The Case of the Vanishing Marginals: The Bureaucracy Did It*

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Introduction

The ongoing Erikson-Mayhew-Tufte-Burnham-Ferejohn exchange illustrates once again that political events and processes are easier to describe than to explain. We now are aware of a clear political trend: the decline of competition for House seats. The significance of this trend becomes apparent when coupled with evidence that policy change in the Congress results more from the replacement of incumbents than from changes in their behavior.1 Seemingly, the primary determinants of change in national policies will soon be individual deaths and retirements rather than elections.

But what are we to do? Any attempt to stimulate competition in congressional elections presupposes an understanding of the factors which foster and inhibit it. And here E-M-T-B-F come to a parting of the ways. Somewhat casually, Tufte suggests that institutional change, namely redistricting, has put marginal districts on the endangered list. Ferejohn rejects Tufte’s suggestion, as does Bullock in another contribution.2 Among other possibilities, Mayhew recalls the venerable Stokes-Miller dictum that “to be known at all is to be known favorably” and exhibits evidence that now, more than ever, congressmen follow the sage advice, “use the frank, use the frank, use the frank.” But here too, Ferejohn raises questions. Neither in absolute nor in relative terms do the incumbents of today enjoy a greater informational advantage than those of yesteryear.

Having discarded two potential explanations Ferejohn next offers his own. Following Erikson and Burnham, Ferejohn argues that changes in electoral behavior underlie the vanishing marginals. Perhaps many citizens use simple rules of thumb when voting in low information elections such as those for the House. According to proponents of the behavioral change view, party identification probably serves as the most common rule of thumb. But in recent years the citizenry has apparently become more informed, issue conscious, and ideological. And as this changing electorate monitored the divisive, highly charged politics of the ‘sixties, increasing numbers of citizens grew suspicious of their traditional rule of thumb. Ferejohn and others suggest that incumbency voting has filled the void left by weakening party identification: for a significant number of citizens voting for the incumbent has replaced voting for their party.

The preceding argument has a curious ring to it. On the one hand we are to believe that party identification has declined in importance because citizens are increasingly aware and informed. But on the other hand we are to believe that these same citizens increasingly rely on the seemingly simplified rule of voting for incumbents. In a nutshell, voters are getting smarter, while voting behavior (other than presidential) is getting dumber. Moreover, consider the data analyzed by Arthur Miller.3 With citizens increasingly dubious about government competence, intentions, and efficiency, is it plausible to argue that they increasingly support the objects of their cynicism?

Marginal districts are on the wane. Why? Some kind of incumbency effect exists, and apparently has come to exert an increasingly strong influence on congressional elections. But what is the nature of the incumbency effect, and why has it become more important over time? In this comment I propose another possible answer to the preceding questions. My thesis emerged during explorations of two congressional districts relatively alike in their demographic profiles but strikingly different in their electoral history. Basically, I will argue the following:

In the postwar period we have seen both the decline of the marginal district and the expan-

*Without implicating any of them, I wish to thank Richard Fenno, John Kington, Charles Bullock, David Mayhew, Douglas Price, and Glenn Parker for their thoughtful comments and criticisms.


sion of the federal role and its attendant bureaucracy. I believe that these two trends are more than statistically related, that they are in fact causally related. An institutional change—the growth of the bureaucracy—has encouraged behavioral change among congressmen, which in turn has encouraged behavioral change among some voters.

The Two Districts

The two congressional districts studied are reasonably similar in their demographic profiles. Both are in the same region of the country. Neither is metropolitan nor rural—each contains more than two counties, one medium-size city, and an important agricultural sector. Politically, however, the two districts present a striking contrast. District A is the quintessential marginal district. Since its creation in 1952 no election has produced a victory percentage as high as 58 per cent; the average winning percentage is 53. Both parties have won the seat with at least two different candidates during the 1952–1974 period. In contrast, the political history of district B illustrates Burnham’s “triumph of incumbency.” Until 1964, Republicans won the district with margins around 55 per cent. But in 1964 a Democrat squeaked through, held on in 1966, and from the statistical record now appears safe.

Are there important differences between the two districts? Why did the Democrat who captured district A in 1964 not duplicate the feat of his counterpart in district B? Why has district A not experienced the triumph of incumbency on the Republican side? One explanation we can eliminate is redistricting. District A underwent no boundary change between 1952 and 1972, and then underwent a change amounting to less than 5 per cent of the district population. District B has remained unchanged since World War II. What then, explains the political differences between districts A and B?

