

**Do Presidential Campaign Issues
Affect Congressional Agendas
(and/or Vice Versa)?
An Introductory Essay
By Don Wolfensberger
For the Congress Project Roundtable
On “The Presidential Campaign and Congress:
What Is At Issue?”
Monday, March 17, 2008**

Former New York Governor Mario Cuomo once observed that “campaigning is poetry, governing is prose.” Those who try to carry the language of policymaking into a campaign soon learn it does not easily translate to poesy, pleasing to voters’ ears. Just ask former Senate Majority Leader Bob Dole (R-Kan.) who was panned for talking bill-speak in the 1996 presidential campaign and got clobbered by the incumbent (speaking of Bill) who exuded empathy.

Much has been made of the contrasting rhetoric of the remaining two Democratic presidential contenders this year—Sen. Barack Obama (D-Ill.), with his oratory of hope and change, and Sen. Hillary Clinton (D-N.Y.), with her 15-point policy-wonkese. Does that make Sen. Clinton the Bob Dole of 2008, and, if so, does that make Sen. Obama her husband?

It all makes for lively debates about the relative roles that personality, experience, policy positions and rhetoric play in voters’ choices. Moreover, it raises a legitimate question as to whether current campaign flummery bears any relation to the real challenges of governing.

An early indicator might be the nexus between today’s campaign themes and current activities in Congress. This is especially pertinent because the remaining three presidential candidates are sitting senators who must return to the Senate periodically to cast votes on important legislation.

The candidates’ congressional connection gives their respective party leaders in Congress incentives to make those return trips count and to condition the presidential aspirants to the value of retaining close working relationships once in the White House. It also helps ensure that congressional candidates are on the same page as their parties’ presidential candidates. In short, the presidential candidates’ return visits to the Hill serve as a combination of legislative reality checks, party unity rallies, and early orientation for a new governing partnership.

This essay is adapted from the author’s “Procedural Politics” column to be published in *Roll Call*, Monday, March 17, 2008, and is embargoed for public release until then. Reprinted by permission of *Roll Call*.

Looked at from that perspective, it's a little easier to understand the seemingly erratic course both parties are pursuing in Congress during today. Make no mistake: The course is being carefully mapped with a view to the White House (not to mention a solid governing majority in both houses of Congress).

One need look no further than Senate Democrats jumping back and forth between Iraq withdrawal legislation and housing mortgage relief last month or House Republicans alternating between fights to renew the Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Act (FISA) and to impose a moratorium on Members' earmarks--all in sync with their national security/anti-pork presumptive nominee, Sen. John McCain (Ariz.).

Meanwhile, House and Senate Democrats are gearing-up to brand all their major initiatives over the next several months as "stimulus" bills to highlight the sagging economy and the president's resistance to doing more to help beleaguered Americans. Republicans are using the same label to package permanent tax cuts and other growth incentives.

Two past campaigns that come to mind in which Congress and the pre-convention fights for the presidential nomination were intertwined are 1912 and 1960. In 1912, two early favorites for the Democratic presidential nomination were House Speaker James Bauchamp ("Champ") Clark (Mo.) and House Majority Leader Oscar Wild Underwood (Ala.). Democrats had retaken control of the House in the 1910 elections after 16 years in the minority. Underwood replaced the "Czar Speaker" leadership model with "King Caucus" which he deftly managed (with Speaker Clark's full support).

As Cornell University Professor Elizabeth Sanders has noted of the 62nd Congress (1911-1912), "Meeting behind close doors to debate and hammer out policy decisions, and then (on a two-thirds vote) binding members to support the measure, the Democrats passed bill after bill in compliance with their progressive 1908 platform." Some bills died in the Republican-controlled Senate; others, like Underwood's tariff reductions, fell victim to Republican President William Howard Taft's vetoes; and a few were enacted into law with the help of progressive Senate Republicans.¹

Speaker Clark and Majority Leader Underwood significantly enhanced their presidential prospects by championing these progressive measures. Although Clark had a majority of votes in the early balloting at the 1912 Democratic convention in Baltimore, two-thirds were needed for the nomination. New Jersey Governor Woodrow Wilson eventually won the nomination on the 46th ballot (with the support of Underwood's delegates and William Jennings Bryan). The earlier work of the 62nd Congress helped shape Wilson's "New Freedom" progressive platform, and, with Underwood as his legislative lieutenant in the House, gave him a running start at moving it through Congress once elected.

¹ Elizabeth Sanders, "Economic Regulation in the Progressive Era," in *The American Congress*, Julian E. Zelizer, ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2004), 344.

In 1960, the Democratic field of presidential candidates included Senate Majority Leader Lyndon B. Johnson (Tex.), Sen. John F. Kennedy (Mass.), and Sen. Stuart Symington (Mo.). As chairman of the Armed Services Preparedness Subcommittee and then as the self-appointed chairman of the Select Committee on Space and Astronautics, Johnson exposed America's lag in missile development following the Soviet launch of the Sputnik satellite in 1957. Symington flogged the same themes as a prominent member of the Armed Services Committee (and former Air Force Secretary).

Although Johnson and Symington lost the nomination to Kennedy, the so-called "missile gap" became a principal issue that Kennedy used against Vice President Richard Nixon in the general election campaign. Nixon could not disclose classified information in rebuttal, but the gap mysteriously disappeared shortly after Kennedy's election. Johnson got the vice presidency as a consolation prize (plus chairmanship of the revived national Space Council and, what would later be named, "The Johnson Space Center" in Houston--both in 1961).

Presidential candidates are warned by handlers not to get bogged down in detailed policy plans that invite opponents' barbs and voter stupefaction. But Congress does provide plenty of policy fodder for the campaign trail and reminds candidates they have a real policy world to deal with once elected.

One thing campaigns can't expose
is how the winner
will work with Congress
to translate poetry back to prose.

#