

Coming into the Country: How First-Term Members Enter the House

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In mulling over how newly elected Members of Congress (henceforth MCs¹) “enter” the U.S. House of Representatives, I have been drawn back to John McPhee’s classic book on Alaska, *Coming into the Country*. Without pushing the analogy too far, the Congress is a lot like Alaska, especially for a greenhorn. Congress is large, both in terms of numbers (435 members and 8000 or so staffers) and geographic scope (from Seattle to Palm Beach, Manhattan to El Paso). Even Capitol Hill is difficult to navigate, as it requires a good bit of exploration to get the lay of the land. The congressional wilderness is real, whether in unexplored regions of the Rayburn Building sub-basements or the distant corridors of the fifth floor of the Cannon Office Building, where a sturdy band of first-term MCs must establish their Washington outposts. Although both the state of Alaska and the House of Representatives are governed by laws and rules, many tricks of survival are learned informally -- in a hurried conversation at a reception or at the House gym, in the wake of a pick-up basketball game.

In the end, there’s no single understanding of Alaska – it’s too big, too complex. Nor is there any single way to grasp the House. It’s partisan, but sometimes resistant to partisanship. It’s welcoming and alienating. It’s about Capitol Hill, but also about 435 distinct constituencies. All Representatives must reach their own understanding of the House, one that works for them. And judging by length of service and infrequent electoral defeats, most MCs do come to terms with the institution, even as it changes (say, in the 1970s or 1990s) right before their eyes. Like

Alaska, it's still there every January 3rd of odd-numbered years, still large, still complex, still in need of a new understanding.

November 20, 1975.

The notion of the congressional career has intrigued me from first days as an APSA Congressional Fellow, in November, 1975, when I wandered into the Longworth building office of (then) first-term Representative Paul Simon (D-Ill.) and didn't wander out again for 9 months. Here was a freshman Member of Congress who cared little about my negligible legislative talents and my less-than negligible policy expertise. No, as a veteran of the rough-and-tumble political wars in Illinois, Rep. Simon saw me as a cost-free resource – a body with a Ph.D. degree, who could help him in his efforts to draft Senator Hubert Humphrey as the Democratic nominee for president in 1976. Think of it. Here was a first-term Representative (albeit a fairly experienced one) who was seriously seeking to influence presidential politics. I signed up.

My initial job was to write the Federal Election Commission to discover its position (if any, given its short history) on conducting a “draft” campaign on behalf of an ostensibly unwilling principal. From there, off I went for six months or so, until it had become painfully obvious that HHH, even as he edged more toward being a willing draftee, had no chance to win the nomination. By May, 1976, I had completed my presidential work, and there was little time to get involved with much legislatively, especially in a session where Speaker Carl Albert's main concern was making sure the Magna Carta arrived safely from Great Britain in time for the bicentennial celebration.

During my six months of presidential politics, I had observed the large class of freshmen Democrats with increasing interest. Such young whippersnappers as Tom Downey(D-NY) and George Miller(D-Cal.) had both energy and attitude, and the very number (75) of Democratic

first-termers made them a force to be reckoned with.² If they could survive for a few terms, I reasoned, we might be able to learn a lot about how congressional careers evolved, even if this was an atypical group. I went to Representative Simon and asked if I could spend the last two months of my fellowship conducting some research on the freshman class. To his credit and my relief, he agreed, and during the summer I cajoled surveys out of most of the members of the class, conducted some interviews, and talked at length with the staff of the New Members Caucus. It was great fun, and the beginning of a 12-year research project that ended with a book on the Class of 1974 and continuing interest in how newly elected Members “come into the country” on Capitol Hill.³

Entering the Congress: The Textbook Congress Era

In the 1950s, when scholars began looking at congressional behavior with a bit of sociological sophistication, they found and described in great detail what Kenneth Shepsle has called “The Textbook Congress.”⁴ More than anything else, committee-based seniority dominated how individual MCs related to the institution. Save for extreme circumstances (e.g., Adam Clayton Powell’s behavior in the 1960s), MCs knew that much of their influence within the House would rest upon what committees they sat on and how much consecutive service (seniority) they could accumulate on those committees.⁵ MCs had few personal staffers, although that began to change in the 1950s and early 1960s. And only the advent of jet aircraft in the 1960s allowed most non-Eastern members to return home on a regular basis, so most MCs stayed in D.C. for long periods of time and actually got to know many of their peers.

There were relatively few recorded votes, and many of those were on final passage on legislation, long after key substantive points had been settled in closed-door negotiations or in unrecorded votes on the House floor. The Congress, while nominally under Democratic control

after 1955, was dominated by a Conservative Coalition whose policy agenda was not extensive or aggressive. Sam Rayburn, a Texan, was perfect Speaker for such a committee-dominated, low-demand legislative setting. “To get along, go along” was superb advice, as long as things did not change, and most members were willing to serve long apprenticeships and show substantial deference to senior members.

Newly elected members in particular and junior members in general knew their place in such a regime. They lobbied for the best committees they could hope for (but rarely the “power” committees of Rules, Appropriations, and Ways and Means), sat quietly as the senior members asked questions in committee hearings, performed their casework, and waited to move to better committees and to accumulate enough seniority so that they could wield some influence.⁶ These were (mostly) men in their 40’s, who would have been advancing to the top ranks of their chosen professions; in the House, they were expected to serve their constituents and to wait their turn -- seen, but not heard

By the mid-1960s, this had begun to change, for a host of reasons, and although committees and seniority would hold on to their dominance until the mid-1970s, the outlines of a new environment were becoming clear. As Shepsle and others note, one major change came with the increased resources that members allocated to themselves. In the 25 years after the enactment of the 1946 Legislative Reorganization Act, the staffs of individual members grew from three or so per member to a maximum of 18. MCs discovered that they could do their constituency service work, often from district offices, and still have staff left over to perform meaningful legislative (and press) work. These “small businesses” or “enterprises” became central to new members, who immediately had substantial resources (phones, computers, travel,

in addition to staff) with which to engage in policy-relevant activity, to say nothing of solidifying their status as incumbents.⁷

