

Preface

This book is about political change in America as reflected in changing patterns of representation. The research focus is on two members of the U.S. House of Representatives, each of whom represented the same district, but at different points in time, one from the 1950s to the 1970s, the other in the 1990s. The research question is threefold. First, what, if anything, has changed in the way in which the two House members have gone about the job of representing their constituents? Second, how might we explain this change? And third, how might the explanation of this change help us to explain representational change more generally?

The research approach is based on the idea that representation is a process; that it is, in part, a grassroots process; and that questions of representational change can therefore usefully be studied at the grassroots level. The research strategy is one of on-the-scene personal observation of the two representatives at work in a congressional district in west-central Georgia, just south of Atlanta.

While the study is directly about representational change in one district, the hope is that it might also contribute to the larger subject of political change in the South. District-level change—from a mostly rural, one-party Democratic district to a mostly suburban, Republican-dominated one—surely has relevance for the study of political change in the region. A further hope is that in its conceptualization and focus—if not in its scope—the study might contribute something to the larger study of political change nationwide. It might, for example, help us to understand the increasingly polarized partisanship we have been observing in the House of Representatives in Washington.

The years preceding the new millennium have not been friendly to America's politicians. As a group, they have been ranked near the bottom of the ladder of occupational respect. As individuals, they have not been held up as role models. More parents than ever are

advising their children not to go into politics. Why, then, it might be asked, would anyone want to write about two individual politicians? Or, more to the point, why would anyone want to read about them? Newspaper editors and television producers do not find such individuals interesting or newsworthy—unless they are touched by scandal. And political scientists tend to fold individual politicians into large data sets—unless they hold leadership positions.

The simplest reason for studying politicians is that however much they are demeaned and denounced, and however uneventful and unimportant their everyday activity may seem to be, they are people without whom our democracy cannot work. And since we have a representative democracy, it seems only reasonable and prudent to take a look, occasionally, at a few of those who make democracy work—and to look at them where they work. It also makes sense to see them as flesh-and-blood, multidimensional individuals and not just as part of a widely condemned category of “politicians.”

Representation is both a grand idea for our political system and a grassroots activity for our individual representatives. If readers can capture a sense of the latter, perhaps they will strengthen their grasp of the former. Overwhelmingly and deliberately, therefore, the focus of this study is on the grassroots activity. The reader will be overloaded with information about the day-to-day, district-level activities of two little-known House members. Why? Because the study makes a basic distinction between the representational patterns of the two House members, a distinction that is based mostly on evidence from seven personal visits and twenty-five days spent in the district, and I want to convince the reader of the validity of the distinction. Readers will therefore be exposed to the fullest range of the raw evidence—that they may see, feel, and weigh it for themselves.

The book will take the reader to the counties, the towns, the homes, the businesses, the churches, the schools, the rallies, the meetings, the restaurants, the coffee shops, the clubs, the organizations, the fields, the streets, and the parks—event by event, handshake by handshake, friend by friend, group by group, visit by visit, question by question, answer by answer, story by story. The research required considerable stamina and patience. Readers will need stamina and patience, too.

Given the goal of reader immersion, the chronological narrative form seemed appropriate. This form, of course, makes the author responsible for selecting, organizing, and presenting the material.

Admittedly, I have done that in ways that suggest and support certain generalizations about individual patterns of representation and about changes in these patterns. But I have tried to be faithful to the material and not to distort the presentation of it or press it to do more than is warranted by the evidence. In no sense is there any idea that one person's pattern is “better” than the other's, only that they are explainably “different.” The methodological problems that are endemic to this kind of participant-observation research and my own efforts to cope with them have been discussed at length elsewhere.

My debt to those who have made this book possible begins with the two principals, Jack Flynt and Mac Collins. Both men were candid and accommodating, altogether a pleasure to be with, talk with, and learn from. They wanted to help, and they did—a lucky combination for me. Each has read and commented, encouragingly, on his portion of the manuscript. And each has been helpful in correcting some factual mistakes. But the data, interpretations, and judgments are wholly my responsibility.

