

## Introduction

*As it is essential to liberty that the government in general should have a common interest with the people, so it is particularly essential that the branch of it under consideration [the House of Representatives] should have an immediate dependence on and an intimate sympathy with, the people.*

— JAMES MADISON: *The Federalist*

*The requisites in actual representation are that the Representatives should sympathize with their constituents; should think as they think and feel as they feel; and that for these purposes should even be residents among them.*

— GEORGE MASON: Remarks at the Constitutional Convention

This book is an exploration. It is an exploration of the relationship between members of the House of Representatives and their constituents about which the Founding Fathers philosophized. It is also an exploration of the place where that relationship was thought to originate and to thrive — the constituency. Explorations of such a relationship and such a place are not especially newsworthy or glamorous; nor have they been especially popular among political scientists. It is not hard to see why.

I recall an occasion in one congressional district when a representative's district aide and I were eating dinner, waiting for the representative to fly in from Washington for an evening of election campaigning. When he arrived, he was keyed up and visibly elated:

I spent fifteen minutes on the telephone with the president this afternoon. He had a plaintive tone in his voice and he

pleaded with me. I suppose he figured he would win if he broke me away from the others. But I knew more about it than he did — more than anyone. I've lived with this problem for years. We won. We ended up with a stronger bill than we had three days ago; and now he knows we will override another veto.

The House member regaled us with the intimate details of the fascinating and exciting legislative struggle as he ordered and gulped his dinner. Then the three of us got up and went out to the aide's car, the back of which was piled from floor to roof with campaign ammunition — hundreds of shopping bags, all with the representative's name and picture on them. As he sat down beside the driver, he turned around to look at me, wedged among the shopping bags. He sighed, smiled, and said, "Back to this again." He had moved from one political world to another. It is the first of these two worlds that normally attracts our interest. This book, however, is not about the world of telephone conversations with the president of the United States nor the world of legislative battle. It is a book about the world of the shopping bags.

Political scientists have produced a voluminous amount of literature on the general subject of representative-constituency relations. We have literature on party government that argues that constituency pressures explain why representatives so often fail to vote their party.<sup>1</sup> We have survey research that measures the congruence between constituency attitudes on public policy and the roll call votes of their representatives.<sup>2</sup> We have decision-making literature that assesses the relative influence of constituency factors in the voting calculations of the representative.<sup>3</sup> We have literature on role orientations that differentiates between types of representative-constituency relationships — between the "trustees" who vote their independent judgment and the "delegates" who vote their constituents' wishes.<sup>4</sup> We also have literature on recruitment that traces legislative styles of representatives to the recruitment patterns in their constituencies.<sup>5</sup> We have communications literature, which emphasizes the two-way, interactive, interdependent character of the representative-constituency relationship.<sup>6</sup> And we have reformist literature that protests that representatives spend too much of their time on constituent service — too much the errand-boy; too little the lawmaker.<sup>7</sup>

Despite this outpouring, one question central to the representative-constituency relationship remains underdeveloped. It is: *What does an elected representative see when he or she sees a constituency?* And, as a natural follow-up, *What consequences do these perceptions have for his or her behavior?* The key problem is perception. And the key assumption is that the constituency a representative reacts to is the constituency he or she sees. The corollary assumption is that the rest of us cannot understand the representative-constituency relationship until we can see the constituency through the eyes of the representative. These ideas are not new. They were first articulated for students of the United States Congress by Lewis Dexter.<sup>8</sup> Their importance has been widely acknowledged and frequently repeated ever since. But despite the acceptance and reiteration of Dexter's insights, we still have not developed much coherent knowledge about the perceptions members of Congress have of their constituencies.

