

**The Politics of Expertise in Congress: The Rise and Fall of the Office of  
Technology Assessment; Communication in Congress: Members, Staff, and  
the Search for Information**



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administration fields who are concerned that leaders of public bureaucracies are not effective because they are either too passive or too aggressive. Terry's view includes prescriptions that, if followed, could restore balance to the leadership role. His analysis offers many useful prescriptions that, if pursued, could improve the management and governance of public bureaucracies.

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## Anne M. Khademian

*The Politics of Expertise in Congress: The Rise and Fall of the Office of Technology Assessment*, by Bruce Bimber. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1996, 128 pp., paper, NPA.

*Communication in Congress: Members, Staff, and the Search for Information*, by David Whiteman. Lawrence, KS: University of Kansas Press, 1995, 239 pp., \$35.00 cloth, \$15.95 paper.

It is not headline news to point out that Congress is anything but popular in the eyes of the American public. A daily media diet of questionable campaign finance practices, personal scandals, partisan bickering, and mudslinging portray an institution that is as corrupt as it is inept in dealing with the challenges of the country. Neither the tone of coverage nor the public's opinion should be surprising. Over the airwaves, the printed page, or the Internet, corruption and scandal sell news, and a public busy trying to make a living and taking care of families does not have the time or interest to seek out additional information about the ways in which Congress operates, or the depth and scope of the problems for which public policy solutions are expected. The institution does, of course, have its share of significant problems, but I would argue that the most serious of these are not represented by the stories of corruption and scandal. Rather, they are the challenges of collective decisionmaking in a democracy made up of diverse economic, social, and political interests.

To some degree, the coverage of Congress by those who analyze public policy and its implementation resembles that of the popular media: critical, but somewhat shallow. The field of public management, for example, targets congressional micromanagement proclivities, the institution's "fire alarm" approach to oversight, and poorly articulated mandates as keys to the troubled implementation of public policy. In order to improve government performance,

it is suggested that Congress do one of two things: (a) pass legislation that is explicit in defining goals and hence allows agencies to be held accountable through performance indicators that assess their goal achievement, which in turn would minimize congressional micromanagement; or (b) Congress should simply delegate more authority to the executive branch by giving agencies greater discretion in the implementation of public policies. If Congress were simply more rational in its behavior and generous in its allocation of power, in other words, the world of the public manager would be sufficiently simplified to allow for strategic and entrepreneurial efforts.

Nor has Congress escaped the ire of the broader policy literature which faults the institution for its responsiveness to special interest pleadings and its fragmented and incremental decisionmaking processes. Again, if Congress would only be more comprehensive and rational in its decisionmaking, more dependent upon expert analysis, and more willing to leave the really big social problems to special advisory panels, analysts would see the fruit of their labors in public policies that worked in practice.

Congress might not fit neatly within a reinvented government or provide the decisionmaking base necessary for comprehensive policymaking, but it is the institutional base for the U.S. policy process. Yet rather than accept the institution's decisionmaking dynamics as part of the policy process that needs to be more clearly understood, the tendency has been to wish Congress behaved better (more rationally) or simply went away altogether. Part of the problem is the disparaged, but nevertheless ever-present assumption that politics can be separated from the design and implementation of public policy—or at least analyzed as such. But a more important problem is the lack of understanding about just how Congress does make its collective decisions and how it uses (or fails to rely upon) expert analysis in shaping individual initiatives or casting a vote.

Two recent analyses of Congress go a long way to address this knowledge gap. Bruce Bimber and David Whiteman confront the assumption that Congress does not know enough, or does not care enough, to search widely for policy-relevant information in its decisionmaking efforts, and the assumption that policy expertise plays a minimal role in congressional decisionmaking.