Consider District A. During the 1950s both national and state races activated local ties, to Republican advantage in the former case and Democratic advantage in the latter. Congressmen rose and fell partially for reasons beyond their control. The Republican congressman who followed the Eisenhower era was a rural conservative, a crusty personality of unquestioned integrity, who took pride in his attendance record, perceived his job as the making (and obstructing) of national policy, and in general operated rather independently of his district. In 1964 he refused to separate himself from Goldwater and followed his leader into enforced retirement. Unlike the beneficiary of the Johnson landslide in district B, however, the Democrat in district A failed to retain his seat in 1966, losing it to the Republican he defeated two years earlier. In 1974, after more narrow victories, the conservative Republican retired, his party held the seat—by the narrowest of margins—but now Democrats and Republicans alike agree that after a year in office the freshman Republican successor is safe.

Why this turnaround, this triumph of incumbency? Several explanations are offered. The new Republican blankets his district with communications both greater in number and more “effective” than his predecessor’s. District observers perceive that the freshman Republican’s voting record is more closely attuned to his district than was his predecessor’s conservative stands. “He throws a few votes our [opponent’s] way now and then.” And finally, the freshman Republican travels around his district from meeting to meeting saying, “I’m your man in Washington. What are your problems? How can I help you?” While generally favorable to his successor, the former Republican disapproves of the amount of time his successor spends in the district: “How can he do his job in Washington when he’s back here so much? People shouldn’t expect a Congressman to be running back home all the time.”

In summary, district A was influenced by broader political forces during the 1950s. During the 1960s it elected congressmen who did not make all-out efforts to maximize their vote. Now that someone is doing so, local observers and participants are betting that another marginal has vanished.

Now consider district B which is simply ten years ahead of district A. Until 1964 district B was marginally Republican. The Representative for most of this period was involved in controversial legislation such as Taft-Hartley and Landrum-Griffin. He had a personal problem, and probably more important, a political problem: declining Republican registration. In 1948 Republicans had a comfortable registration edge, by 1964 this edge had dwindled, and today the parties are dead even. Some district politicians believe that the registration shift has little significance for national elections, that it is felt mostly on the local level. But it seems prudent to bear in mind that the triumph of incumbency in district B may reflect the changing political allegiances of the district. A defeated Republican congressman is partial to this view.

Still, the Democrat who barely won in 1964 backed the tide in 1966 and has won by margins of 40,000 votes at times since. District observers agree that his strength is bipartisan; a county chairman contends that in only one instance has any other national, state, or local candidate of either party run ahead of the Democratic congressman in the district, or in the relevant common subarea of it. Equal registration does not explain such electoral one-sidedness.

But here again we find a behavioral difference between the pre-1964 Republican and the post-1964 Democratic congressman. Although district B is not located in prime Tuesday-to-Thursday club area, the Democratic incumbent belongs to the club nonetheless. By general agreement he is a pervasive presence in the district. He relies on no campaign organization other than the formal party structure. But he personally works the district at a feverish pace. A party chairman from a Republican area commented: "Congressman _____ comes to see people.____ [former Republican congressman] didn't. The people know ______. He's the first Congressman to take an active interest in them."

The Democratic incumbent maintains well-staffed offices in district B. In these offices secretaries busily work on social security and veterans' affairs matters. Here too we find a difference between the Democratic incumbent and his Republican predecessor. The latter commented: "When I was in office I had four staff members. Now they have a regiment; that's just not necessary. It's a waste of the taxpayer's money, a frivolous expense."

The matter of the congressional staff is especially interesting in that the retired Republican in district A spontaneously brought it up. In discussing examples of the "hypocrisy" of modern congressmen (one of which was the 1967 expansion of the staff) he said facetiously: "No congressman could possibly use 16 staff members." The Democratic incumbent in district B is using them (ten in his district) and one can not dispute the results.

Clearly, the two districts show evidence that major changes in their congressional election patterns are associated with behavioral differences on the part of the congressmen they elected. What might produce such differences? Former Republican congressmen in the two districts lean toward the view that today's congressmen are not as good as the pre-1960 variety. Oversimplifying a bit, in olden days strong men walked the halls of the Capitol. They concentrated more heavily on affairs of state than do their successors. More than today's congressmen they believed that the public interest should take precedence over reelection.