A major reason for this neglect is that most political science research on the representative-constituency linkage is conducted at one end of the linkage — in the world of legislative combat and not in the world of the shopping bags. Typically, our interest in the constituency relations of senators and House members has been a derivative interest, pursued for the light it sheds on some behavior — like roll call voting — in Washington, D.C. When we talk with our national legislators about their constituencies, we typically talk to them *in Washington* and, perforce, in the Washington context. But that is a context far removed from the one in which their constituency relationships are created, nurtured, and changed. And it is a context equally far removed from the one in which we might expect their perceptions of their constituencies to be shaped, sharpened, or altered. Asking constituency-related questions on Capitol Hill, when the House member is far from the constituency itself, could well produce a distortion of perspective. Researchers might tend to conceive of a separation between the representative "here in Washington" and his or her constituency "back home," whereas the representative may picture himself or herself as a part of the constituency — *me-in-the-constituency*, rather than *me-and-the-constituency*. As a research strategy, therefore, it makes sense to study our representatives' perceptions of their constituencies while they are actually in their constituencies — at the constituency end of the linkage.<sup>9</sup>

From the fall of 1970 until the spring of 1977, I traveled intermit-

tently with some members of the House of Representatives while they were in their districts, to see if I could figure out — by looking over their shoulders — what it was they saw there. These expeditions were totally open-ended and exploratory. I tried to observe and inquire into anything and everything these members did. I worried about whatever they worried about. Rather than assume that I already knew what was interesting, I remained prepared to find interesting questions emerging in the course of the experience. The same with data. The research method was largely one of soaking and poking — or just hanging around.

During nearly eight years of research, I accompanied eighteen individuals in their districts: fifteen sitting representatives, two representatives-to-be, and one representative-elect. I made 36 separate visits and spent 110 working (not traveling) days in the eighteen districts. In fourteen cases, I visited the district more than once; in four cases, I made only one trip. Because I was a stranger to each local context and to the constellation of people surrounding each representative, my confidence in what I saw and heard increased markedly when I could observe at more than one time. The least amount of time I spent with any individual was one three-day visit; the most was three visits totaling eleven days. Nearly two-thirds of the visits occurred during the fall election period.<sup>10</sup> In eleven cases, I supplemented the district visit with a lengthy interview in Washington. In the district, I reconstructed my record from memory and from brief jottings, as soon after the event as was feasible. In Washington, I took mostly verbatim notes during the interview and committed them to tape immediately thereafter. Wherever necessary, I have given the representatives pseudonyms in the text, in order to preserve their anonymity.

I have tried to find a variety of types of representatives and districts, but I make no pretense at having a group that can be called representative, much less a sample. The eighteen include ten Democrats and eight Republicans. Three come from two eastern states; six come from five midwestern states; one comes from a border state; three come from three southern states; and five come from three far western states. Since I began, one has retired, one has been defeated, and one has run for the Senate. There is some variation among them in terms of ideology, seniority, ethnicity, race, age, and sex,<sup>11</sup> and in terms of safeness and diversity of district. No claim is

made, however, that the group is ideally balanced in any of these respects — only that the group is diverse enough for the exploratory purposes to which it has been put. These and other matters of method have been elaborated in a lengthy Appendix.

A final word about what this book does not do. First of all, it does not compare the attitudes of constituents with the attitudes or behavior of the representative; it is written entirely from over the representative's shoulder. It does not investigate constituent attitudes, and cannot compare them, therefore, with anything. Nor, second, does this book compare representatives' perceptions of their constituencies with some "objective" or "real" or "true" version of those constituencies. The perceived constituency is the only one we know anything about. In the third place, this book is not a study of "constituencies" that may lie outside a representative's congressional district. Some House members attract financial contributions and other forms of support from people across the state or nation. Though I have run across traces of these — in examining the appointment schedules of members, for instance — I have excluded them from this study on the grounds that ordinary constituency relationships are complicated enough.

Fourth, I do not delve into the personalities of the representatives being studied. Here again, I have stumbled across intriguing hints that these things may be important. For instance, a long-time friend of one member of Congress told me, gratuitously, that I could never understand that congressman's ambition unless I understood the relationship between him and his mother — "a tough old woman" who wanted her son to be "perfect." "He could never please her. Nothing he could do would please her." I have let all such matters lie untouched, because it is beyond my competence to do anything else with them.

Finally, this book is about the early to mid-1970s only. These years were characterized by the steady decline of strong national party attachments and strong local party organizations. They were characterized, also, by considerable public cynicism and distrust toward our national political institutions, including Congress. Had these conditions been different, House members might have behaved differently in their constituencies. Even with these several caveats, it will be task enough to figure out the perceptions that a few members of Congress have of their constituencies and to examine some possible political consequences.