In *Communication in Congress: Members, Staff, and the Search for Information*, David Whiteman adopts an analytical framework that differs from mainstream congressional studies in two ways. First, rather than focus on the individual member of Congress, he focuses on the congressional enterprise—any of the 535 offices in Congress made up of members and their personal and committee staff. Whiteman draws upon extensive interviews with members and their staff to present five enterprise types. He argues that variation in: (a) the level of hierarchy; and (b) the autonomy of the enterprise staff define enterprise operations from the “collegial” (with low hierarchy and high staff autonomy) to the hierarchical “unitary” enterprise in which the member is both the center for communication gathering and decisionmaking. Second, rather than focus on individual voting actions in Congress, Whiteman focuses on the communication networks developed by each enterprise to gather information for decisionmaking that precedes committee action and floor votes.

This alternative approach is very appropriate given the dramatic changes in Congress in recent decades. The institution has worked diligently to reinvent itself over the past 25 years with the intent of striking a more even balance with the executive branch, from its oversight of bureaucratic activities to the

development of an annual budget. During this time, staff size has expanded, congressional support agencies have been created, and individual members have developed the means to participate in a variety of policy areas beyond the jurisdiction of a single committee. Yet much of the research on Congress still focuses on individual members and their voting choices. As Whiteman points out, what is perhaps the most important aspect of the voting decision (and most representative of congressional efforts to improve decisionmaking sophistication) is not the vote itself but decisions regarding levels of attention to an issue, and the extent and content of information searches to arrive at policy initiatives for legislative consideration, or final votes.

The policy initiative, Whiteman argues, is especially critical, as it will play a prominent role in shaping the discussion of the problem in the legislature and its policy solution, and will be an option for other members to vote upon. Just how an enterprise decides to develop an initiative, and how the initiative is actually developed are then critical to an assessment of how Congress makes decisions and the information quality of those choices. The only way to explore these efforts is to take an "enterprise," rather than an individual member, focus. It is possible that with the patterns of congressional decentralization and the diminished influence of committee chairs in setting the agenda for a particular policy area, the individual enterprise focus offers insights beyond the committee focus pioneered by Richard Fenno in 1973. As Congress has changed, so must our research methods.

The core of Whiteman's argument is contained in three chapters devoted to the different communication and information gathering patterns of enterprises that are "attentive" to an issue, those directly "involved" in developing a policy initiative, and the agenda setting process that transforms an attentive enterprise to an involved one. Considerations of enterprise goals (including public policy goals, constituent goals, and the member's desire to "make a mark"), resource availability, and the ambitions and interests of members and their staff play the defining role in the decision. As the transition is made to enterprise involvement, Whiteman identifies increased levels of staff autonomy from member oversight in the search for information, even in the enterprises defined by low staff autonomy at other times. The transition also includes a deepened information gathering effort, with information searches defined by policy breadth and the range of sources utilized.

In general, Whiteman finds that the involved enterprise reaches beyond network contacts normally engaged during an "attentive" phase, to include congressional support agencies, university and think-tank experts, and experience with people and organizations in the "real world." From the staff member who conducted his own safety test by driving alternately at 55 and 65 miles per hour to inform his views on the national speed limit, to the staff member who went to the Washington Hospital Center to observe cataract operations and to talk with physicians in his search for medical policy solutions, the involved enterprise tends to engage in wide-ranging search activities. Whiteman's chapter on the use of policy analysis, in particular, should be encouraging to scholars in the public policy field. On the down side, only the involved enterprises routinely engage the expertise of the congressional support agencies or other policy research organizations. But for those involved enterprises at the core of an issue network, reliance on policy analysis ranges from an awareness of reports and the findings to careful readings by staff. Policy analysts are competing in the provision of information with some heavy players

in any given network, from interest groups and constituents to executive agencies, but the more “dense” the network is with information, the more likely an analyst and his or her work will be included in the mix.

