime Democratic Party "Bash" we didn't attend. The other was his "Presidential Debate" with a local Republican. His district manager had cobbled together a daily schedule—laden with what he called "fill-ins," several of which had to be dredged up from ten year old appearance requests: a hospital Emergency Program, a Vista-related Youth Education Center, a Defense Department Map Agency, a Residential and Education Center for recent prison inmates, the Missouri Criminal Justice Council, a Veteran's Administration tree planting ceremony, a Jewish Community Center, a Social Security office and a Lutheran Church group. He also spoke to two public administration classes at Kansas State University.

He was not on top of things; and he was going through the motions. He was not exerting himself; he was not engaged; and he was not worried about constituency politics. Certainly, not about home politics. "I'm in the midst of an unthinking process," he said. And, "I'm
running on automatic pilot.” “When I come home, I work from idiot cards most of the time. I don’t know what I’m going to do from one hour to the next.” “When I do things like this,” he said, “I have to remind myself that I wasn’t drafted to take this job.” “I go to all these meetings, listen to them, and participate in a low key way. I don’t make speeches to experts. And I don’t take credit—’I got you this; I got you that.’ My position is deliberate and self-serving.” “It’s all legitimate,” he said defensively. “It’s the advantage of the incumbent. People want to see me.” It was a classic protectionist outlook and performance.

We made a couple of brief, spur-of-the-moment stops at shopping centers, where he shook hands and handed out brochures. “We finally saw a few people,” he enthused. “I had good recognition in both places, higher among old people.” And then, a big leap: “They say I don’t get along with people in Congress—that I’m snobby or aloof. I know that’s not true because of the relationship I have with people in my district. I get along with them very well.” At several of the day’s stops I saw respect, i.e., “How do I introduce this great man.” But I did not see warm personal contact or political give and take.

“If I were in trouble,” he said, “we’d do more walking. We might use media as a supplement. But I’m not a media showboater. Some of the newer (House) members have mastered the media, but not anything else. The intensity of personal contact is most important... Contact—that’s the glue.” If you “do the tube,” he said, “you may get elected, but you don’t get any depth of commitment. That comes only through personal contact.” He was, admittedly,
pacing himself. “If I have something complicated to do,” he added, “they’ll rest me... I’m absolutely brutal about a nap in the afternoon.” And he did nap before his one and only overtly political engagement, as a Jimmy Carter stand-in debating a President Ford supporter.

Throughout my visit, his district manager drove the car, prepping the congressman before each engagement, interpreting for him afterward and purveying local gossip in-between. In the car, Bolling underlined his current protectionist posture by recalling his early expansionist days.

He emphasized, for example, the importance of establishing, early in his career, institutionalized links with his new constituents. In his first term, “The key thing I did was that I started a home office”. He told another interviewer, “Nobody had home offices in those days...a real home office, you know, working day in and day out. As far as I know, I was the third Congressman in the United States to do that.” He described the office, in protectionist/expansionist terms as a place to which constituents could bring their problems and from which he could send newsletters. In the beginning, he had to pay for all outreach efforts himself. “You did not have allowances for that. You got a room, but you did not get allowances.” In those days, he was one of a very few House colleagues to have a district office—“one of three,” he said. And later, he commented that his office was “the only one
between the coasts.” It was a trail blazing “protectionist” career initiative.

He had his own district-centered incentive and rationale. “I set up a home office,” he explained, “because everyone here was used to going to ‘the boss’ for everything, and I needed (to build) independent support of my own.” In the Republican year, 1952, he added later, “It made a big difference. I think it probably saved me.” He had staffed it since 1956, with “my best friend and loyal political ally” Larry Bodinson, a proven comrade in arms from his formative AVC days. Now, with the office’s card file of 40,000 constituent names, he said, “Larry could run against me any time and win.”

“I use district staff and newsletters,” said Bolling, “so that I can pay attention to legislation in Washington. Ninety percent of my time goes into legislation.” His early protectionist moves—a constituency office and a personally close district manager—produced the essential and durable district-wide underpinnings of his career on Capitol Hill. Henceforth, Dick Bolling’s immersion in Washington politics would dwarf his immersion in Kansas City politics.

“How often do you come home,” I asked. “I don’t know,” he answered.