At the same time, from the mid-1960s on, MCs had to address the issues that flowed from a federal government that was beginning to grow rapidly through the Kennedy and (especially) Johnson years.⁸ Legislators found it to their advantage to control access to the bureaucracy through their own enterprises, rather than setting up a centralized ombudsman system.⁹ First-term members found that they needed to learn to administer their own enterprises, and many found this a challenging part of their initial term in office. Still, the benefits of delivering responsive, nonpartisan constituency service were great, and most members figured out how to do it.¹⁰

If resources were important in changing the “textbook Congress,” so too were changes in the membership of the House – in particular, the surge of new members in the elections of 1958, 1964, and 1966. The 1958 and 1964 elections brought in waves of Democrats who established the base of substantial partisan majorities for thirty years, to say nothing of providing many of the votes that overcame the Conservative Coalition to pass Lyndon Johnson’s Great Society programs. In 1966, Republicans recouped many of their losses from 1964 and energized their own caucus with the influx of new blood. Once Democratic majorities became less overwhelming in the late 1960s, members from both parties began to think through a series of reforms, which would change the nature of the House – and change the ways in which new members would enter the House.

At the same time, these large classes had less influence than their numbers might have promised, in that the Congress remained a committee-oriented, seniority-based organization in which junior members faced many obstacles in affecting legislation. Thus, the Democratic

Study Group (DSG) and various other individual members pushed for rules changes in both the caucus and the chamber as a whole (where they were often joined by Republicans). Again, there is a rich literature here.¹¹ By 1974, individual rank-and-file members had won considerable more power, both in terms of obtaining better committee and subcommittee assignments, of having a say over committee chairs, and of possessing various “rights” protected against the arbitrary actions of committee chairs.

By the early 1970s, the Congress had entered a “reform” era in which the textbook Congress was giving way to a more entrepreneurial, individualistic (even chaotic) body. These reforms simultaneously allowed for the Democrats (and later the GOP) to strengthen their party leaderships to the point that, by the mid-1980s, congressional parties had become the dominant organizing units of the institution.

This gets us to the post-Watergate election of 1974 and the entrance of 75 first-term Democrats (and 13 new GOP members) who took advantage of the rules changes produced by the DSG and their allies. Their experience, both in entering and shaping the House, changed the ways in which new members of both parties have operated. Moreover, their experience shaped the ways in which the next major “class” of new members, the 1994 Republicans, envisioned their opportunities for producing major institutional and policy changes.

The remainder of this paper will consider, first, how “large classes” of new members enter the institution, and in particular, the differences between the 1974 Democrats and the 1994 Republicans. It will then turn briefly to considering how MCs currently enter the House, and what lessons from the past 25 years seem most relevant, especially when the number of new members is relatively small.

Class and Community

Whenever newcomers, as an identifiable group, enter an institution — be it the army, a college, or a corporation — they tend to identify with each other and stick together, at least for a while. As a group, they are all new to a situation and all in the same boat. The U.S. House of Representatives is no exception here, and there is a modest literature that describes and analyzes the behavior of first-term members.¹² For members of most congressional classes, coming to Capitol Hill at the same time simply reflects an accident of history. Although some personal friendships do develop, most members go their own ways, as their districts, ambitions, interests, and committee assignments frame their decisions within the institution. But members of large, partisan classes have at least the option of embracing their fellow classmates as an important reference group, one that can provide mutual support well beyond the initial period of adjustment to life on Capitol Hill. Indeed, large classes may well offer their members a sense of community that defines — in part — their relationship to the institution as a whole (and to other elements of the body, most notably the party leadership).

Elements of Community within the Class

Members of different large, partisan classes have similar experiences -- or kinds of experiences -- by dint of the kind of victories they experience. Not all classes construct their experience in quite the same way, as we shall see in comparing the 1974 Democrats with the 1994 Republicans, but the general similarities are striking. Six distinct elements make up class-based community; these include:

- shared experiences (prior to and after the general election)
- shared expectations

- shared values
- organized linkages
- perceived differences between members of the class and others
- media definition of the class as a distinct grouping

Congressional communities grow out of sets of informal relationships. The interconnected webs of relationships are important to members of all legislatures, but they are especially significant to first-termers and other junior members of the U.S. House.¹³ That is so, first, because parties nor committees dominate organization within the institution, and most freshmen play only marginal roles within either legislative parties or committees. Second, and more positively, webs of personal relationships are important because all members possess valuable resources -- their votes in committee and on the floor, as well as the considerable resources of their individual offices (staff, franking, travel, communications, etc.). Combining those resources either informally or formally (through a caucus, for example) will likely benefit even the most junior MC.

The 1974 Democrats: A Community of Entrepreneurs

Even in the late 1990s, with no more than a handful of the original class of 1974 members still serving in the Congress, the so-called "Watergate Babies" remain an identifiable grouping in the lore of Capitol Hill. All but two the original 75 survived in 1976; their numbers were imposing. So too were their talents, both in surviving in difficult districts and in pushing for various policy initiatives over the years. Still, members of the Class of 1974 were prisoners of their era -- a transition period between the 1950s' committee government and the 1980s' emphasis on strong congressional parties. To be sure, they were a force in the early days of the 94th Congress (1975), but in the end they made their mark more as individual policy

entrepreneurs (e.g., Rep. Henry Waxman, D - Cal.) than as loyal partisans or members of coherent class-based communities.

Yet political observers of all stripes continue to identify this group as important in the way Congress evolved in the past thirty years. So, both for this class and for the Republican Class of 1994, this paper will examine how their members “came into the country” that is the U.S. House of Representatives.

