

Chapter 15

Makeover: The nice, new kind of Representative

What a job! You're a United States Representative.

Your \$174,000 salary is more than three times the median family income. Also there's top-of-the-line health insurance, a rich retirement scheme, the elegant dining rooms and, of course, the gym. Your very own suite of offices is located in the best building in Washington DC . You have at least one office (and maybe several more) back home in your congressional district. Your number of offices depends on how you allocate your "members representational allowance" which averages \$1.5 million per representative. Your staff numbers about 16 or 17 people—some in Washington and some in your district. Although travel back and forth between Washington and your district can be a drag, it's all paid for. And since the House work week in Washington has been reduced to three days, you at least have time for the travel. Travel on "fact finding" junkets and to conferences is another matter. They can be great fun.

This is not your ordinary 9 to 5 employment. In fact you almost don't have to show up for your real job at all. Mostly you work at getting reelected. Here's how Ornstein, Mann and Malbin describe the congressional work week in their book *Vital Statistics on Congress 2008*:

...the Tuesday-to-Thursday Club has nearly universal membership. In a typical week when Congress is in session, most members struggle in late Tuesday afternoon and leave for home early Thursday afternoon, staying in Washington only one full day and fragments of two others. In 2006 the legislative schedule had only seventy-one full days in session, with an additional twenty-six days with no votes before 6:30 p.m. (in many cases, with no votes at all). That is the lowest number by far in modern times, lower than the number in 1947, the famous Do-Nothing Congress criticized by President Harry Truman....

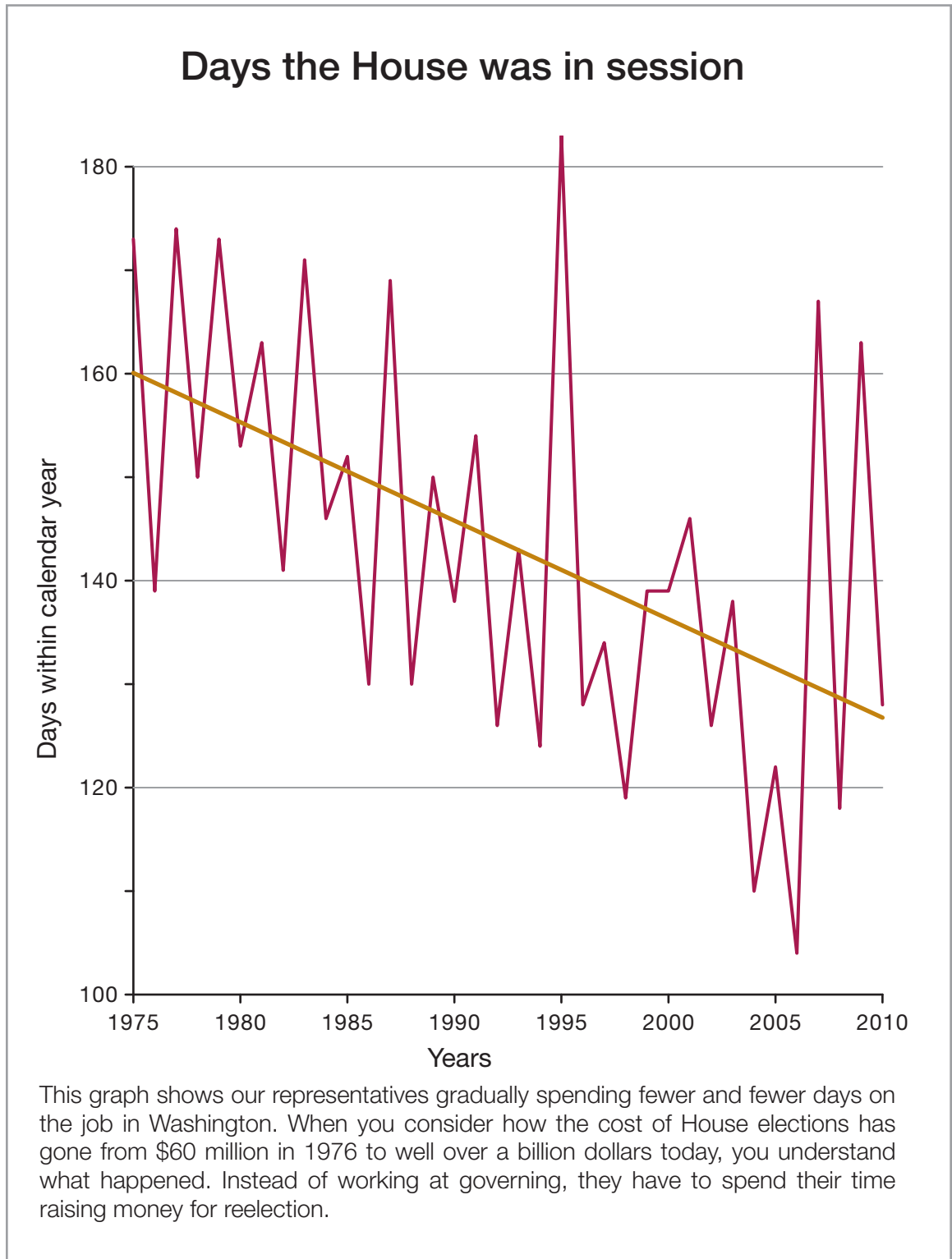
During the 1960s and 1970s the average Congress was in session 323 days. In the 1980s and 1990s the average number of days declined to 278 and has plummeted since; the average for each two-year Congress for the first six years of the Bush presidency was fewer than 250 days. Of course, days in session and days voting do not give a full picture of Congress and its work. Committees and subcommittees hold hearings, do oversight, and markup bills. Still,