Without the graciousness of Patty Flynt and Julie Collins, too, my district visits would have been less profitable than they were.

Among Jack Flynt's staff, I owe thanks for their assistance to Mary Lou (Lucas) Smalley, Rae Joiner, and the late Joe Akin. Among Mac Collins's staffers, my special debt is to Shirley Gillespie and Clark Reid, whose generous welcome and assistance were indispensable to my work in the district. Betty Munro was a versatile friend, both in the district and in Washington. My tasks in Georgia were lightened, in all sorts of ways, by Betty Bush, Fred Chitwood, Lisa Parish, Wanda Tscudy, and Jean Studdard. In Washington I received friendly assistance from Sari Greenberg, Brian Jones, Kirk Foster, Ann Jasien, and Bo Bryant I thank them all.

I am much indebted to three expert colleagues for their stimulation, guidance, and all-around sustenance—Merle Black, Chuck Bullock, and Harold Stanley. I could not have ventured into this project without being able to lean on their knowledge, counsel, and friendship. Merle Black not only read the manuscript but put his own neck on the line by recommending me to a publisher! My thanks to Gary Jacobson and Gerald Gamn for reading the manuscript and making helpful suggestions. I also thank Bill Bianco and Tom Mann for their comments.

With respect to my publisher, the University of North Carolina Press, and with respect to my editors there, I can only say: I have

been most fortunate. I thank Lewis Bateman for his strong support. I also thank Paula Wald for her reassuring in-house management and Mary Reid for her expert copyediting.

I dedicate the book, with affection, to my sister Elizabeth Blucke, who steered me to my first teaching job and who has supported me all the way to Georgia.

Political Representation

Background

When Newt Gingrich emerged full-blown onto the American political stage in the 1990s, he carried with him into public view a little-known political figure named John J. Flynt Jr.—not into the bright lights of center stage, to be sure, but into the dim background, as a bit player to be hustled onto the stage, briefly noted, and hustled off again. Flynt was the incumbent Georgia congressman who twice defeated the aspiring young Gingrich—first in 1974 and again in 1976—and whose retirement in 1978 propelled the Republican college professor into Congress.

Reporters who inquired into Gingrich's early career, therefore, discovered Jack Flynt. They characterized him succinctly as a "long-time conservative Democratic congressman," "an ageing incumbent Dixiecrat," "a standard bearer of the old courthouse crowds."¹ The reporters contented themselves with these thumbnail characterizations and moved on. They knew nothing about Flynt; he was not their story. I do know something about him, and I want to make him the centerpiece of my story—a story about changing patterns of representation in the U.S. House of Representatives.

Three times in the 1970s (1970, 1972, and 1976), I went to Georgia to follow Jack Flynt as he worked in his district. Eventually he became a leading character in my study, *Home Style*.² In the twenty years since that study was published, however, much has changed in American politics. As I thought about that change, it occurred to me that my constituency-level explorations in the 1970s had given me

some unique baselines from which to begin to explore changes in the relationships between House members and their constituencies. It seemed to me, further, that such an exploration might profitably begin in a constituency where some easily recognizable macro-level political changes had occurred—and that one obvious place was the South. These reflections led me to think about revisiting my travels with southerner Jack Flynt, and to think about using that experience to construct a baseline from which to explore micro-level political change in the region.

When I dug out my notes, I found two baselines. The first allowed me to explore changing representational relationships over the course of Flynt's own twenty-year incumbency, during which his small-town, rural district changed into a suburban district. There the question was, How might a House member with well-established constituency connections react to the challenge of contextual changes over which the member has no control? The second baseline encouraged me to explore the change in representational relationships between Flynt's incumbency in the 1970s and the incumbency of a successor in the 1990s. And so, four times in the 1990s (twice in 1996 and twice in 1998), I returned to the old Flynt district—that is, to the remaining three-quarters to two-thirds of it—to travel with its current representative, Mac Collins. Here the question was, In what ways, and why, might the representational relationships of two different House members in the same district have changed from the 1970s to the 1990s?