Shared Experiences: The Election of 1974

As with most large classes (and especially those with a strong partisan coloration), the 1974 Democrats possessed only *modest political experience*. For every Paul Simon (D - Ill.), with a quarter century of state politics behind him, there was a Bob Edgar (D - Pa.), who had to look up the "Democratic Party" listing in the phone book as a first step in mounting a candidacy. In that Democrats captured 295 seats in 1974 (as many as in the 1964 Johnson landslide) and won 47 formerly Republican districts, many Democratic candidates obtained their party's designation without much hope of winning in November. Lots of amateurs could run, in part because their races appeared too difficult for more experienced candidates to accept the challenge.

Most members of the Class of 1974 were self-starters who ran for a host of reasons, although both the Vietnam War and Watergate did stand as core issues that both motivated the candidates and gave them hope for victory. These same issues did make for a *nationalized election*. Although the concerns would play out differently in New York and North Carolina, respectively, the Watergate issue, in particular, systematically worked to the advantage of the Democratic candidates.

As the election results rolled in, congressional Democrats found themselves as beneficiaries of a tremendous off-year landslide. Yet many victories were seen as individual surprises, not necessarily part of a national campaign. Indeed, *there was very little in the way of a formal national campaign*. For the members of the Class of 1974, this meant that they owed very little to the party campaign committee or the party leadership. The typical interpretation of many of the new members was to be stunned -- not to see their victories in terms of any sweeping endorsement of ideas or party positions.

Shared Experiences: After the Election

If the Class of 1974 did not reflect much sense of community before November, 1994, it certainly did in the months that followed. By late November, Representative-elect Tim Wirth (D- Colo.) had scrounged up \$8000 in foundation grants and had begun to piece together an informal organization that would become the New Members' Caucus -- and it was in place even before the orientation and party caucus sessions took place in December.

If Wirth's nascent organization offered the possibility of facilitating communication among new members, the newly elected members also benefited from the existence of a well-defined reform agenda that the DSG had constructed over the previous 15 years. Although a variety of committee-based reforms had already been passed, there remained several issues, including the size of the Ways and Means Committee and its role as a Democratic Committee on Committees, that needed to be addressed.

The newly elected members, who made up more than a quarter of the class (75 of 295), and, to an extent, their political inexperience proved a short-term virtue. As Representative-elect Ned Pattison (D - N.Y.) wrote in his diary,

No doubt it frequently turns out that enthusiasm uninhibited by experience is not the wisest course. Occasionally, however, positive results can occur, and the ignorance of "reality" can be a blessing.¹⁴

The Class of 1974 Democrats pushed beyond the initial DSG goals and, in the two months leading up to January 22, 1975, helped to enact the capstone reforms of the era, changes that generally weakened the hand of committee chairs by strengthening the Caucus, the leadership, and individual subcommittee chairs.¹⁵ If the Watergate babies felt they had any overall mandate, it was to open up the system and make leaders (especially committee chairs) accountable for their actions.

To the extent that their post-election efforts resulted in a strong sense of community, it came in their dramatic unseating of three full committee chairs in January, 1975. As Representative Norm Mineta (D - Cal.) explained, "when we've acted together, it's made a difference." This was especially important on the chairmanship issue. First, the class had helped pass a new rule that required all chairs to be ratified by the Caucus. Second, and more important, as Mineta explained, after sending out invitations to each committee chair to appear before the freshmen, "To a person we got back polite notes saying 'No.'" Using the leverage of its numbers, the class responded, through its leaders, with a second invitation that stated the class members' intention to vote as a whole against any chairman who failed to make an appearance. Mineta concluded, "They all came, even [Armed Services Chair F. Edward] Hebert (D - La.), who showed up the day before the Super Bowl in New Orleans."

Not only could the class force the chairs to come, its members used their voting strength to help unseat three senior chairmen, including the unfortunate Hebert, who addressed the new members as "boys and girls." The defeat of three chairs meant that the class had to be taken

seriously, although their votes were merely part of the majority needed to defeat them. In these initial days of the 94th Congress, freshman Representative William Hughes (D - N.J.) summed up the conventional wisdom: that the class had "numbers and solidarity [and] really stuck together to change the way things are done around here."

Even as they voted for various institutional reforms and against the unresponsive committee chairs, the newly elected members grasped that unity on procedural matters would not easily translate into clout on substantive issues. The new members soon recognized that with class size came great diversity -- based on differences in region, experience, ideology, and electoral circumstance. Moreover, as Congressman Hughes observed, "you only have a chance to change the organization in the first one or two months." At the six-month mark, Representative Mineta noted that the class had initially raised expectations, only to have "the system swallow us up." With the passage of time, of necessity, there was a shift from procedures to substance as committee business and constituency issues came to dominate the schedules of the new members. But these reformers, unlike most of their predecessors, did not retreat quietly to play the traditional roles of backbenchers and supernumeraries.

Even in their first term, the Class of 1974 Democrats increasingly became "free agents" or independent policy entrepreneurs, who sought to move issues on to the congressional agenda. Such a style was made possible early in their congressional careers because within two more terms, almost every surviving member of the class either chaired a subcommittee or sat on a "power committee" (Rules, Appropriations, Ways and Means). More important, these legislators, many who came from traditionally Republican districts, threw themselves into winning reelection. And they succeeded in spectacular fashion, at least in 1976. Only one member lost a bid for reelection, largely because, as then-Rep. Richard Cheney (R- Wyo.) put it,

"the Watergate Babies expanded the hell out of the powers of incumbency."¹⁶ They did this in any number of ways -- by moving more staff members back to their districts, by focusing relentlessly on casework, and by raising campaign funds in increasing amounts.

