The U.S. Congress

Causes and Explanations of Congressional Member Voting

(1) "Home-Style" Constituency Voting

- Members of Congress will vote according to the preferences and views of their constituency (State or Congressional House District)
- Members mirror and reflect constituents’ wishes (Delegate Theory of Representation)
- Members are especially more likely to vote along constituency preferences if legislation has a significant economic and regional impact on the particular constituency (POLITICO THEORY)
- “Home-Style” voting: House members who spend more time with their constituents are more likely to win re-election by wider, more comfortable margins
- Members who spend less time away from their home constituencies, in favor of spending more time in Washington D.C., either win re-election by smaller margins or lose their seat outright to the challenger;
- Those members who do win by just small margins are more likely to spend time at home during subsequent term and, thus, win re-election by a wider margin in their next campaign

(2) Committee and Sub-Committee “Specialists”

- During the last half-century, there has been an increase in the growth of govt. and the Congressional workload
- Also, in the last half-century, there has been a DE-CENTRALIZATION of legislative power and authority “devolving” down from the chamber leaders (Speaker of the House, Senate Majority Leader) to Committee Chairs
- This means that Comm. Chairs have had more power to control the fate of legislation (i.e., power to schedule and hold expert testimony and hearings before the committee, more control over mark-up sessions, holding votes, sending bills to the floor, etc.)
- With the combination of greater workload, more influence and power held by committees, along with the increase in the number of sub-committees serving under the main committees, committees have become very important sources of information for the rest of the Congressional membership
- Members of each committee offer a high level of knowledge, expertise, and specialization in the particular policy area covered in a particular committee
Therefore, members of each committee hold a good deal of consultation and influence over other members of Congress.

This is especially true in the last 30 years; individual members of a committee have been given more influence over legislation, its content and its fate (whether or not a bill gets out of committee and goes to the floor).

(3) Party Membership

- **Party unity** scores: The % of the time members of Congress vote according to the views and wishes of their party leaders on legislation.
- Party unity scores are comparatively lower in the U.S. Congress than they are in the legislatures of most other Western democracies.
- Parties in other democracies have considerably more discipline and control over their membership in terms of obeying the platform, campaigning on the party line and voting on legislation, according to the party line.
- Still, most years have seen party unity scores, nevertheless, in the majority; Hence, a member’s party leadership is an important source of Congressional member voting.
- Party leaders are the ones responsible for assigning committee seats to each of their fellow party members in their respective chamber (majority party leaders additionally assign committee chairmanships to higher ranking seniority members of their party - who already belong to a particular committee).
- Virtually all members of Congress (especially newly elected “freshmen”) desire to be on a committee that (A) focuses on policy issues relevant to the concerns and interests of their constituencies and (B) “high-profile”, prestigious committees that increase the name recognition and political influence of that member.
- Both these types of committees enable the member to be more successfully responsive to delivering favorable policy and local “pork” to the home constituents.
- Hence, it behooves members to vote along party lines (at least on legislation of high importance to the party); this makes it more likely that the party leadership will reward loyal party voting members with their desired committee assignments.
- Party loyalty = good committee seats.

(4) Congressional Staff

- Those hired and **employed** by individual members of Congress.
- # of staffers hired have increased substantially over last half-century.
- Staffers hired to:
- (A) Provide legal and legislative research and analysis on potential legislation
- (B) Serve as PR liaisons between other members, President and White House staff, media and home constituents
- © Help the member work on and draft legislation; help put in specific language that a bill may contain
- (D) Provide expert consultation and advice as to how a member of Congress should vote on a bill; staffers are usually well-educated "specialists" on certain and different areas of policy

(5) The President Himself

- **Abdication Hypothesis:** Based on the idea that Congress as a whole (from individual members to Committee chairs and “specialists” to part leaders (even in both parties) will give up its preference on a policy and give way (or abdicate) to the preferences of the President
- **Two Presidencies Thesis:** Based on the idea that Congress will cooperate and support the President on intl./foreign affairs, yet will oppose and resist the President on domestic policy
- Possible causes: Congress sees Pres. as Commander-in-Chief of armed forces, thus, more than willing to pass “political hot potato” to the Pres.
- The extraordinary years of Cold War conflict and nuclear tension with the Soviet Union made Congress more inclined to give way and cooperate with Pres.
- Voters, in past years, have typically shown low-level interest, knowledge and salience in foreign affairs. Thus, members of Congress have felt comfortable in not voting along with Constituencies and instead, voting along with the Pres. with regard to foreign policy issues