This book, therefore, tells two stories about representation. Both stories involve a single district in the South, and each one covers nearly a quarter of a century. They are liable to all the sampling intricacies and scientific inadequacies of a case study. They are a first-cut, narrative account of one instance of representational change. Whether or not the narrative has anything to say about representational change in general, or about representational change in the South, or representational change in a suburbanizing type of district, I cannot say. But it might. At the least, it will put a human face on one of the most profound changes in recent American politics. And it will provide some individual-level support for larger generalizations about political change in the South. At the most, it might stimulate further micro-level examination of the larger subject of political representation.

Conceptualization

Representation is surely one of the most multifaceted ideas in political science. Not surprisingly, therefore, the study of political representation has been as multifaceted as the idea itself. Students of electoral systems, legislative institutions, public opinion—legislator linkages, identity politics, redistricting problems, and principal-agent relations continue to work at it. Agreements are hard to come by, progress is piecemeal, and closure is nowhere in sight.

Hannah Pitkin, who has given us the most familiar working definition of representation—"acting in the interest of the represented, in a manner responsive to them"³—has despaired of reaching philosophical agreement on the subject: "There does not seem to be any remotely satisfactory agreement on what representation is or means."⁴ From an empirical perspective, Heinz Eulau, who has helped to probe "the components of responsiveness," agrees: "The puzzle of representation . . . [is] that we have representative institutions, but like the Greeks, we do not know what they are about."⁵ In a recent review of several studies of representation and responsiveness, James Kuklinski and Gary Segura conclude similarly that "the more complex becomes a definition of representation, the more elusive becomes a definition of responsiveness that will accommodate them."⁶ Research on representation seems destined to encompass many perspectives and to cumulate in an exceedingly incremental fashion. This study is a tiny increment in a very large and thriving enterprise. As a contribution to the study of political representation, the Flynt-Collins case has several characteristics. First, the research takes as given the single-member-district, plurality-takes-all electoral system that governs elections to the House of Representatives.

It deliberately sidesteps macro-level questions concerning the fairness or the proportionality or the "representativeness" of the American electoral system, or of the outcomes produced by that system. It assumes a structure of 435 congressional districts, one member to a district, each member representing a separate and distinguishable set of constituents. Representation, here, is a set of relationships between a House member and that member's constituents. It is also an activity. The assumption is that any activity engaged in by the representative relating to his or her constituents involves the activity of representation.

Second, the research effort centers on the individual representative and is conducted in the constituency from which that representative has been elected.

For most empirically oriented political scientists most of the time, the study of political representation focuses on voting in the legislature—on how best to explain vote patterns, both individual and collective. Representation is treated largely as a relationship between the policy preferences of a constituency and the roll-call votes of the elected legislator.⁵ Typically, investigation centers on the vote choice, and the legislator's vote choice is interpreted as a representational choice. That is, it is a choice that can be studied as a response to constituency preferences.

Legislators also make another representational choice, one that is focused not on their behavior in the legislature, but on their behavior in the constituency. There the representational choice for the legislator is not "How should I vote?" but "How should I connect?" As we shall see, these two choices, when made by the same person, will impact one another and will produce behavior patterns that are related to one another. But this study is premised on the idea that making connection decisions at home can be separated analytically from making vote decisions in the legislature—and on the idea that home connections are important in their own right to the study of political representation.

The study of choices about connections is less a matter of constituency influence on the legislator—as emphasized in our empirical literature—and more a matter of the legislator's immersion in the constituency; of the legislator as part of the constituency. Home connections involve continuous interaction, and all connections count. They are more about "keeping in touch" than they are about "voting right"—though the two are related. It is harder, therefore, to isolate discrete connection choices for causal analysis than it is to separate discrete vote choices for such analysis. If it were easy, perhaps more scholars would have done it.

Since the study of home connections remains in an exploratory stage, participant observation in the constituency would seem to be an appropriate approach. And, since representing a constituency takes a lot of hard work in the constituency, it seems sensible for political scientists to take a look at representatives while they are actually working there. This study has been conducted largely by representing representational activity from over the shoulder of the repre-

sentative and by talking with the representative about it. The study, therefore, depends one-sidedly upon the representative's words, deeds, perceptions, and interpretations. The research offers no independent account of constituency viewpoints.