Sharing Values, Rejecting the Rules of the Game

From the beginning (and encouraged by their post-election experiences), the Class of 1974 Democrats interpreted the *norms* of the House somewhat differently than their predecessors. Without digging through too much of the underbrush, the 1974 Democrats simply did not see such norms as apprenticeship, specialization, reciprocity, or institutional loyalty as important as had most members of Congress in the 1950s and 1960s.¹⁷ Placing less importance in many of the norms (e.g., "to get along, go along") meant that the members felt free to pursue a range of interests and activities, but there was little sense of overall community in many of the pursuits. Rather, individualism and entrepreneurship were fostered, at least over the short term.

Looking for a mandate -- a set of specific, election-oriented expectations -- is fruitless for the Class of 1974, beyond their early, general reformist sentiments, which were channeled and expanded by their initial few weeks in Washington. These legislators proved themselves skillful and resilient, but often that reflected either (a) an absence of a sense of mandate and the demands implicit in such a sentiment or (b) a highly individualized sense of mission, often derived from their separate districts and electoral experiences. In general, there was little to bind them together in a sense of community with their classmates.

Likewise, the 1974 Democratic freshmen displayed the ideological diversity that distinguished the congressional party as a whole. If there were no hidebound conservatives in their ranks, the range of their backgrounds -- from Southern Democrats to big-city liberals to rural Midwesterners from Republican districts -- worked against any clear class positions on

most issues. Although many members became active in a host of congressional caucuses, there were few important communities of interest within the class. As one member concluded: "There is incredible camaraderie within the class...[but] I couldn't think of a more nonideological group." Lots of small, overlapping friendship groupings developed, but with only modest overall impact.

Organized Linkages

To the extent we can identify a community within the Class of 1974 Democrats, it came within the New Members Caucus (later labeled the 94th Caucus), whose continued existence was interpreted negatively by Speaker Thomas P. O'Neill, who later grouched, "what really annoyed me about this group is that as late as 1979 they still had their own caucus....I had naturally assumed that after their first term was over, the new members would join the mainstream."¹⁸ The Speaker was wrong in his assessment that these members had not joined the mainstream (as the while redefining it), but he did see the significance of a continuing organization for the some legislators.

Early on, most new members took advantage of the New Members Caucus (NMC) as a venue to seek information that was unfiltered by either the party or committees. They contributed funds from their office accounts and even held a fund-raiser to support a modest, but effective, staff, which served as an organizational locus. Although the NMC could be a thorn in the party leaders' side, its own whip organization provided the leadership with accurate estimates of voting support among class members. Perhaps the most valuable activity performed by the NMC came in a series of campaign-related activities, which addressed the general problem of winning reelection faced by most of these members. Indeed, most NMC staff efforts were focused on the individual member's relations with his or her district.

The Class of 1974 as a Distinct Group: Through the Eyes of the Members and the Media

For all the talk of a "new breed" of legislator, however, the members of the Class of 1974 proved most adept at the most traditional skill of winning reelection -- which did, indirectly contribute to the perception of the class as an entity. As of 1981, 44 members remained in the House, and virtually all of them held some position of power. But there was no real community to hold them together.

Likewise, the media's early attention on the 1974 House Democrats gave them an identity that would stay with them for years. Yet each individual's connection to the media was far more important than any set of group relations. Indeed, one of the trademarks of a Waxman or a Downey was to obtain publicity that could be used to move issues through the policy-making process. But this was a highly individual endeavor, or at most an effort centered in a small subgroup -- not a full class effort.

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The Democratic Class of 1974 has made its mark in two major ways, neither of which demonstrates much in the way of either a class community or, alternatively, a host for major subcommunities of interest within the group. First, the new members in 1974-5 both adopted previous reform agenda items and pushed the Democratic Caucus to consider seriously the role of committee chairs, to the point of denying chairmanships to three veteran legislators. The reformist impulses that brought members of the class together early in the 94th Congress did not extend to most policy issues. Although the first-termers did enjoy their early impact, they also understood that long-term influence would come only with each individual member's reelection and subsequent success within a fragmented House that allowed for considerable entrepreneurial

activities. Ironically, the early actions in denying seats to the three chairs set the stage for both the subsequent strengthening of the Democratic party leadership (with most of the class's approval) and the 1994-5 Republican whirlwind of activity that depended on the authority granted to Speaker Newt Gingrich by the Republican Conference.

Second, the members of the Class of 1974 helped to usher in a new legislative style that has emphasized the importance of the Caucus/Conference, the leadership, and the individual member, all at the expense of committees, committee chairs, and subcommittees and their chairs. Over time, the survivors came to understand the importance of giving party leaders more authority and greater latitude. But there was never much of a Class of 1974 community that pressed effectively for given policies. The election of 1974 had placed some gifted politicians in the Congress, most unexpectedly for many of them, but it did not give these members a coherent sense of direction. Small groups of friends evolved, and the members embraced various communities of interests (e.g., caucuses), but the class as community simply had little staying power.

The 104th Republicans: A Sense of Mission

Members of large, partisan classes often bond strongly, in part because they often must react to the expectations of others, such as the press or their party leaders. Compared to most other first-term groupings, they are more likely to share dramatic experiences, both before the general election and after. Members of the Class of 1994, more than any post-WWII congressional class, have shared experiences that have given them a distinct identity. And combined with their expectations, values, ideology, and sense of difference between them and other legislators, these members have become part of an overall class community — a community made up of overlapping subgroups that offer many members protection and support.

At the heart of most of these communities is the members' sense of mission — a perception that they were sent to Washington to accomplish something special. Over time, this feeling of distinctiveness has waned, but it defined their entrance into the House.

