

"Congress and Issues of Representation and Democracy"

When the United States was first established, the concept of “representation” was operationalized in the Constitution. Article IV, Section 4, states, “The United States shall guarantee to every state of the Union a Republican form of Government...” The system that the Constitution was proposing is known as “representative democracy.” At the time of the Constitution’s authorship, it was believed that elected representatives could live at home and truly represent the people who elected them.

Today, legislative districts can be thousands of square miles and contain millions of people, with diverse positions on the overwhelming issues of the day. As a result, concepts of representation have evolved. We tend to envision our representatives in one of three ways: as trustees, as delegates, or as politicians.

With the “trustee” concept, Members of Congress believe that they have been elected by voters to go to Washington, learn about the issues, and make decisions that are in the voters’ best interest. For example, if you were on the Agriculture Committee, you might be interested in learning about subsidies and food stamps, but would you also have time to listen to issues on bugs, cloning, slaughterhouses, environmental contaminants, and soil management? The voters either don’t have the time, or the interest, to learn about all of the issues, so the voters *trust* the elected representatives to make the best choices on their behalf. An elected representative acting as a “trustee” is free to analyze information from expert testimony during committee hearings, listen to the advice of members of their state’s delegation or their party’s leadership, consider the arguments of special interest groups who have a stake in the issue, and review the advice of policy expert staffers. For many voters, it may seem comforting to know that someone in Washington is looking out for their best interests, and as “trustee,” the elected representative is considered more qualified in making decisions than the uneducated and fickle public.

According to the “delegate” concept, the voter takes on more responsibility. The voter wants to make decisions and delegate the responsibility of carrying those decisions to Washington to his or her elected representative. Activists and educated members of the voting public are more comfortable with the “delegate” concept because they spend more time learning about the issues, and they want their voices to be heard. Members of Congress acting as “delegates” can take their voting cues from campaign promises, like the Tea Party Republicans, who promised to cut the budget, or from public opinion polls, which are constantly monitoring the pulse of the electorate on a variety of issues. “Delegates” can also take their cues from massive letter writing, phone calling, or e-mail campaigns, which, in the past, have been known to shut down the communications systems in the Congressional Office Buildings. This kind of communication blitz happens frequently when a hotly contested issue (such as abortion, same-sex marriage, or the death penalty) comes into play. These issues elicit strong emotional responses, even from a vocal minority, and can sway a “delegate’s” vote, because Members of Congress know that these are also the kinds of issues that motivate people to get out and vote.

And finally, the “politico” concept, with all of the negative connotations that go along with the word “politico,” is the most realistic way of describing how most of our elected representatives go about representing us. A “politico” is one who acts as a

“trustee” when there are no voter’s cues to follow, and acts as a “delegate” when the voters cry out to be heard. With over 10,000 bills introduced into Congress each year, it is impossible for anyone to know enough to make well-educated decisions on every issue; therefore, most of the time, voters must trust their elected representative to do what is in their best interest. However, when the voters do have enough information to make their own decisions, they can delegate that decision to their elected representative. Most representatives will follow the wishes of their electorate, regardless of their personal opinions. This is not flip-flopping; it is just being practical.

In the United States, the majority rules and the minorities have rights. There are narrow special interests (represented in the House) as well as broad national interests (represented in the Senate), but there are few elected representatives who have had the courage to vote against the wishes of their electorate. *Profiles in Courage* by John F. Kennedy honors men who went against the popular position of their day to do what was right, usually at their own expense. Consider also the example of the Supreme Court in the *Brown v Board of Education* (1954) case: their decision promoted racial integration in the classroom. Based on this case, it had been thought that only an unelected body, such as the Supreme Court, would have the independence and strength to stand up against the powerful to do what was right. However, recent Wall Street bailouts, extensions on tax cuts for the wealthy, and increasing involvement in international conflicts makes one wonder just who Members of Congress are listening to these days.