Political scientists are justifiably skeptical of theories which postulate that human nature has changed for the worse, that yesterday's political giants have given way to today's political pugglies. Thus, I will not dwell on the notion that today's congressmen are more concerned with reelection than they were in the recent past. In all likelihood, since the New Deal era the average congressman's desire for reelection has remained constant. What has changed, however, is the set of resources he possesses to invest in his reelection effort. Today's congressmen have more productive reelection strategies than previously. And these strategies are an unforeseen by-product of the growth of an activist Federal government.

**Better to be Re-elected as an Errand Boy Than Not to be Re-elected at All**

A plausible explanation of the differing political histories of the two cases I have studied would run something like this. The changing nature of congressional elections in these districts stems from the changing behavior of the congressmen who represented these districts. Both districts are heterogeneous in their socioeconomic characteristics, and in their political allegiances (e.g., registration). Thus, so long as these districts are represented by congressmen who function primarily as national policy makers (pro-1964 in district B, pro-1974 in district A) reasonably close congressional elections will naturally result. But given congressional incumbents who place heavy emphasis on nonpartisan constituency service, the districts will shift out of the marginal category. Can we expand this explanation, and use it to explain the vanishing marginals nationally?

A basic fact of life in post-New Deal America is the growth of the federal role and its instrument, the federal bureaucracy. Bureaucracy is the characteristic mode of delivering public goods and services. Ceteris paribus, the more the government attempts to do for people, the more intrusive a bureaucracy the government will require.

While not malvolent, bureaucracies make mistakes (of commission and omission). Moreover, attempts at redress often meet with a characteristic unresponsiveness, inflexibility, and incorrigibility. Members of the U.S. Congress, however, hold an almost unique position vis-à-vis the bureaucracy: congressmen possess the power to expedite bureaucratic activity. This capability flows directly from congressional control over what bureaucrats value most—higher budgets and new program authorizations. In a very real sense congressmen are
monopoly suppliers of bureaucratic "unsticking" services.

As the scope of government expands, more and more citizens and groups find themselves dealing with the federal bureaucracy. They may be seeking positive benefits such as social security checks and government grants or seeking to escape costs entailed by bureaucratic regulations. But in either case their congressman is a source of succor. And the greater the scope of government activity, the more often will his aid be requested. Moreover, unlike private monopolists, congressmen can not curtail the demand for their services by raising their price (at least legally). When the demand for his services rises, the congressman has no real choice except to meet that demand—to supply more—so long as he would rather be an elected official under any circumstances, than an unelected one. This vulnerability to constituency demands, however, it largely academic. Congressmen probably do not resist the gradual transformation from national legislator to errand person. They have not rushed to create a national ombudsman, for example, nor to establish Congressman Reuss' Administrative Council of the Congress. The nice thing about casework is that it is mostly profit, one makes many more friends than enemies. In fact, some congressmen undoubtedly stimulate the demand for their bureaucratic fix services. Recall that the new Republican in district A says, "I'm your man in Washington. What are your problems? How can I help you?" And in district B the demand for the congressman's services presumably did not rise so much between 1962 and 1964 that a "regiment" of constituency staff become necessary. Rather, possessing the regiment, the new Democrat did his damnedest to create the demand to which he could apply his regiment.8

In addition to profitable casework let us remember too that the expansion of the federal role has also produced a larger pork barrel. The pork barreler need not limit himself to dams and post offices. There is LEAA money for the local police; urban renewal and housing money for local officials; and educational program grants for the local education bureaucracy. The congressman can stimulate applications for federal assistance, put in a good word during consideration, and announce favorable decisions amid great fanfare. Bureaucratic decisions bestow benefits as well as create costs. By affecting either kind of decision, the congressman can accrue electoral credit.

Let us turn now to the matter of the incumbency effect. If, over time, an increasing number of U.S. representatives are devoting increasing resources to constituency service, then at the district level we would expect that increasing numbers of voters think of their congressman less as a policymaker than as an ombudsman. If so, other implications are immediate. First, party identification will be less influential in determining the congressional vote, not just because of the unusual presidential politics of the late 1960s, but because objectively the congressman is no longer considered so important for policymaking as he once was.6 In legislative matters he holds one paltry vote out of 435. But in bureaucratic matters he is a benevolent, nonpartisan power. And if more and more citizens come to think of their congressmen in this manner, then the basis of the incumbency effect is obvious. Experience in Washington and congressional seniority count when dealing with the bureaucracy. Thus, so long as the incumbent can elude a personal morality gap, and refrain from casting outlandish votes, he is naturally preferred over a newcomer. This incumbency effect is not only understandable, it is rational. And it would grow over time as increasing numbers of citizens come to regard their congressman as a trouble shooter in the Washington bureaucracy.