Shared Experiences: The Election of 1994

Ironically, one key bit of shared experience came with the new members' political inexperience. Approximately half of the 104th GOP freshmen had never been elected to office in a political setting, and only one-fourth had experience as legislators.¹⁹ The political neophytes and near-neophytes, as well as some of the others, were drawn together by a widely shared conviction that the nation was in desperate shape. As one senior staff aide observed:

If you are an airplane pilot there comes a point in time when you must pull your airplane out of a steep dive. If you don't pull up, you crash. My boss felt that America was in a dive, and unless we obtained new pilots who were willing to get the plane's nose up, the nation would face great risk of collapse.

Community for the 104th GOP newcomers was promoted not only by shared political inexperience but by *circumstances of candidate emergence* and the *commonalties in campaigns*. Most members of the class were influenced and motivated by Majority Whip Gingrich prior to their election bids, but few felt close enough to Gingrich to owe him special allegiance. They felt a loyalty to Gingrich only as long as loyalty served their policy and mission goals. As one freshman remarked, "Members of this class have a great ability to influence each other. But we are not influenced externally. I consider party leadership to be an external force." Another freshman commented, "Typically, members of Congress cozy up to leadership because they want something. That has been the traditional model in the past. Our members were almost oblivious

to this.” Indeed, a couple members said they avoided personalizing their friendships with Gingrich so as to minimize their sense of obligation. Repeatedly, the freshmen attributed their emergence to economic and social trends, and especially their concerns for the welfare of their children’s generation.

During their orientation period, the freshmen were continually getting together to talk shop and discuss their paths to Congress. Not only did they discover that their emergence was grounded in the same concerns, doubts, and difficulties, but that their campaigns, although largely independent, followed similar patterns and resonated with the same national themes.²⁰ Since Gingrich did not have candidates sign the Contract with America in Washington until September 27, 1994, most campaign activity pre-dated the publicizing of the document.

Freshmen members of the 104th class were drawn together by the idea that they shared a community of ideas *prior* to their official commitment to the Contract. Their voluntary choice of similar campaigns helped them believe theirs was a genuine compatibility. A legislative aide concluded: “The Contract seemed to accord with the personal convictions of many rank-and-file Republicans. Thus, they were following more than a party line: they were acting in concern on behalf of their own personal views of accomplishing good policy.”

Finally, there was the election of 1994 itself. Few observers gave Republicans much of a chance to capture the House, thus the victory for individual members became part of an historic shift of power. The collective accomplishment went hand-in-hand with individual achievement. The 104th newcomers thus shared the *euphoria* of a *historic victory*. Furthermore, the watershed nature of the election energized members and motivated them to find community in a group thrown together by circumstance. One staffer remarked, “I cannot adequately explain, but when seventy-three people win their races and become part of history in establishing the first

Republican majority in the House in forty years, it creates relationships that are unusual in consequence.”

Shared Experiences: After the Election

Coupled with the emotions of victory was a more reasoned interpretation of the 1994 election. As one new member recalled:

The pins that Dick Chrysler had made up said it all: We were “The Majority Makers.” We were well aware of the instant celebrity status that the circumstances of our election conferred. This gave us momentum and influence in our role in the conference. We wanted to learn; at the same time we were not shy about exerting our influence. Pushing the envelope was how we saw our job. We aimed at articulating a conservative agenda; we wanted to launch a House-cleaning that would produce real change.

The *success of the class’s orientation period and formal organization* further contributed to community building for the class. Beginning with the September 1994 Contract signing event at the Capitol, and continuing beyond the period of post-election orientation activities (including an important Heritage Foundation retreat), extensive social and ideological bonding took place.

From the start, the 104th Republican newcomers enjoyed a *relationship with leadership* that increased class community. Coming out of the starting gate, the class insisted on term limits for the Speaker — an idea that Gingrich accepted reluctantly. The newcomers found a sense of community in the idea that by remaining cohesive, the class could help Gingrich enact his policy agenda. As one first-termer put it, “Republicans in the House gave the Speaker more power not to further any self-serving interests but to facilitate a shared agenda.” Nevertheless, most of the freshmen were determined to be true to their own counsel even if it cost them progress in the

party system. Another veteran member remarked, “Gingrich thought the freshmen would stick with him. He didn’t think they would challenge him on policy the way they did.” In the end, this double-edged relationship with the leadership would take its toll on both Gingrich and the freshmen, but early on, they were inextricably tied together.

Shared Expectations

The Republican first-termers in the 104th House shared expectations in two fundamental ways. First, they were convinced that their special relationship to the newly ascendant party leadership gave them the right to step beyond whatever remained of the House’s crumbling norms for newcomers. Second, the vast majority of 104th House GOP newcomers were of the opinion that the watershed election that brought their party into the majority position conferred upon them a multifaceted policy and reform mandate.

Unlike the 94th Congress, the 104th Congress did not begin in a context where norms for newcomers were much of an issue. Historical norms, such as reciprocity, apprenticeship, seniority, comity and specialization have been under pressure for some time, but, with the arrival of the 104th Republican freshmen, they became even less relevant. Reciprocity was made to look like unprincipled compromise. Apprenticeship remained defunct as freshmen were put on important committees and made subcommittee chairs. Seniority became a liability to veteran members as more junior members became committee chairs. Comity, already endangered, waned even further as partisan mandate triumphed over any idea of bipartisanship. Finally, some freshmen viewed specialization in committee work as a suspect way of getting around the chamber’s general will. Hence, task forces were created to move legislation toward the floor where the freshmen could exert maximum muscle as a class. The decline — or absence — of

institutional norms may have encouraged the newcomers to feel a heightened sense of community within the class.

The 104th freshmen came to Congress with the perception of a public mandate and an expectation that the mandate would give them sufficient public support to retain the high ground in compelling Clinton to accede to their agenda. More than three-fourths of freshman offices agreed that the 104th Congress had received a public mandate.²¹ As the November 1995 budget fiasco for Republicans made clear, this expectation was not well-founded. Nevertheless, while the mandate perceptions and the resulting expectations lasted, they were instrumental in building community for the class.