Finally, this study will argue that the observable connection choices made by a representative can be summarized as the choice of a strategy of representation.

It is a constrained choice. And in order to make sense of that choice, three factors are most relevant. One is the predispositions and goals of the individual representative. Another is the context—primarily the constituency—in which the representative pursues those goals. And the third is a sequencing or developmental factor whereby prior actions may constrain choice in the present and whereby present choices may constrain future possibilities. It is expected that each of these factors can, where relevant, be found and fathomed by an observer on the scene.

The working assumption is that the choice of a strategy will produce observable patterns of representation. Conversely, the patterns observed by the researcher are assumed to be the result of a fairly deliberate strategy. The concepts of "home style" and "home strategy" are variants of the same idea. Both formulations direct research to the same place and to the same set of activities. The idea of home strategy, however, encourages us to think more directly about representation. It encourages us to separate out goals, contexts, and prior negotiations and to examine them, both separately and together, as they have shaped observable patterns of representation at home.

Goals and Contexts

All representatives are goal seekers. They have ambitions; they want to accomplish things. They make choices and work actively in pursuit of such goals as getting reelected, making good public policy, accumulating power in the legislature, and winning higher office. Representative strategies will center on such goals—playing up some, playing down others. We shall focus on each member's dominant goals. But we shall not assume that the dominance of one goal drives out all consideration of other goals. We assume, to the contrary, that all representational strategies are, of necessity, mixed strategies.

Political ambition may take root at different points in an individual's life. The earliest touches of political ambition are quite likely to occur in the context of a person's district-level relationships—and are

likely to surface when an observer is immersed in the home constituency. Goals may take shape during an individual's initial decision to go into politics, as answers to the questions "Why go into politics anyway?" and "What do I want to get out of politics?" Such pre-congressional goals might develop from a motivation to fulfill a civic duty, to meet a self-imposed personal challenge, to savor the sociability of political involvement, to build party strength locally, or to become an ombudsman for individuals. Institutionally oriented conceptualizations may not, therefore, be sufficient for an exploration of representational activity in the political world beyond the legislature.

All representatives are context interpreters. They will make choices and take actions not in the abstract, but according to what they believe to be rational and/or appropriate in the circumstances or context in which they find themselves. And it is the goal seekers themselves who must interpret the opportunities and constraints present in that context. For members of Congress, the two most important contexts are the constituency back home and the legislative institution in Washington—along with, to a lesser extent, the political parties as they exist in both places.

Each constituency context, we assume, contains some fixed elements—such as geography, demography, the economy, and a few unshakable issue preferences—that do not allow for interpretive latitude on the part of the representative. We also assume that the constituency context contains some variable elements—such as constituency expectations, preferences, practices, and habits—that do allow for such interpretive latitude. Therefore, we assume, each member's relationship to his or her constituents will be partly the member's responsiveness to expectations generated by the constituent and partly constituent responsiveness to expectations generated by the individual representative. The working out, over time, of a mutually satisfactory and durable fit is the object of each legislator's continuous interaction with his or her constituency.

With respect to constituency context, we assume, as discussed in *Home Style*, that each representative perceives not a single home constituency, but a set of constituencies that nest, like a series of concentric circles, within one another. The largest circle contains all the residents of the legally prescribed geographical constituency; the next smaller, the reelection constituency, contains their weak but supportive voters; and the smallest, the primary constituency, consists of their most active and most reliable supporters. Our assump-

tion is that the constituency each member responds to is the one in his or her mind's eye. We also assume that members do not represent or connect with each of these perceived constituencies in the same way or to the same degree.

Members also cultivate supportive constituencies beyond their geographical constituency—to raise money and/or to seek higher office—to which they can be expected to respond. But, unless specifically noted, the representation of which we speak involves the home constituency.