In the meantime, when it comes to politics, Americans do put up with nonsense. Week in and week out, members of a jaded governing class, purporting to speak for "the American people," mouth tired clichés that would have caused members of the Soviet Politburo to blush with embarrassment.

Andrew J. Bacevich
Washington Rules, 2010

... we should not make the mistake of assuming that the influence and importance of the political class stems from their representation of the broad swath of the American public. It does not.

Morris P. Fiorina
Disconnect, 2009



the average Congress in the 1960s and 1970s had 5,372 committee and subcommittee meetings; in the 1980s and 1990s, the average was 4,793 meetings. In the last Congress, the 109th, the number of meetings was 2,492.

It should come as no surprise that our representatives don't seem to be knocking themselves out providing for the safety and happiness of the nation. So how do they spend their time?

Once again, let's turn to the experts—former Senator Alan Simpson, a Republican from Wyoming, and former Senator Bill Bradley, a Democrat from New Jersey. Both served three terms in the Senate. Also Bradley ran for President in 2000. Their words appear in a brief submitted to the Supreme Court in a 2006 campaign finance reform case.

...The time spent fundraising interferes with the ability of elected officials to carry out the duties for which they were elected.... Legislators no longer spend enough time on legislation, constituent services, committee work, oversight responsibilities, and debating or negotiating with fellow representatives. Rather, many legislators neglect these duties in favor of raising money. Representatives and Senators routinely miss important votes due to conflicts with their fundraising activities.... The primary focus of elected officials has shifted from serving their constituents to preserving their jobs by raising money.

...fundraising takes elected officials away from their core duties. This in turn undermines our system of representative democracy. (The italics are mine.)

This shocking statement is not a political rant from the gutter press or some political fringe group. Senators Simpson and Bradley are serious, thoughtful men – each a respected leader within his own party. They don't stand to gain personally by these statements, quite the contrary. Neither man would make such a strong statement lightly. Theirs is a patriotic plea to the Supreme Court to consider how money is eroding democracy.

So would the 2Y2D Plan change this state of affairs?