Bruce Bimber’s analysis of the Office of Technology Assessment (OTA) provides similar conclusions regarding the search for and use of expert analysis. In the conclusion of *The Politics of Expertise in Congress: The Rise and Fall of the Office of Technology Assessment*, Bimber writes, “It is laudable for the conduct of policy analysis that an institution designed to represent political interests in a pluralistic way tends to represent technical knowledge pluralistically also. . . . [A]s a forum for eliciting a multiplicity of expert views that can collectively tend toward objectivity and neutrality, Congress appears especially competent” (p. 98). The “multiplicity” of sources refers to congressional use of its support agencies, including the now-defunct OTA—a victim of congressional housecleaning in 1995. But the key to this use of expertise by Congress lies with the dynamics of Congress as an institution, and the role expert analysis plays in the policy process.

Our traditional conceptions of the use of expertise by politicians, Bimber argues, is defined by the politicization of executive branch support agencies. Deficit forecasting by the Office of Management and Budget (OMB), for example, is often met with an assumption of political bias built into the estimates that will favor the administration’s budget in any given year. However, to make the assumption that expertise provided to Congress by a congressional support agency would be biased toward a particular legislator’s position, or that of a political party, is to ignore that the executive and legislative branches are institutionally distinct. Bimber argues that the “character of the relationships between experts and politicians might be shaped more by institutional arrangements than the choices or styles of individual politicians and experts” (p. 7). A highly decentralized institution with power pluralistically distributed will “reward experts who provide broadly applicable, politically uncommitted expertise” (p. 7). Where an expert in the executive branch is rewarded for commitment to a set of political objectives, experts serving Congress would be ignored or punished. In the executive branch, the OMB stands out as a politicized yet essential arm of the executive branch, while the President’s Science Advisory Board was abolished in 1973 for its neutrality-seeking efforts in scientific advice. A brief review of the Congressional Budget Office, the General Accounting Office, and the Congressional Research Service gives some additional evidence, along with the OTA, for the importance of neutrality in a decentralized institution as an expert-agency survival strategy.

Bimber’s analysis is slight in page numbers, but not in insight. This lively, well-written book offers students of public policy and of institutions keen insights presented in a simple and concise manner, seemingly obvious—although not obvious before reading the book. With full understanding of Congress and the incentives driving member behavior, Bimber offers several conclusions about the nature of expert information and its use. First, it must “do no harm” to members by undermining a firmly held position, or catching them by surprise. Second, members rely on policy expertise as only one source of information, and then it is primarily to help them think about an issue and frame the problem, not as a source of voting instruction. Third, expert advice is not only a means to improve public policy, it is ultimately a means to gain an edge over the executive branch in the policy process. The expert who forgets any of these three rules, so to speak, will have a short life in Congress.

The book neatly details the historical transformation of the OTA from an agency politically captured by a few legislators who expected support for their initiatives, to a savvy, politically neutral provider of expertise. The agency went to great lengths to avoid taking policy positions, alerted members on both sides of the partisan aisle to the conduct of studies and their eventual release, and used its proximity to Congress and the opportunity to testify on issues to convey expert analysis verbally—a more effective means to convey expert advice for members too busy to read even a condensed memo on the topic.

Through their studies of Congress, both Whiteman and Bimber provide links to our understanding of other institutions and networks. Whiteman's discussion of information search patterns, defined by internal structure and level of issue involvement in any given enterprise, suggests connections to organizational theory: the study of management and leadership styles, culture, and incentive structures. His analysis of issue networks, held together by information needs, and defined from the inside out by familiarity and hence trust, offer those studying networks more generally interesting evidence on the role information searches play in providing network glue, as well as the transitory nature of network boundaries.

Similarly, Bimber's case study of the OTA is a study in leadership, culture, and organizational strategies for survival—although no amount of strategizing on the part of a neutrally competent agency could apparently protect it from the dynamics of election year housecleaning to demonstrate a willingness to cut the budget inside Congress, as well. Perhaps a more important lesson from the demise of the OTA is the significance of institutional change. A more centralized Congress, led by a strong Republican Party, might very well alter the expectations for expert advice.