When asked about the nature of their perceived mandate (and thus, the core of their mission), members of the class and their senior staffers selected the legislative passage of the Contract with America as their most important goal. Members gave second place to the creation of internal reforms in Congress; third place to the promotion of increased integrity in government; and fourth place to regulatory relief. Prominently mentioned among other mission elements was a balancing of the federal budget and a downsizing of government.

Shared Values

The Republican Revolutionaries discovered the basis for community early in the 104th Congress, in part because they shared so many values. Many of the freshmen felt that the class possessed clear agreement as to the excessive regulation of business by government. For example, Representatives Mark Sanford (R-S.C.) and George Nethercutt (R-Wash.) argued that this perception played a greater role in candidate emergence than did the actual recruiting efforts of Republican party leadership. Both saw the class as a community in its beliefs about the dangers, and evils, of excessive government regulations. As one veteran legislator put it, “The

104th freshmen are the most cohesive class in eighteen years. They came to office with a sense of mission and esprit decor.”

The second element of shared values was *mission*. Interviews with MCs and staff show this sense of mission to be powerful and persistent, expressed in personal convictions, in policy objectives, and especially in the idea that the nation needed to be saved from perceived fiscal irresponsibility. The idea of mission in the 104th GOP freshman class came up repeatedly in member comments. It is one of the defining elements of class identity, and part of the glue that held the class together. As explained by a freshman, “The day that we came up in September 1994 to sign the Contract, I got to know many of my colleagues. The signing of the Contract helped cement for the newcomers a special relationship and mission. Any of the representatives will tell you an uncommon bonding took place. We came with a mission to improve the nation for our children and grandchildren. The bond remains even though we are on different committees.”

Several veterans of the House observed that the 104th freshmen reveled in the idea that as citizen legislators they were free to vote their consciences rather than political expediencies. They carried a common conviction that the circumstances of their professions and campaigns provided them with *reduced re-election pressures*. They saw themselves “as Washington outsiders, there to do a job, get it done, and go home.” One veteran of the House remarked, “I don’t think there has ever been a freshman class where the new members came in so self-consciously intending not to stay.” These newcomers believed that leadership understood their commitment to the citizen legislator paradigm, and thus, leadership would be constrained in manipulating them. In fact, five members of the class did ultimately retire voluntarily after three terms, although the poster boy for term limits—Rep. George Nethercutt – chose to remain.²²

A third set of values revolved around reelection concerns — or, perhaps more precisely, a general freedom from reelection concerns. One of the female first-termers remarked:

I've worked with a certain freedom because I've committed myself to term limits. I'm not worried about my own future. I didn't ask for a committee chairmanship. I'm not going to give up that which constituents trust I will maintain, especially not for any aspirations I have in Washington.

Still, many of them began liking their work in Congress enough to change the way they felt about working in Washington. As one staffer dryly remarked, "While they wanted to be citizen politicians, most of them were not prepared to become citizens quite yet."

Organized Linkages

The formal class organization contributed to the early unity of the 104th Republican House newcomers, as it met weekly and retained a higher level of official organization for a greater period of time than most other freshman classes in the House. But the official organization of the class provided only one of several elements that contributed to community. In addition to linkage through formal organization, 104th GOP freshmen came together through several important subgroups and extensive staff communication.

The 104th first-termers found community through subgroups, in part because multiple membership in these groups tied members together across the groups. Instead of cliques, there was at least the possibility of cooperation. Thus, the conservative action team (CATs), one of the most notable freshman member-dominated groups in the 104th Congress, left observers uncertain as to the size of its informal membership. Likewise, the 104th freshman-dominated Gang of Eleven that arose in the 105th Congress sometimes swelled to a group of thirty when

sympathizers stepped forward to strengthen it. Many subgroups possessed both a core membership and a larger contingent membership that varied with the nature of the issues at hand.

A widely overlooked consideration in regard to the 104th GOP freshman class is the role played by members' staffers working cooperatively across the whole of the class to build class community and accomplish the class's mission. Class *identity* depends largely upon what the members do on the floor and in leadership meetings, and how visible their teamwork is to sympathizers and opponents. Class *cohesion* is to a good degree rooted in the work and communication of staffers. The work of staffers makes it possible for members to get on the same page and obtain a public identity together. Furthermore, the conservative agenda of the 104th freshman class was bolstered by a weekly meeting of thirty to fifty staffers who assembled to share information and coordinate tactics. Many of these staffers aggressively network, and they involve themselves in strategic planning with one another so that they can maximize the clout of their preferred voting block. These staffers tell other staffers when their member is beginning to waiver on an issue, or when some timely piece of information or intervention from other members might modify the office's plan of action. In sum, although formal class organization will decline over time, the class retains substantial community due, in part, to the activity of staffers.

Outside definitions of the group as community

Republicans acknowledge that the press played an important role in giving the 104th's new members the kind of high public profile that increased the class's sense of identity and community. And the media led the way in identifying the class as "revolutionaries." One Gingrich insider put it this way:

On election day, I called someone to find out what the exit polls looked like at 1:30 p.m., and was told that the exit poll company was not putting out the data yet. They thought something was wrong with the numbers since the Republicans were doing so well. It was so completely unexpected that they could not believe it even when they were seeing it. The surprise of it all created an impact. So, Washington reacted to the freshmen. Not only were the freshmen having a sense that they were part of history, but the history was made bigger in all of our minds by Washington's reaction to us. It was an unprecedented level of attention that a new Speaker received, and an unprecedented amount of attention that a freshman class obtained.

According to some staffers, the more the freshmen read about their power, the more they tried to exert it. As one press secretary remarked, "Members of the 104th freshman class thought they had a public mandate, especially once they got here and saw how much coverage they were getting from the media." Another said that the newcomers' solidarity and publicly visible networking provided the media with interesting stories, and the attention these stories received "further fueled the solidarity of the freshmen, creating a snowballing effect."