“I come home when I have something to do. If Larry says it’s absolutely necessary, I’ll come. The only time I’ll come when Congress is in session is when I have a graduation
speech to give. I invite myself to high school commencements. You get everybody that way. I began talking in grade schools because that was the only place they’d let me in. When I first ran, nobody would talk to me.”

In my Home Style accounting of his 1976 trips to the district, he went home nine times in nine months—a once-a-month frequency which placed him in the lowest quartile of his House colleagues. He brushed off criticism. “People say I’m not around much; but I’m around a lot more than they know. The ones who say that are the upper crust businessmen and the self-elected political leaders.”

While he did not come home often, he acknowledged one benefit when he did. “It’s relaxation for me to come home. I have a little spastic condition in my stomach; and I take something for it back there. But out here, I don’t need it. There isn’t the pressure here.” He summed up. “When you make a mistake here, you lose a vote. When you make a mistake in Washington, you lose legislation.”

Constituency Maintenance

Compared with most other members with whom I had traveled, he seemed not to be emotionally attached to, or embedded in, any describable element of his constituency. As we were being driven around one day, he suddenly exclaimed, “It’s fun to ride around my district
and see how things have changed." I noted, "He sounded more like a tourist than a resident." Surely more so, by his own description, than he would have sounded during his worrisome earliest days.

One day, we detoured from the schedule to visit a union headquarters. "We're going to go around personally to pick up a check from the Garment Workers," he said. "Ordinarily, I don't do this. I refused to go pick one up from the municipal employees yesterday. I checked with my protocol officer, Biemiller (Andrew Biemiller, top Washington lobbyist for AFL-CIO and former House colleague), and he said I didn't have to. But we've neglected Renaldo (local Garment Workers leader) lately, so we'll go and 'play butter.'"

"Most of the people closest to me," he added, "are satisfied by what I've done legislatively. Some think they have something to contribute. They need their egos massaged... I can do it. But I'm afraid I'm not very good at massaging egos." That was not news to me. It was news, however, that he had turned to a friendly Washington legislative operative for advice on how to handle a representational relationship in Kansas City. His choice told me something about his labor attachments. They were stronger in Washington than they were at home. And he monitored his home relationships from Washington! But I had to discover it from outside of Congress, in the constituency.

He followed a strategy of vote gathering in Kansas City similar to the one he followed when
making vote calculations in the House. "Working here or working in Washington, you don't want too much publicity", he said. "If you do, people will get jealous and you'll lose the next one. I don't need the publicity--just enough to get elected. I don't try to get a lot of things for my district--just a little more than average." Similarly, inside the House, "I never tried to get all the votes I could--just enough to win... The best bill is the one you pass by one vote. But, of course, you can't ever count that well. I like a little better plan than 51%." Analysts of strategic voting would recognize the wisdom of his "minimum winning", "just enough" support intuitions and calculations.

"Too few congressmen are willing to accept a position of national leadership," he told one university class. "They are opinionated, and they vote their opinions. But not many try to lead their communities in ideas." "I have the best platform from which to educate of anyone in the country," he told them. "To me, there's no difference between education and leadership. Do you know the Latin meaning of education? 'To lead out.' What is politics if not teaching?" "How often are you asked to explain a vote," one student asked. "Hardly ever. I can hardly remember one." And then, "It all goes with my Burkean philosophy of what a representative should be--that I should use my own judgment in legislative matters."

In marked contrast to many of my other traveling companions, Dick Bolling did not express strong personal or emotional attachments to his constituency as a distinctive or as a formative place, or to its inhabitants. He never spoke in "I am one of them," or "he is one of
us" terms. And I never recorded the word “trust” from our conversations.

From the beginning, Representative Bolling had been a staunch programmatic liberal. His earliest attachment, he emphasized, was to Harry Truman’s pro-labor, pro-civil rights, pro-health care, education and welfare programs, and to the Democratic party because of those active-government policies. In his first primary campaign in 1948, “I was the only person around who campaigned hard for Mr. Truman. Everyone else thought he was going to be a liability. It wasn’t so much that I was excited by Mr. Truman. I was excited by Mr. Truman’s program.” Kansas City, of course, was Harry Truman’s neighborhood. “Basically,” Bolling explained, “it was a conservative Democratic district, and I was clearly not a conservative. But I was ‘umbrellad’ by Truman, because the home town boy was at least as liberal as I was... You see, Truman was not only a personal help to me, but he was a general help because his program was the program I ran on and it covered me, it protected me.” Throughout his career, Bolling maintained a devoted and defining attachment to the liberal domestic policies of the national Democratic party.