There is room for criticism in both studies. Whiteman's analysis is based on relatively old data from the mid to late 1980s. Although this does not detract from his contributions, it does leave the reader wondering if the changes in Congress that are so well depicted by Bimber have implications for the operations of individual enterprises. Do Republican enterprises under a more centralized party structure engage in similarly wide information searches? Do they rely upon a more defined set of resources? Or does centralized leadership not affect the way individual enterprises are operated?

A second criticism (one which is a bit unfair, given the defined scope of his analysis) is Whiteman's neglect of broader questions that define relations between Congress and the executive branch. Do the present patterns of information searches represent a Congress competent in its efforts to stand toe-to-toe with the executive branch in policy development? Given the limited number of enterprises that actually engage in concentrated searches for information on any given issue, is Congress any more pluralistic in its representation of the public than the executive branch? And for those interested in government reform, what do the results tell us about the congressional potential to define more explicit legislative goals and performance indicators?

Bimber's analysis would have been enhanced with greater discussion of the role of expertise in government decisionmaking, what we know about the relationship between experts and politicians more generally, and the long-held fears he alludes to concerning the replacement of expertise with common sense and the popular will. One is hesitant, nevertheless, to push Bimber in this manner. At the conclusion of his study some readers might be apt to say, "Of course! Didn't we know that already?" If we did, no one has stated it so simply

and engagingly as Bimber. To the extent that his book is widely read, and it should be, it is likely to take on the feel of conventional wisdom in our discussions of expertise and political institutions.

For the student of public policy and public management, disenchanted with a Congress that never seems to do things in a rational, comprehensive, or clearly defined manner, Whiteman's study offers a wealth of insight. It is not merely special interests and the goal to be reelected that drive congressional decisionmaking, but the congressional enterprise whose dynamics are defined by personality, experience, leadership, and even gender, struggling to balance constituent responsiveness, an overwhelming number of policy demands, and the need to do its job in an informed manner. For those enterprises at the core of an issue network, their efforts are quite admirable. Yet, regardless of the wisdom offered in policy analysis, expert advice is only one of many components that must enter the calculus to shape policy and make decisions. If it is a bit like making sausage, at least there is a wide search for ingredients by the presiding chefs, and an effort to understand potential side effects upon consumption.

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#### Jane E. Fountain

*The Age of the Network: Organizing Principles for the 21st Century*, by Jessica Lipnack and Jeffrey Stamps. New York: John Wiley, 1994, 264 pp., \$16.95 paper.

*How Organizations Act Together: Interorganizational Coordination in Theory and Practice*, by Ernest R. Alexander. Langhorne, PA: Gordon and Breach Publishers, 1995, 384 pp., \$68.00 cloth, \$25.00 paper.

Lipnack and Stamps founded the Networking Institute in 1982 and have consulted to numerous organizations since then. In *The Age of the Network* the authors attempt to link networks with earlier organizational forms in order to help practitioners and executives "to use the new powers of networks together with the best mix of hierarchy, bureaucracy, and small groups" (p. viii). The volume is stimulating and highly readable, "unfettered" for the most part by theory and research, and informed by the authors' intense empirical engagement with the phenomenon that comprises the subject of the book.

Sections one and two of the volume, comprised of the first three chapters, provide the main conceptual ideas. I found them uneven but the most rewarding of the book. Chapter 1 presents the major assertions of the authors: Society is at least 40 years into a major transition to the Information Age. The network is the most important organizational form to emerge in the Information Age. Chapter 2 presents a historical overview, greatly simplified and with barely a footnote, of the emergence of organizational forms. (How can one explain bureaucracy without mention of Max Weber?) This brief history is meant to demonstrate that as organizational forms have emerged in response to large-scale environmental change, they have not replaced one another as much as sedimented one on top of another. Changes in the previous organizational form come about from its juxtaposition with the new form.