In a 2Y2D House not all members will make the list for sainthood or for a spot on Mount Rushmore. They'll be a cross section of ordinary Americans. Most likely these men and women will be either slightly more ambitious than average or else dedicated to some particular cause. However, what's important here is that many will compete for House seats who wouldn't even consider seeking office in today's money infested system. We will be hiring our representatives from a

One never expected from a Congressman more than good intentions and public spirit.

Henry Adams

The Education of Henry Adams, 1905

...if we can have but one class [of public men], then let us have the young and the vigorous...

Elihu Root

Addressing the Senate, February 10, 1911

The New Hampshire primary is one of the few situations in presidential politics where the candidates are forced to campaign like human beings, on the same level with the voters. There is no Secret Service presence in New Hampshire, no vast and everpresent staff of hired minions and police escorts... the candidates drive around the state in rented Fords, accompanied by a handful of local workers and press people, and they actually walk into people's living rooms and try to explain themselves -- taking any and all questions face-to-face, with no screening, and no place to hide when things get nasty.

Hunter S. Thompson

Fear and Loathing:

On the Campaign Trail '72, 1973

larger pool of possible candidates. The filter limiting candidates to the ethically challenged will have been removed.

In this new world a representative is likely to be just as eager as existing representatives to return for another term. However, the path to reelection will be different. Instead of time spent raising money, the better bet will be time with constituents or working at governing (for the safety and happiness of the people). Here's why.

First, the voting public will expect to meet candidates—both incumbents and challengers. Because personal interaction is the most effective way to campaign, House candidates will not be able to escape it. They will have to personally meet their constituents if for no other reason than that's what the competition will be doing. The New Hampshire presidential primary—always the first in the nation—is a good example of how candidates respond when the constituents' personal knowledge of a candidate is critical to being elected. Presidential candidates start visiting New Hampshire years in advance because the voters expect to meet prospective candidates in person even if it is only to shake hands. They have this expectation because it is possible. Here in New Jersey where primaries take place much later we have no such expectations. Only big contributors and high officials get to shake hands with a presidential candidate. We, the ordinary people, are lucky to see a presidential candidate at a big rally. It's an expectation thing.

The irony in this is that many voters will still be influenced by a candidate's personal appearance—their charisma—the cut of their jib—the same sorts of things that the advertising gurus hope to put across. The difference is that voters now will be able to size up these characteristics in person. You cannot buy personal charisma the way you buy a well-crafted 30 second spot trashing your opponent.

Second, it's a numbers thing. Every single voter becomes more important. Today, in the “average” district of 710,000 between 250,000 and 350,000 people vote—more if it's a presidential election and less if it's not. In a 100,000 district, between 35,000 and 50,000 will vote. All of a sudden, five thousand voters will make a big difference.

Third, while the incumbent advantage does not disappear, it's significantly reduced. The incumbent will still have easier access to the local media, most likely will still have a local office and should be able to deliver federal money for local projects.

On the other hand, it will no longer be necessary to raise hundreds of thousands of dollars to mount a challenge for a House seat. A highly motivated challenger can run a credible campaign on a shoe string. A highly motivated challenger who can raise fifty or sixty thousand dol-

lars will pose a distinct threat. The challenger after all gets to spend full time in the congressional district. Lots of time to attend community gatherings and go door-to-door. In an mid-term election, 18,000 to 20,000 votes should be able to deliver a win. Fewer if there's more than one challenger or if the challenge is in the primary election.

Americans have always believed in the benefits of healthy competition. The 2Y2D Plan will restore these benefits to a government from which they have gradually disappeared.

Finally, if wooing the voter is so important, why would the congress person spend any time in Washington? What's the motivation to work at providing for the safety and happiness of the people? If he is one of 3,000 plus House members, who will miss him if he doesn't show up? The answer is as old as time—carrots and a stick.