When he talked about his constituency career, he said over and over that three personal ties—President Truman, Truman’s friend who became the congressman’s career-long finance chairman and Bolling’s long time district manager—were responsible. “The fact that I had Truman, that I had Walter Evans as a campaign manager and that I had Larry Bodinson, made an enormous difference.” By turns, they provided him with broad political cover, with

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political money and with street-smart political protection. The President gave the
Representative his start, and the other two freed him to concentrate on his legislative
activities in Washington.

Walter Evans was still raising Dick Bolling's campaign money when I was there. And the
Representative himself still seemed to want no part of it. Today's expectation, that party
leaders and party aspirants would vie with each other for nationwide fund-raising prowess
as a key to in-House promotions, was still two decades away.

Travel in his district confirmed a hunch that the expansionist period of his political career
was in the distant past, and that his outlook and performance were thoroughly protectionist.
The visit was an encouragement, therefore, to proceed with that particular developmental-
sequential idea about congressional careers.

A second lesson of the visit was to find that the muscular, devoted liberalism which had
driven his inside Washington work, was also the hallmark of his outside constituency
connections. He embraced philosophically--and he displayed politically--a pro-active
government, pro-labor, pro-civil rights, pro-civil liberties, pro-internationalist and
anti-communist liberalism.Intellectually and viscerally he was a Harry Truman-type liberal.
And that side of him was every bit as much of a driving force at home as it was in
Washington. He was, indeed, the exact same policy driven--and personally distant--
politician in both places, inside DC and outside DC.

In our Washington-centered conversations, his concerns had centered on public policy and on the business of turning his liberal policy preferences into legislation. At home, his talk was enlivened by the same concerns and the same issues. In Washington, he was a staunch advocate of labor unions—on matters of full employment and on their organizing and bargaining activities. At home, he expressed unhappiness with the quality of his city’s union leadership. “The labor movement in this town is bad—though I’d never say it in public. All the best AFL-CIO people that come here leave. The UAW and the Steel Workers weren’t with me in 1964... The steel workers’ leader traded me off for a position as a delegate to the (Democratic) convention. I helped to see to it that he was retired early. I took that trade very badly.”

His relationship with organized labor was crucial. But he was reluctant to hostage himself to the labor leaders in his home constituency.

“Sometimes, I have a better idea of what the rank and file of labor thinks than their own leaders do. Sometimes I know that from my own contacts; sometimes I know it from the national leaders. In that case, we play one off against the other. It’s very complicated. You have to know the politics of each international union. And you have to weigh political support and labor support at the same time—a seamless web.”

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He worked hard on behalf of organized labor. And he relied heavily on their support. His frequent reliance on national labor operatives in preference to local ones seemed totally strategic.

His strong support for civil rights legislation in 1975 was reflected in his conversation about its impact within what he called his “conservative Democratic district.”

I’m in a position where a lot of politicians would have to give ground in order to survive. My position on (school) busing is more hard nosed than it has to be. I don’t come in the back door with busing--by talking about quality education. I keep busing right up front, to let my constituents know they have to do something. As my district takes in more white suburbs, that position will be harder to hold. I don’t know what I’ll do. I don’t think I’m going to give in on it. If I have to, I’ll go out (of office) with it.

On the positive side, he noted that, “I try very hard to fulfill the responsibility of educating my constituents. If you can survive the brouhaha of the moment on something like busing, you will end up with a deeper strength because you leveled with them.” He would hold the line equally, he said, on abortion choice for women. On gun control, however, “I have retreated.” Why? “My district is on the flyway. And my hunters are fanatics.”
He was distinctively not caught up in newer middle class liberal enthusiasms. He disapproved of campaign finance reform. "I'd like to ask those Common Cause people to come here and show me what is campaigning and what is not." And then, "The one area of reform I've never touched--and I realize it--is the golden rule of incumbency." He dismissed Ralph Nader's consumerism crusaders with: "They want to take power. They are elitists." Style-wise, "I was a lot less taken with Jack Kennedy than the people around me were... But I busted my ass for him." He had come to office in a different time. And some of his earlier preferences remained.

