

FOREWORD BY R. DOUGLAS ARNOLD

Thirty years ago this short book revolutionized the study of Congress. The congressional literature was already large and illuminating. Postwar scholars using a variety of research methods, including case studies, participant observation, and quantitative analysis, had done important work on every aspect of congressional behavior. We knew about elections, careers, committees, parties, state delegations, leaders, seniority, rules, roll calls, and policymaking. A decade later the literature was on a new path—more theoretical and more rigorous; three decades later the literature was transformed. These shifts were partly a consequence of this elegant book.

What made David Mayhew's book so influential? First, it was the initial attempt to integrate what we knew about Congress with a simple, parsimonious theory. Mayhew's theory was the political science equivalent of plate tectonics theory, which had revolutionized geology in the previous decade. Both theories attempted to explain a wide range of outcomes from a single assumption. Plate tectonics theorists assumed that the earth's outer shell was composed of

a dozen or so large plates and argued that the plates' movements and collisions explained earthquakes, volcanoes, mountain ranges, continental shapes, ocean ridges, and the worldwide distribution of species. Mayhew assumed that legislators were single-minded seekers of reelection and showed how the pursuit of this goal affected the way legislators allocated time, sought publicity, took positions, organized Congress, interacted with each other, dealt with interest groups, and made public policy. It helped, of course, that most congressional scholars found his arguments persuasive. He was not challenging what we knew; he was arguing that much of what we knew was caused by a single force—legislators' incessant quest for reelection.

Second, the time was ripe for a rational choice explanation of legislative behavior. Although rational choice theory was making inroads into political science, it was not yet firmly established. Two economists had shown the way—Anthony Downs for political parties (1957) and Mancur Olson for interest groups (1965). But no one had attempted a comprehensive rational choice explanation for any of the major governmental institutions: legislatures, executives, courts, or bureaucracies. Mayhew crafted a theory that was every bit as original as what Downs and Olson had created. Unlike the two economists, however, he had first-hand knowledge of his subject—he had spent a year on Capitol Hill—and an encyclopedic knowledge of the congressional literature. He was

able to buttress his arguments with well-chosen examples from the real world and with extensive citations to empirical studies. It also helped that Mayhew was theorizing about the calculating behavior of full-time politicians. In retrospect, it is clear that rational choice theory is vastly more successful explaining the behavior of elites (legislators, executives, bureaucrats), whose careers are at stake, than explaining the behavior of ordinary citizens, who are deciding about matters less central to their lives, like how to vote or whether to join an interest group.

Finally, Mayhew was not alone in his embrace of rational choice theory. The year before, Richard Fenno, the discipline's most distinguished legislative scholar, adopted a rational choice approach in his book comparing congressional committees (1973). After interviewing more than two hundred members of six House committees, Fenno concluded that members pursued three principal goals—reelection, influence within the House, and good public policy. Legislators who were strongly motivated by a single goal tended to join the same committees and structure those committees to achieve their common goal. The parsimonious Mayhew and the nuanced Fenno provided alternative models for constructing rational choice theories about Congress. They also demonstrated the virtue of combining theoretical and empirical analyses.

Rational choice theory is now the dominant theoretical approach for explaining congressional organi-

zation and behavior. Although all scholars do not begin with the same assumption about legislators' goals, their style of reasoning is similar. Rational choice theory has proven itself remarkably versatile for studying congressional history, organization, committees, rules, reform, budgeting, policymaking, and the relations between legislators and various political actors, including bureaucrats, presidents, and interest groups. Even those who do not share Mayhew's view that political parties are not the centerpiece of congressional politics use rational choice theory to advance their arguments.

A very different consequence was to invigorate the study of congressional elections. If the electoral connection was central to understanding Congress, then we needed a better understanding of what accounts for incumbents' repeated success at the ballot box. The view at the time was that congressional elections were largely partisan contests. Voters knew so little about the candidates that the best they could do was to vote based on party identification or on the economic performance of the incumbent party. Mayhew undermined that notion in this book and demolished it in a companion article, published the same year, "The Case of the Vanishing Marginals." These two works sparked an explosion of interest in congressional elections. The literature on congressional elections, once a backwater, is now one of the most distinguished literatures in American politics.

Finally, Mayhew gave us the vocabulary to discuss

political accountability. American scholars had long been prisoners of the doctrine of responsible party government. According to the tenets of that creed, (a) strong parties were necessary for voters to hold politicians accountable, (b) the United States did not have strong parties, and, therefore, (c) citizens could not hold politicians accountable for governmental actions. Mayhew urged us to examine what individual candidates do to attain office, what incumbent legislators do to retain office, and how voters decide among competing candidates. By focusing on the behavior of individual voters and legislators he gave us the tools to analyze political accountability in the American setting. Moreover, he identified the key accountability problem in American politics. The electoral connection guarantees that legislators take pleasing positions, but it does nothing to impel legislators to produce pleasing effects.

How has the book stood the test of time? Any thirty-year-old book in political science faces two challenges. The world can change, and scholars can discover new things about the way the world operates. Well, the world has changed. If Mayhew were writing today he would need to address additional questions. Why did the House adopt centralizing reforms? How has the relentless pursuit of campaign funds affected legislators' behavior? Why does zero-sum conflict occur more frequently? Are party leaders more influential? Although the world has changed, the fundamental logic that Mayhew identified is still the dominant

force in the American Congress. Candidates still decide when and where to run for office; they still assemble their own electoral coalitions; they still survive in office only as long as they please their constituents. Knowing these three things gives one enormous leverage in understanding the behavior of individual legislators in Congress. Some people believe that political parties are now fundamentally important for understanding congressional behavior. Perhaps they are. Nevertheless, the crucial question is how legislators make the tradeoff between party and constituency. In the world I observe, most legislators would rather offend party leaders or the president than offend their reelection constituency. That is the essence of legislative politics, Washington style.