## NOTES

1. For example, Edward Schneier and Julius Turner, *Party and Constituency: Pressures on Congress*, rev. ed. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1970).
2. For example, Warren Miller and Donald Stokes, "Constituency Influence in Congress," *American Political Science Review* 57 (March 1963): 45-56.
3. For example, John Kingdon, *Congressmen's Voting Decisions* (New York: Harper and Row, 1973).
4. For example, Roger Davidson, *The Role of the Congressman* (New York: Pegasus, 1969).
5. For example, Leo Snowiss, "Congressional Recruitment and Representation," *American Political Science Review* 60 (September 1966): 629-39.
6. For example, R. Bauer, I. Pool, and L. Dexter, *American Business and Public Policy* (New York: Atherton, 1963).
7. For example, M. Green, J. Fallows, and D. Zwick, *Who Runs Congress* (New York: Bantam, 1972).
8. Dexter's seminal article was "The Representative and His District," *Human Organization* 16 (Spring 1957): 2-14. It will be found, revised and reprinted, along with other of Dexter's works carrying the same perspective in: Lewis Dexter, *The Sociology and Politics of Congress* (Chicago: Rand McNally, 1969). Another early example of the perceptual emphasis in constituency studies is Charles O. Jones, "Representation in Congress: The Case of the House Agriculture Committee," *American Political Science Review* 55 (June 1961): 358-67.
9. Political science studies conducted in congressional constituencies have been few and far between. The most helpful to me have been: *On Capitol Hill*, ed. John Bibby and Roger Davidson (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1967); *On Capitol Hill*, ed. John Bibby and Roger Davidson (Chicago: Dryden, 1972); John Donovan, *Congressional Campaign: Maine Elects a Democrat* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1957); Charles Jones, "The Role of the Campaign in Congressional Politics" in *The Electoral Process*, ed. Harmon Zeigler and Kent Jennings (New York: Prentice-Hall, 1966); John Kingdon, *Candidates for Office: Beliefs and Strategies* (New York: Random House, 1966); David Leuthold, *Electioneering in a Democracy* (New York: Wiley, 1968). And no one interested in this subject should miss Richard Harris's superb "How's It Look?" *New Yorker*, April 8, 1967, pp. 48ff. The most recent study, conducted simultaneously with this one, is: *The Making of Congressmen*, ed. Alan Clem, (North Scituate, Mass.: Duxbury, 1976).
10. A full listing of the district visits will be found in Table A, Appendix.
11. The group contains seventeen men and one woman. In this Introduction, I have deliberately employed the generic terms "House member," "member of Congress," "representative," and "his or her" to make it clear that I am talking about men and women. And I have tried to use the same language wherever the plural form appears in the book. That is, I have tried to stop using the word "congressmen." However, I shall often and deliberately use "congressman" and "his" as generic terms. Stylistically, I find this a less clumsy form of the third person singular than "congressperson," followed always by "his or her." This usage has the additional special benefit, here, of camouflaging the one woman in the group.

## CHAPTER ONE

*Perceptions of the Constituency*

What does a House member see when looking at his or her constituency? Kaleidoscopic variety, no doubt. That is why there can be no one "correct" way of slicing up and classifying member perceptions — only "helpful" ways. Most helpful to me has been the member's view of a constituency as a nest of concentric circles. In one form or another, in one expression or another, in one degree or another, this bullseye perception is shared by all House members. It is helpful to us for the same reason it is common to them. It is a perception constructed out of the necessities of political life.

THE GEOGRAPHICAL CONSTITUENCY:  
THE DISTRICT

The largest of the concentric circles represents the House member's most encompassing view of his or her constituency. It is "the district," the entity to which, from which, and within which the member travels. It is the entity whose boundaries have been fixed by state legislative enactment or by court decision. It includes the entire population within those boundaries. Because it is a legal entity, we could refer to it as the legal constituency. We capture more of what the member has in mind when conjuring up "my district," however, if we think of it as the *geographical constituency*. We then retain the idea that the district is a legally bounded space, and emphasize that it is located in a particular place.

The Washington community is often described as a group of people all of whom come from somewhere else. The House of Representatives, by design, epitomizes this characteristic; and its members function with a heightened sense of their ties to another place. There