The preceding argument provides a critical insight into Ferejohn's critique of Mayhew. Ferejohn concludes that the incumbency effect is not explained by the information that incumbents shower on constituents, because the informational advantage incumbents possess has not increased between 1958 and 1970, while the incumbency advantage apparently has increased during that period. But what if the content of the information has changed over time? What if in 1958 voters who have "heard or read something" about the incumbent have heard or read about a policy stand, whereas in 1970 they have heard or read about the good job the incumbent is doing to get Vietnam veterans' checks in the mail? Some voters will agree with a policy stand, some will disagree. But everyone will applaud the congressman's efforts in behalf of the veterans. Thus, a constant informational advantage may be quite

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8 The expansion of the congressional office cries out for further study. At the beginning of the 90th Congress in which the last major expansion took place, Congress Staff Directory listed 3,276 individuals of whom 26 per cent were in the districts. In 1974, 34 per cent of 5,109 were in the districts. What are these people doing?

6 Cf. Burmann, "Party Systems," p. 335. Burmann believes that the decline of party identification as an influence on congressional voting has increased the attractiveness of the ombudsman role. I am arguing that the causal influence is reciprocal if not the reverse.
consistent with an increasing incumbency advantage if information about the incumbent has become increasingly noncontroversial in content. And, as suggested above, those voters who have "heard or read nothing" about either candidate act quite sensibly in voting for the incumbent to the extent that he is an ombudsman rather than a legislative giant.

For clarity's sake I have drawn the preceding argument in very bold strokes. Let me now fill in the picture a bit. In order to account for the vanishing marginals we do not need to argue that all congressmen have opted exclusively for an ombudsman role, and that all constituents now think of their congressmen in nonprogrammatic terms. The disappearance of a marginal requires only marginal change. To illustrate, if one defines Mayhew's 1972 bimodal distribution by Erikson's 5 per cent estimated incumbency effect, the trough in the marginal range disappears. To explain the vanishing marginals one need only argue that over the past thirty years, expanded constituency service opportunities have given the marginal congressman the ability to capture 5–10 per cent of his district's voters who might otherwise oppose him on party or policy grounds.

One further question arises. The growth of the federal role has been continuous and reasonably gradual, although with definite jumps during the New Deal and World War II. The decline of congressional competition, however, has been more erratic. We would expect some lag between the onset of bureaucratization and the decline of the marginals because congressmen presumably would not grasp the new opportunities immediately. But how would we explain the especially pronounced decline of congressional competition in the late '60s? It would be a bit much to contend that Great Society programs translated into casework and votes quite so quickly. One plausible explanation of the '60's decline lies in recent work by Richard Fenko.

Fenko discusses the congressional "home-style," a congressman's basic pattern of interaction with his district. According to Fenno, homestyles tend to persist once established. Now consider that between the 88th and 90th Congresses one-third of the membership of the House changed. I think it is plausible to hypothesize that the homestyles of the new representatives placed relatively greater emphasis on constituency service than did the homestyles of the more senior congressmen they replaced. The average freshman in 1965 for example, replaced a congressman elected in 1952 or 1954. Paradoxically, then, the electoral upheavals of the 1960s may have produced the electoral stability of the early 1970s. New congressmen chose homestyles best adapted to the changed congressional environment. Is it purely coincidence that these first Congresses raised staff allotments by almost 50 per cent (eleven to sixteen) between 1967 and 1973?

Conclusion

Congressmen can earn electoral credit by taking positions on the issues, by bringing home the bacon, and by providing individual favors. The first option is inherently controversial. The latter two need not be. As the federal role has expanded, congressmen have shifted emphasis from the controversial to the noncontroversial, from the programmatic to the nonprogrammatic. Perjoen no doubt is correct; electoral behavior has changed. But at least part of that change is endogenous to the system. Congressmen are not merely passive reactors to a changing electoral climate. In no small part they have helped to change that climate.


9. Obviously, my argument suggests a variety of implications for the future operation of the American government. Space precludes me from entering upon such a discussion here. The interested reader should refer to my Congress--Keystone of the Washington Establishment (New Haven: Yale, 1977).

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