Let's start with the stick. Dissatisfied voters will vote against the incumbent. It will make no difference that whatever is wrong may not have been their representative's fault. It will make no difference that a representative is both charming and wise. If enough voters say to themselves and to each other, "This isn't working. Let's try someone else," then the incumbent will be toast. Therefore, it's in the interest of our House member and his colleagues—all of whom face the same challenge—to work at governing well.

The carrot is that the House will become a fascinating place to work. Over three thousand members will bring to bear new and interesting ideas on the issues that confront the nation. Our representative will join others like him who really speak for the ordinary people. He will be able to work with these men and women to find a way to make the nation once again a land of opportunity. Will they all agree on what's best? No, of course not. But most will bring good will to the task at hand.

No matter what the whiners and wasters in Washington say, the United States is the richest nation in history and still has endless potential. Our current congressmen have had to work hard for years to create the current economic mess. It will be extraordinarily interesting, challenging and rewarding for the 2Y2D House to put the country back on track.

It is worth noting that a similar economic shambles in 1787 drove thirteen new nations to create the new government embodied in our Constitution. Here is how it's described in the *Federalist 15*:

We may indeed with propriety be said to have reached almost the last stage of national humiliation. There is scarcely any thing that can

When the pundits declared us finished, I told them I'm going to New Hampshire where the voters don't let you make their decision for them.

And when they asked, "How are you going to do it? You're down in the polls. You don't have the money." I answered, "I'm going to New Hampshire, and I'm going to tell people the truth."...

I just talked to the people of New Hampshire. I talked about the country we love, the many challenges we face together, and the great promise that is ours to achieve....

I talked to the people of New Hampshire. I reasoned with you. I listened to you. I answered you. Sometimes, I argued with you....

Thank you, New Hampshire, from the bottom of my heart. I'm grateful and humbled and more certain than ever before that, before I can win your vote, I must win your respect.

John McCain
Victory speech after the
New Hampshire primary
January 8, 2008

In free Governments the rulers are the servants, and the people their superiors & sovereigns. For the former therefore to return among the latter was not to *degrade* but to *promote* them- and it would be imposing an unreasonable burden on them, to keep them always in a State of servitude, and not allow them to become again one of the Masters.

Ben Franklin on July 26, 1787
from James Madison's notes in
Max Farrand's *Records of the
Federal Convention*, 1911

wound the pride or degrade the character of an independent people which we do not experience... The price of improved land in most parts of the country is much lower than be can accounted for by the quantity of waste land at market, and can only be fully explained by that want of private and public confidence, which are so alarmingly prevalent among all ranks, and which have a direct tendency to depreciate property of every kind. Is private credit the friend and patron of industry? That most useful kind which relates to borrowing and lending is reduced within the narrowest limits, and this still more from an opinion of insecurity than from a scarcity of money. To shorten an enumeration of particulars which can afford neither pleasure or instruction, it may in general be demanded, what indication is there of national disorder, poverty, and insignificance that could befall a community so peculiarly blessed with natural advantages as we are, which does not form a part of the dark catalog of our public misfortunes.

As you can see reforming government to solve economic problems is very much part of our American tradition. Our Constitution grew out of the need to turn around an economy that was failing because government had lost its credibility. Private citizens forced the issue with the result that the nation prospered for the next 200 years. We are at a similar crossroads today. You and I have that same opportunity and obligation to restore sound government to the United States.

Finally, another carrot (or stick depending on how you look at it). Today when a House member leaves office, he or she most likely becomes a highly paid lobbyist or consultant. He is assured of an income that puts him on a completely different level from ordinary people. This will no longer be true.

As a result of the 2Y2D Plan, the economics of lobbying will be profoundly altered. First, the lobbyists' stock in trade is money, and House elections will no longer be driven by money. Second, the cost to corrupt over three thousand representatives becomes prohibitively expensive. Where I am going with this is that with the 2Y2D Plan when a House member leaves office, he will be much more likely to return to his previous life—to once again be an ordinary citizen. Thus, our representatives will have an incentive to make laws that work well for ordinary people like himself.