With respect to both goal-seeking and context-interpreting, it would be unrealistic to expect a politician to lay out neatly for inspection by a visitor all the elements and interrelationships of a decision calculus or an interpretive calculus. An observer's description and analysis will, of necessity, depend heavily on retroduction—that is, treating observed comments and activities *as if* they were grounded in the pursuit of certain goals and in the interpretation of certain contexts. Throughout, an effort will be made to present evidence that gives some support to these "as if" conjectures—and, at the same time, enables other scholars to pose other possibilities.

Careers and Negotiation

Because time and sequence are such fundamental variables in this chronological study, it will be useful to think of each representative in terms of his or her career and in terms of his or her continuous negotiations with constituents. Careers and negotiations are the most important of the sequencing or developmental factors mentioned earlier, and they are crucial to the conception of representation as a long-run, over-time activity.

Out in the district, the sense of a career in progress is overwhelming. And the obligatory recitation of a representative's career milestones reveals the existence of two such careers—jointly pursued, but analytically separable. There is the career in the constituency, and there is the career in the legislative institution—and each affects the other. Our observational perch in the constituency reflects a primary interest in the career in that context. The distinction in *Home Style* between the protectionist and expansionist stages of the constituency career will be helpful in understanding each member's representational activities. The career stage at the time of observation and the story of the career to that point are among the possible constraints on present choices.

What all House members want from their constituents is support. In the short run, they want the support of a voting majority at the next election. For some members, that is all they want, or all they are free to contemplate. Others, however, may take a longer view of constituent support. For those members, reelection is a necessary, but not a sufficient, support goal. They seek a degree of constituent support that they can call upon and rely upon between elections. Their goal is what we might call durable interelection support.

These members want more from their constituents than a “yes” or “no” verdict on election day. Their calculation is not just how to win next time, but how to win consistently. They seek a support relationship that is reliable enough to guarantee them behavioral leeway between elections to pursue other goals, such as good policy or institutional power. They want a level of support that manifests itself either subjectively, in a comfortable sense of “fit” or objectively, in a stable “equilibrium,” between their performance and the expectations of their constituents, especially their primary constituents.

The covering word that House members use to describe the interelection support relationship they seek is *trust*, by which they mean something akin to the benefit of the doubt, coupled with a willingness—should constituents be in doubt—to listen to the explanations of the representative. Trust, as the *Home Style* study argued at length, requires a lot of attention to the constituency; in the constituency, over a considerable period of time. Whether described as the achievement of a durable fit, or constituent trust, or decision-making leeway, the long-run goal for many members is to build a constituency relationship that is solid, stable, and reliable enough to be as helpful between elections as it is on election night.

The relationship between representative and constituents over the course of a constituency career can usefully be conceptualized as a negotiation. Such a negotiation at one point in time may affect—as a preexisting condition—negotiations at a later point in time, often in a path-dependent fashion. An individual’s negotiating abilities and capacities (as well as goals) may also change over time and thus alter the range of strategic possibilities. The basis for negotiation is that “each has something the other wants; and each has something to offer in exchange. At the most general level, representatives want support, and they offer responsiveness. Constituents want responsiveness, and they offer support.”⁹ Further, in principal-agent terms, the “principal” (that is, the constituents) wants to be able regularly to

monitor the state of the negotiation in order to hold its “agent” (that is, the representative) accountable.¹⁰ Periodically, the state of the member-constituent negotiation does get monitored, and accountability is registered for all to see and evaluate, if not participate in, at election time.

While an election may be considered a one-time “test” of a representative’s responsiveness, the activity of responding is continuous for the representative. When constituents vote, they are taking stock of, and passing judgment on, a whole set of activities that have been taking place for at least two years. All of the public activities and all the public contacts of House members in their home districts are acts of responsiveness. All of those actions contribute to voter assessments of the representative’s responsiveness. And while students are rightfully preoccupied with the final election-day “grade” on member responsiveness, we cannot ignore the steady stream of responsive activity that contributes to that election-day judgment. Put differently, representation is an outcome, but it is not just an outcome. It is also a process. If an incumbent wins reelection, that outcome is only a punctuation point in that member’s continuous, long-running efforts at representation.