Overall, the media fueled the perception for Republicans that they had a public mandate, especially when journalists pushed the question, "Is Clinton relevant?" Republicans felt that this question confirmed their mandate, at least until Clinton later made people believe in his relevancy. One experienced staffer framed the issue this way: "After the media played heavily on the idea that the freshmen had a mandate, members of the class reasoned that they had to claim one."

Still, as significant as community was in the 104th freshman class, community was seldom comprehensive. A senior Gingrich aide explained this as follows:

The Washington media certainly recognized the 104th freshmen as a class. At the same time it would be a mistake to see the class as monolithic. *The class was cohesive without being monolithic.* They certainly were self-consciously a class, they worked as a class, and they met together as a class. The freshmen covered each other's backsides and supported one another. If one was abused they would rally around him. There is no doubt that they had very high esprit de corps, and were committed to each other for the common cause. But there was a vast range of types. There were experienced savvy politicians, as well as people who didn't have a clue about what politics is about. There were people who were team players and others who were loners. ...So they varied with regard to human qualities and attributes.

* * *

In the end, the Republicans of 1994 harbored both a class community, and a set of smaller, often overlapping, subcommunities. And community was defined from within the class and from outside it. The Republicans were loyal partisans, but scarcely Newtoids. And although they could calculate this loyalty to the leadership, they could also remain loyal to their own sense of community within the class.

The Democratic Class of 1974 as Reference Point for the Republican Class of 1994

The Republicans elected in 1994 were not historians, but they did, generally, have a sense of the Watergate class, and many of the new GOP legislators used that group as a reference

point. The most important inference they drew from the 1974 experience was a strong, overall sense that this large, partisan turnover would allow their class to make a real difference. New members could help create, and on occasion dictate, major change. This gave the class a sense of optimism as they came to Washington, and the Speaker traded on that optimism. One press secretary for a GOP newcomer concluded:

When we look back at the analogy of 1974, Watergate created an opportunity for people to come in and pull some of the old bulls aside and say, "We're not going to do it that way any more." The same was true of this 1994 Republican class. Newt said the party was not going to rely upon the forty-year-old model the Democrats had created. "We're going to invest some new power in some of these younger players." ...[F]reshmen were given responsibilities that seemed to go beyond what the normal operating procedure had been for the House [and] you saw right away that these guys were being validated by the leadership. They didn't have to push their way in; they were being welcomed...

To an extent this press secretary got it right, but the 1994 GOP first-termers got a lot more of their early identity and sense of community from the party leadership than did the Watergate Babies, who did have to "push their way in," as they sought to influence party and chamber decisions. For both classes, however, the relationship with the party leaders did help define the class community.

A GOP chief of staff distinguished between the two classes in terms of their motivations, and the uncertain value of mission for the members. He observed:

The difference between the 104th class and the 1974 Democrats is that, in my opinion, we will not have nearly as high a percentage of members who make a

career here. This class is just as bold as the Watergate babies, but in an opposite way: This class has less concern with their reelection and more concern with the principles they feel were wrong with the institution. But, both classes bucked what they saw as the status quo when they arrived on the Hill.

Perversely, the class with the stronger community linkages (the 104th) may well have a shorter life span than the grouping that did not form a strong, substantive community.

In the end, the Watergate babies were out there -- a distant, but not quite mythological grouping that had made its mark. This analogy, rather than any particular accomplishment or set of behaviors, may link the two classes together. And the example of the 94th Congress Democrats demonstrated to the Republicans what a class could do if -- even in the short run -- it kept itself together.

Coming Into the Country: Beyond Large, Majority Classes

Contrary to the experience of the so-called “Watergate Babies” and “Republican Revolutionaries,” most new members of Congress are not part of a brigade of newcomers who are making a frontal assault on the institution. Rather, newly-elected Representatives are more likely to infiltrate the body platoon-like numbers, whose initial imprint is almost always modest. Encamped on the upper reaches of Cannon and the backside of Longworth, they are thrown into a chamber in which they are simultaneously highly valued and largely marginal. That is, their value is great because the Congress is so closely divided. Every partisan vote is great, and one’s worth becomes all the greater in a House where the majority holds a single-digit advantage. At the same time, a first-termer has no seniority (which still counts for something) and little experience (which continues to count for a lot). Moreover, a substantial number of freshmen

come into a House that is “controlled”(at least nominally) by the opposing party – in a highly partisan era.

Figure One. Entering the Congress: Different Contexts (with examples)

<p align="center">Large Majority Class - 1958, 1964, 1974 Democrats</p>	<p align="center">Small Majority Class - 1978, 1980, 1984-1990 Democrats</p>
<p align="center">Large Minority Class - 1966, 1978, 1980 Republicans</p>	<p align="center">Small Minority Class - 1974, 1982-1990 Republicans - 1994-8 Democrats</p>

Still, an emphasis on partisanship circa 2000, much like the focus on committees in the “textbook” era, may lead scholars, journalists, and even some new members to miss real opportunities to affect both policies and processes. Most obviously, in a closely-divided House, the vote of every MC has value, and that value is often enhanced when like-minded individuals join together, as with the “Lunch Bunch” or the “CATS” or the Democratic “Blue Dogs” and so forth. The budget process is filled with nooks and crannies where an MC can negotiate for pork and policies.

Likewise, a party may do well in congressional elections but fail to win a majority, a circumstance common to Republicans prior to 1994. But if we look at the GOP classes of 1978 and 1980, respectively, we can see two different ways in which first-termers can have an impact on the institution. In 1978, with a Democratic administration, the fairly large Republican class included such notables as Newt Gingrich and Dick Cheney (and a host of others) who would

have a major impact on the institution for years to come.²³ Conversely, the 1980 class contained not nearly as many long-term success stories, but did provide the critical mass for many of the Reagan Administration.