He described his eighty-five percent urban Kansas City constituency,

It's a wonderfully heterogeneous district... We have every kind of Jew. We have every kind of Catholic, from the most parochial Italians to the most highly sophisticated Irish. Eighteen percent of the vote and twenty-five percent of the district is black. They didn't used to have leadership, now they are getting some. Next to them live the blue collar Italians who feel neglected--and they have been. They have been the whipping boy too long. It's a district as much affected by agriculture as any other because we buy from the farmers, process what they produce and move it through... In income, we have everything from a silk stocking area to a flat ghetto... It's the only kind of district in which a guy like me--an independent if that is the right word--can survive. Everybody gets mad at me once or twice, even three or four times, but never all at once. My
support is pretty amorphous. It’s simple minded, but true, that my “nut” (i.e., base) is the weak and the poor. They don’t vote as much as they should, but those who do, vote for me. And it’s enough.

“The weak and the poor” supported him, he believed, because of his liberal legislative efforts. At home, as in Washington, issues were what mattered most to him. His emotions were attached to policy. They were not attached to place.

His description of his constituency as “marvelously heterogeneous” or “wonderfully heterogeneous” did not refer to any personal or emotional connections to its inhabitants. He told an interviewer, “We had a very large substantial area of blacks... abutting a very substantial area of Italian-Americans, and they didn’t get along very well. So we were always worrying about the problem of explosion... this was a very unenlightened area.” It was a clinical, strategic description.

The constituency was “marvelous” and “wonderful” for him because its heterogeneity guaranteed his electoral success. “I’ve been in a lot of congressional districts; and there aren’t very many where I could get elected. I could never survive in one of those homogeneous, one interest--or two interest--districts. I’m too opinionated.” “Kansas City has no one industry that dominates. It has no one anything that dominates. That’s why I’m able to get reelected.”

“Some people say I was the only kind of Democrat who could have been elected--one not
connected to any of the factions."

"I don’t have any trouble talking to blacks and then talking to the Italians who live next to them. You don’t start with the same priorities. But you interface with them and go on from there... If you don’t start communication somewhere, you won’t get anywhere.” As for a primary opponent? “I don’t think one person could do it. It would take something more complicated—flaking off a little from one group and a little from another. Everything is so split up. Who could flake off enough to beat me? Nobody.”

The one constituency-wide organization to which he expressed policy devotion was the Democratic Party. “I’m the most partisan Democrat you’ll ever find in a general sense. I believe absolutely that the Democrats are better for the country than the Republicans.” His focus, however, was national. He had no strong personal or emotional connections with the local party people.

I don’t mess in their business and they don’t mess in mine. That’s the way I want it... They are the biggest f.....s you ever saw. They run off in all directions. They are an absolutely no-party party. I’m the biggest vote getter and I’m the only one who doesn’t think he is elected all by himself.

Of that evening’s debate with a Gerald Ford supporter, he said, “I think I’m the only person
around who is running for office and accepts invitations to defend (Democratic Presidential candidate) Jimmy Carter. Everyone else is running for himself. (But) I'm defending the ticket.” He seemed both politically secure and personally satisfied.

Other than his party, the only home relationship about which he spoke often was his non-involvement pattern with the Kansas City business community. Each day he found an occasion to criticize them.

With a few exceptions, most of the businessmen in this community are just plain stupid. I remember when I first went to Washington and met the kind of imaginative businessmen who were part of the administration. I came back here and said to myself, “What pricks these people here are. They have absolutely no vision.”

When Clarence Kelly became police chief here, the business leaders held a big dinner for him. I told him that those were the sons of bitches that had been after me all my life. Before he left (to become FBI Director) he came to me one day and said he knew what I meant when I called them “sons of bitches”.

“In twenty-eight years, I have never spoken to the Chamber of Commerce in this town. They have never invited me.” ‘I think the real reason the businessmen resent me so much is that I don’t participate in their social affairs. I don’t participate in any social
affairs. I make no pretense of being a part of the social life of this city... I never paid any attention to the upper crust in this city.”