Activities undertaken at home before and after election day can usefully be studied as building-block contributions to responsiveness and, therefore, as essential roots of representation. Representation is legitimized by elections, but it is redeemed by actions taken between elections. Thus, while the actions that normally command our attention are taken in Washington, if representation is our subject, we must include actions taken in the home constituency.

Every election result is provisional. The representational relationship, while tested at regular intervals, is always subject to renegotiation between elections. The process of negotiation is, then, characterized by a succession of approximations by each side to the representational preferences and expectations of the one and the performance of the other. If and when the representative achieves a comfortable fit—or a stable equilibrium—with constituents, it will be a negotiated outcome. The idea of a negotiation captures the contingent, repetitious, and developmental nature of the representational relationship—and allows for the possibility that member strategies might change over time. The idea also allows for the appearance of historically constrained, path-dependent strategies.

Constituents, we assume, have some elementary notion, or can

develop some notion, of what good or satisfactory representation looks like. In the beginning, constituents' judgments about good representation and about their own representative will be minimally informed and maximally unstable. Name recognition and basic qualifications will suffice. The representative will—through a mixture of responsiveness and independence, promise and performance—“set a mark” or “make an impression” that constituency elites, at least, will recognize and characterize.¹¹ After repeated interaction, constituency expectations and judgments become more informed, more differentiated, and more stable. Over time, the early, tentative mark, or impression, develops into a fuller, more recognizable pattern of activity—that is, into a reputation.¹²

A favorable reputation will cut the costs, for constituents, of acquiring new information and will aid in the development of trust. And with trust can come the achievement of durable interelection support, increased legislative leeway, and an ever more recognizable representational pattern. An equilibrium may be established in which a certain degree of member independence is recognized, accepted, and valued by a preponderance of constituents. In cases of unusual longevity of the representative, constituents may stop taking in new information altogether and instead make a standing commitment based on incumbent reputation and constituent trust.¹³ In sum, reputation, trust, and leeway are career-related phenomena. All must be negotiated over time.

Representation as Process

Combining the discussion of goals and contexts with the discussion of sequential activities involving careers and negotiation leads us, finally, to think of the phenomenon of representation as a process. And that conceptualization, in turn, requires that representation be studied over time. That is the logic that emerges from the introduction of such ideas as multiple goals, changing contexts, building connections, developing career sequences, continuous responsiveness, continuous negotiation, durable fits, increasing leeway, solidifying a reputation, and winning trust.

Representation is not only a political process, it is a distinctive political process. It is related to the electoral process, but it is not the same as the electoral process. It is related to the legislative process, but it is not the same as the legislative process. Representational strategy is related to campaign strategy in running for Congress, and

it is related to voting strategy inside Congress. But it is not identical to campaign strategy or to voting strategy. As conceptualized in this study, representation is an autonomous process.

Legislation and representation, our textbooks tell us, are two parts of a single job. Indeed, the process of representation, as it is described in this book, has many similarities to the legislative process—as that process has been described in our research. Both are slow moving, incremental, repetitious, and continuous negotiating processes that occur under conditions of uncertainty. Both processes are punctuated, on occasion, by votes—roll calls in Congress and election results in the districts—that provide some temporary finality. Students of both processes have used these punctuating votes to characterize or to measure legislative and/or representational outcomes.

It has been axiomatic, however, for students of the legislative process to probe deeply, and in detail, the lengthy and complex building-block negotiations that lie behind successful performance of the legislative side of the job. Many such students have gone to Washington to have a firsthand look at this process, and their case studies of “how a bill becomes a law” have become foundation stones of congressional research. Fewer students of representation, on the other hand, have thought it important to dig into or trace the building-block negotiations that lie behind and lead up to successful performance of the representational side of the job. Fewer still have gone to the districts to examine firsthand the myriad member-constituency connections that the representational part of the job requires.

Despite the links between the two sides of a representative's job and the commonalities of the two processes, therefore, we do not have an equivalent case study literature on “how an elected official connects with a constituency.” The following study might be read as an invitation to think about the absence of such a literature and about the potential contribution it might make to the larger study of political representation.