But even minority members in small classes can have an impact, beyond simply leveraging their votes. Two particular illustrations can be drawn from the late 1990s. In 1998, Representative Dennis Moore (D-Kans.) defeated a one-term incumbent in a major effort, a heavily Republican suburban Kansas City district. Winning re-election would be a difficult task for him, to say nothing of having a policy impact. With a veteran staff and an opportunistic eye, however, Moore saw the emergence of so-called “527 groups,” which could lobby publicly without any accounting, as a target for regulation. Joining with Senator John McCain, Moore pushed a disclosure bill that became law in his second year of House service. Working across party lines and catching a small wave of campaign reform enthusiasm, Moore could legitimately take credit for some part of the legislation’s success – an accomplishment that he subsequently used in his bid for reelection.

More systematically, Rep. Henry Waxman, as ranking member of the Government Reform committee, used ten or so of his minority staff to produce a series of localized reports for a large number of Democratic members. Waxman and his staff sought to provide all members with reports on a range of issues. Newly elected members stood to benefit a great deal from these reports, even as Waxman learned, through these MCs, what important issues were developing across the country. For example, in 1998 he went to then-freshman Rep. Tom Allen (D-Maine) and asked if the Government Reform staff could produce a study for his district on one of a number of topics. Allen brought up the idea of doing a district-based study of prescription drug costs, which led not only to a report on this topic, but also more than a hundred

similar studies for other Democratic members. Although these studies – on drug pricing, air pollution, class size, among others – have received only modest national publicity, they have won extensive local media attention, often for junior members who have little expertise in the substantive areas that are covered by the analyses.²⁴

In the end, even in a Congress dominated by strong parties and continuing partisanship, individual members, with their own staffs or with the help of entrepreneurial leaders such as Waxman, can have an impact on processes and policies. Indeed, the Allen-Waxman combination helped move prescription drug prices to the top of the political agenda for both the 2000 presidential and congressional elections.

A Dennis Moore and a Tom Allen can begin to carve out a niche early in their political careers, given their substantial staffs, an eye for a key issue, and the assistance of a senior legislator like McCain or Waxman. “Coming into the country” that is the U.S. House will never be easy, but with real resources and adequate skills, new members can make their mark, even as they chart their future paths through and outside the institution.

Endnotes

¹ In my own notes, I have often used the “MC” notation to refer to all Representatives. But it is that eminently sensible and influential congressional scholar, David Mayhew, who recently began using this nongendered, shorthand reference that corresponds to the MP designation for Members of Parliament.

² Actually, there were 70 “new” members and five “retreads,” in the words of the always-colorful Rep. Andy Jacobs (D-Ind.).

³ Burdett Loomis, *The New American Politician* (New York: Basic, 1988)

⁴ Kenneth Shepsle, “The Changing Textbook Congress,” in *Can the Government Govern?*

⁵ Barbara Hinckley, *The Seniority System in Congress*

⁶ There is a huge literature here. For a journalist’s perspective, see William S. White, *Home Place*. John Manley’s *The Politics of Finance* (Boston: Little Brown, 1970) gives an excellent sense of how one committee (Ways and Means) operated in such circumstances.

⁷ See Burdett Loomis, “The Congressional Office as a Small(?) Business: The New Members Set up Shop,” *Publius*, 1979; Robert Salisbury and Kenneth Shepsle, “The Congressional Office as Enterprise,” *Legislative Studies Quarterly*, 1981. On incumbency, there has been a blizzard of writing, but Morris Fiorina, *Congress: Keystone of the Washington Establishment* (New Haven: Yale, 1976; rev. ed., 1988) remains the best introduction.

⁸ See James Sundquist, *Politics and Policy* (Washington: Brookings, 1968), which remains the best roadmap to the growth of government and its implications for the Congress, which he further pursues in *The Decline and Resurgence of Congress* (Washington: Brookings, 1981)

⁹ Fiorina, *Congress...*

¹⁰ See, for example, Loomis, *The New American Politician*

¹¹ Roger Davidson and Walter Oleszek’s, *Congress Against Itself* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1977).

¹² See, among other, Herbert Asher, Irwin Gertzog, 1966, Jeff Fishel, 1973, Burdett Loomis, 1979

¹³ Susan Webb Hammond, *Congressional Caucuses in National Policy-Making* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press)

¹⁴ All unattributed quotes come from personal interviews conducted by either Burdett Loomis or Timothy Barnett

¹⁵ Loomis, *New American Politician*, 33.

¹⁶ Steven Roberts, “The Life of A Watergate Baby,” *New York Times*, May 4, 1986, p. A24

¹⁷ Among others, Donald Matthews. 1960. *U.S. Senators and Their World*. (New York: Random House, 1960);

Rohde, David W., Norman J. Ornstein, and Robert L. Peabody. 1985. In G. Parker, ed. *Studies in Congress*; Asher, 1973; Burdett Loomis and Jeff Fishel, 1981

¹⁸ Tip O’Neill, *Man of the House* (New York: Random House, 1987), 285.

¹⁹ Killian, Linda. 1998. *The Freshmen: What Happened to the Republican Revolution?* (Boulder, Colorado: Westview)

²⁰ Merry, Robert W. 1994. “Voters Demand for Change puts Clinton on Defensive.” *Congressional Quarterly Weekly Report*, 12 (November) 3207-9.

²¹ Timothy Barnett, *Legislative Learning* (Rowan and Littlefield, 1998)

²² These include Reps. Salmon, Chenoweth-Hage, Coburn, Sanford, and Metcalf.

²³ Ben Pershing, “Cheney: The Pride of 1978 House Class,” *Roll Call*, August 3, 2000, p.1.

²⁴ Marilyn Weber Serfani, “Bitter Pills,” *National Journal*, October 31, 1998, 2554-2558, and “Prescription 2000,” *National Journal*, April 24, 1998.