“If the businessmen had ever collared me here, I wouldn’t have lasted. It’s amazing that I’ve been able to run against them, as I have, and survive. They run everything else in this town. It’s the kind of town where the highways get built out to where they live, and before the little (urban) parks (get built). Actually, I do things to help business, but I don’t pay any attention to the businessmen themselves.”

He mentioned winning appropriations for a flood control dam and a federal building. He was altogether more open about his political enemies than were most of my other 1970's traveling companions. Why? Because, I conjectured, he had spent his entire political life in Washington “testing loyalties” and “keeping score.” It came naturally to him.

Except for his presidential campaign debate, his other memorable public policy commentary came when he urged a Lutheran group to engage in greater civil rights outreach. “I was a little hard on that church group,” he said afterward,

“because they tend to focus on their narrow little project and forget the rest of the world. Besides, we need the church groups on the big issues. We never would have passed the last civil rights bill without them. We got the conservatives that way.
Unlike a lot of liberals, I think the churches have a reservoir of influence when they want to turn it on.”

His coalition-building instincts and practices were always with him. And in this case, he was prescient.

In all the years following his first reelection, Representative Bolling experienced only one memorable challenge. As he reported it, a coalition of the business community with factional remnants of the old machine mounted one last-gasp primary campaign against him in 1964. And the better part of one luncheon conversation with old friends--his “personal constituency”--was taken up with reminiscences of that early, rough and tumble campaign.

For the Representative, the highlight was his breakthrough relationship with the district’s African-American community. As he recalled,

In 1964, I went to a meeting of black middle class politicians with A. Phillip Randolph (a prominent, veteran African American labor leader). I was the only white man there; and they were talking about candidates and about supporting the organization in the primary. I said that I was the only pro-civil rights congressman in Missouri and that I had a record to prove it. There was a silence. And then from the back of the room someone said, “He’s telling the
truth." Most of them supported me. I like to think that was the turning point, because the black middle class declared independence and began to take political action. It was a political victory for me. It was a personal victory. It was my whole life.

He added,

In that election, we broke off a large chunk of Italians from the organization. We pushed back at them so hard they stopped fighting me. It got so it wasn’t worth their time to keep after me. That 1964 victory was personal for me. It was like getting a scalp after a fight.

He and his friends recalled it as a serious campaign. From the others around the table, I picked up various details.

"We had six hundred volunteers." "We spent over $100,000, mostly on registration and re-registration." "Our strategy was to increase the size of the vote." "Martin Luther King was on the radio for us." "Bobby Kennedy came in and turned it around. Up to that time, nobody thought we could win. Bobby’s trip made people think we could do it. Black voters would come to the polls to vote for ‘the man.’ And Bobby was ‘the man.’"
"In the tough Second Ward, (largely black but organization-dominated), we hired roofers from the construction trade to do a little counter-intimidation at the polls. "There was this one roofer who was about 6'5" and weighed 400 pounds. He picked me up by the collar and lifted me off the ground to show what he could do. We called him ‘Tiny.’ We instructed ‘Tiny’ to walk close to the machine people—not to start anything, but to walk nice and close to them!"

"In 1964," the Congressman concluded, "nobody thought we could win. We ran a hell of a campaign in every way... We beat the business people and their allies two to one... It was the only time the whole labor movement in Kansas City came together... It's a hell of a damn complicated district. And it's fun to think about it even after all these years." It was the last gasp of the old urban machine--and it put the lingering "expansionist" stage of Dick Bolling's political career behind him. Strong support in the African-American community was assured. With his fund-raising and his district service operations securely in the hands of friends Evans and Bodinson, he remained free of electoral concerns for the next nine elections.

Reflections

All in all, he seemed happy doing what he was doing. And he intended to keep doing it. "I know I'm the cork in the bottle here... The joke is that when I die, there will be no one at my funeral. They'll all be down at the state capitol, taking out nomination papers to succeed

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me!” He had his memories of some testing times early on in the constituency. Now, however, he was just going through the familiar motions—“just enough,” as he put it, to stay in office. “I run in a district”, he said later, “where they will beat me some day unless I quit in time--because I run in a Conservative Democrat district and I’m not a Conservative Democrat.”

Once, he said, he had been asked to take an interim appointment for a U.S. Senate seat, with the thought that he could make it his own in the next election. But he had declined, emphasizing his attachments to the House. “A lot of good people leave the House (for the Senate),” he said. “They don’t understand that with the smaller base goes a lot more freedom--freedom to be a national politician. That’s ironic, but true. That’s why I didn’t want to run for the Senate.”

