Congressional Decisions: Crash Course Government and Politics #10

Crash Course: U.S. Government and Politics
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CRAIG: Hello, I'm Craig again and this is Crash Course: Government and Politics and today were gonna look at why congress acts the way it does. More specifically we're gonna try to figure out as much as we can without being mind readers, the factors that influence congressmen when they make decisions. And then after that we'll be mind readers and then we'll see if we were right.

This should be a welcome change of pace from the last couple episodes where we delved into the gory details of how congress works or is supposed to work anyway. [shudders]

(Intro)

So, to over simplify greatly, but also to help those of you who studying for tests there are three main factors or agents that influence congressmen in making their decisions: their constituency, interest groups, and political parties. And they vary in importance depending on the situation that a congressmen is in. Our basic understanding of democracy and representative government suggests that constituents would matter most to representatives and senators and fortunately, this is sometimes the case. Unfortunately, this is sometimes the case.

If a congress person ignores what the voters in his or her district want they're probably not going to be in office for very long, representatives pay the most attention to their constituents when they are actually voting on bills because votes are a record that constituents can easily check, say right before an election. If this is the case then the relative lack of important congressional votes in recent years tells us something. Nowadays, congressmen are more likely to depend on direct service to constituents, what is sometimes called case work, to build up their record.

This might be why congressmen tend to spend much more time in their home states and districts than in Washington, they might also want to check up on their lawn, you know grass grows you gotta mow it. Constituent's views can affect congressmen without the threat of unseating them in an election though, because congressmen can anticipate what the voters will want and respond to this. They manage this through public opinion polling. The more sophisticated polling is, the better representatives are at crafting their message, and maybe even their votes to what their constituents want.

We're going to devote a number of episodes to interest groups in the future, explaining what they are and where they come from. I know this because I'm psychic. But for now, it is important to recognize that they are incredibly important to congressmen although not for the reasons you might think. Let's go to the Thought Bubble.

Na-kay, Now when I mention interest groups or say the phrase special interests [suspenseful background music] you probably imagine some guy in a suit maybe even a fedora surreptitiously handing suitcase full of money to a congressmen in return for his vote on some issue of supreme importance to the interest group that the suit guy represents.

Or maybe you think interest groups are more subtle than this, buying votes with campaign contributions, this stereotypical view presents a dramatic story and paints picture that sticks in your head but there is no empirical evidence that it's true. I hope the fedora part is true tho. That's probably true.

The main thing that interest groups provide to congressmen is information that they can use in writing a bill or making a policy case to their constituents.

One of the big things in American government is that information is very important and very valuable. On the other hand, interest groups do give an awful lot of money to campaigns. They also provide a lot of research and assistance in the writing of bills.

Interest groups are most influential at the committee stage of legislation, rather than when congressman are casting floor votes and their influence tends to be mostly negative. This means that rather than inserting the items into legislation, it's much easier and more effective to exclude potential provisions from laws. Plus, this practice and maybe the fedoras a little bit, makes it easier to obfuscate special interest influence on law. It's hard to prove that interest groups have kept something out of a law than that they put something into it.

Thanks, Thought Bubble. that brings us to our third big influencer, Political parties. Whoo hoo [popper pops]. Oh, not that kind of party. The way that political parties effect law makers is even more complex than the role of interest groups. A disciplined party leadership can put pressure on a congressmen to vote a certain way. They call them whips for a reason. This only works when the party is unified and strong. The weaker the party the more freedom the representative has to go rouge on some issues and votes if there are many different factions within a party then there is less of a consequence for voting along the party line.

This is why I don't have friends. Freedom. The clearest example of this is the so called Hastert Rule named after formed speaker Dennis Hastert who would only bring a bill to the floor of the house for a vote if a majority of the majority party, in his case, republicans, supported it.

Side note, if you've got the majority and the party unity to pull of a stunt like that you really end up looking like an effective speaker.

Parties also help to organize logrolling which is relatively straight forward quid-pro-quo bargaining. You vote for my farm bill senator, and I'll support your banking bill. You vote for my not punching eagles bill, Eagle and I won't punch you. Not voting for it? [clacks to ground]. You've been logrolled. Is that how that word works?

Logrolling accrue most obviously at the voting stage but can also be part of the writing up legislation in committees. When we talk about parties we talk about me. But when we talk about political parties we can't leave out the president. Who is the de facto leader of his party and it's own most influential member. I'm pretty sure you're aware of that.

The president has the most power when his party and the majority part in congress are the same. When this happens, congress usually follows the president's lead and allows him to set the policy agenda. That way they can take some credit if the policy is a winner and avoid some blame if turns out [deep inhale] not so great.

We saw this most recently with the creation of The Affordable Care Act (Obama Care) which was written and passed during the first few years of the Obama presidency when his party, the Democrats, also had the majority in both houses. Divided government, when the president and the congressional majority are in opposite parties works well for congress too because it super easy to set a policy agenda, they just oppose what ever the president wants.

This type of obstructionism is unfortunately common in congress today, just look at the years from 2010 to 2012 when congress's program could be summed up in four words, repeal ObamaCare and replace it. Wait, that's not true, that's five words.

To sum up, political parties are most influential over congress when a single party controls both houses and the presidency and when the party leadership is strong enough to exert discipline and a degree of uniformity of policy.

So this is about it for the factors that influence congressional decision making. Mmm. Really Stan, that's it? That's all? I'm going on break. Well, obviously there are other factors like the personal lives of individual congressmen and maybe congressional history but since this is broad survey of American government and politics we can't easily get into that without taking less breaks. And, I'm gonna go on break.

For my money, it's the structures of congress and most of all which party has the majority and thus controls the leadership and the committees that makes the most difference. Even though I want to say and believe that constituents matter most because I don't want to feed into this cynicism that seems to come so naturally to discussions of congress.

So I think we should try to avoid any cynicism and conspiracy theories when we try and figure out why a congress person acted a certain way and recognize that any congressional decision is the product of complex interaction of a number of factors, only some of which will be apparent. Each of these decisions will be conditioned and strained by the structures and procedures of congress itself. Thanks for watching. I'll see you next time.

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