Throughout my visit he was, as noted earlier, hoping (and building) for electoral success among his fellow Democrats back in Washington. And his preoccupation with the ongoing contest for the House Majority leader surfaced sporadically. He certainly thought of himself as qualified. “Too few congressmen are willing to accept a position of national leadership,” he told the students. “They are very opinionated and they vote their opinions. But not many try to lead their communities.” As, by inference, he did.

Privately, he described himself as “fascinated by the capacity equations that translate into
influence-to-power equations.” (Or don’t). Off and on he would offer random strategic assessments. “If I get within five votes, I’ll get ‘em from (Speaker) Tip O’Neill. He’s got that many. And if he thinks I can win, he’ll come around.” Or, referring to a southerner, “He won’t come to me any time soon, but in the end, he’ll prefer me to X.” Or, (most interestingly) “I know he’s solid for me because he told a leader in his district and the leader told me.”

“I don’t believe in treating everyone equally,” he mused.

“Those people who will go a long way with you and stick their necks out on legislative matters, I’ll find something very special for them to do. Those that do medium, will get medium. Those that do nothing, will get nothing. I tell everybody that. I know that’s a strange philosophy. (Speaker) Carl (Albert) and (Majority Leader) Tip (O’Neill) do everything for everybody. The question is, are there enough people who want to do the legislative work and who will agree with my philosophy. If there aren’t, then I don’t want to be Majority Leader.”

In that spirit, he assessed one supporter. “He’s a proceduralist and a damned able parliamentarian. He’s a damn good subcommittee chairman. You’d be surprised how few guys have the ability to chair a meeting.”

One day, he wondered aloud whether “a non-gregarious person like me” could “get enough votes to win”. And, that, if he did, “I may have to call in all my chips at home so that I can
devote full time to legislation.” To which, he added, “If I become Majority Leader, I will become Speaker. The only thing I ever wanted for myself was to become Speaker.” But it was not to be. He came in third in the four-person majority leader race. We shared no post-mortems.

**Conclusion**

After three more terms, and thirty-three years in the House, Representative Richard Bolling retired. “No two people understand and like each other more”, said Speaker Tip O’Neill. “He is my strong right arm.” Six years later, in 1999, the Representative from Missouri died. Newspaper obituaries focused entirely—and favorably—on his achievements in Washington. A colleague’s description of him as “the most brilliant legislator in this century who never became Speaker” was widely quoted. Speaker O’Neill himself captured that judgment when he wrote, “Dick Bolling had more talent and brains than any other member I’ve ever served with.”

Speaker O’Neill captured another side of the Missouri Representative, too, when he added, “He had more than enough talent (to be Speaker) but he didn’t relate well enough to other people.” Other obituaries described Representative Bolling, too, as “an abrasive tactician” who “did not suffer fools gladly,” and who “treaded on a lot of toes.” Some quoted Bolling himself to the same effect. “I think I’m too arrogant to win.” Or, “I really was not a natural-born politician. I could never learn to slap backs.” From the story told here, a sober judgment
would be that Representative Bolling thought more constructively about, and worked more
diligently at, the business of legislating than all but a handful of House members of his time.
For those performance qualities, he certainly merits special scholarly scrutiny. Whether or
not he was "century's giant", his political performance stands as an encouragement to
scholars, to pursue constituency-centered research. And that is a result the Wall Street
Journal editor certainly would have applauded.

2. A colleague, Prof. Bruce Oppenheimer, when interning for Bolling had accompanied him to Missouri in that capacity. He was most helpful to me thinking about this material.

3. Travelling in 1976, Bolling commented on his 1968 race in the House that if he got four more votes in his head count, he would call Bobby Kennedy and get three from him. “But I couldn’t get the four.”

4. The group’s leader was Political Science Prof. David B. Truman of Columbia University. He was the editor of a recent book, *The Congress and American Future*, Prentice Hall, 1965, to which (at his request) I had contributed a relevant chapter entitled, “The Internal Distribution of Influence: The House”, p. 63-90.


6. Ibid.


10. “Oral History Interview”.


13. (“strong right arm” – to check).


16. Ibid.