
Television and Legislatures: The American Experience

by Harry Grundy

It is now more than twenty years since the United States House of Representatives began televising its daily proceedings in March 1979. The Senate followed in 1986. This article looks at some of the effects television has had on legislative proceedings.

Over the last several decades, Congress has evolved from a public institution protective of its privacy to one that has welcomed the public to view its proceedings. Television cameras have allowed viewers the opportunity to watch their congressman at work and to see democracy in action. The cameras have also allowed members to bask in the light of publicity and play to the camera – a necessary evil in this age of electronic politics. During the debates on televising the Senate, J. Bennett Johnston, an opponent of the cameras, accurately, if somewhat sarcastically, described the marriage of today's politician with television:

There is no rush, there is no feeling, there is no sensation quite like appearing on national television because to get that feeling and say the message to the whole Nation is an elixir, an opiate, a drug more powerful than most anything in the Nation. Indeed, each Member of this body, when he or she has a chance to sup or drink from that cup of beta endorphin called national TV will rush to the occasion and drink to the full.¹

Familiarity may breed contempt but in the case of Congress two decades of televising its proceedings has led to a better understanding of both the institution and the legislative process. The dire predictions by opponents that viewers' interest would wane have never materialized. Currently, C-SPAN is available to over 75 million households in America while C-SPAN II is available to slightly over 50 million households. Though their ratings are low

compared to other cable channels, there is a dedicated audience of viewers that participate in call-in programs, watch various congressional hearings and stay informed as to the issues of the day. In many ways, ratings and audience figures cannot fully measure the importance of having cameras inside a legislative body. Yet, at the same time, the camera's supporters cannot claim total victory in terms of the public's opinion towards their institution. Doubters remain as to the camera's effectiveness in presenting the activities of Congress to the people.

Before television the maxim of the House was: "in order to get along, you must go along." Personal contact between members was encouraged. Junior members deferred not only to senior members but to committee and subcommittee chairmen as well. It was a common occurrence for many freshman members "to be seen and not heard" either on the floor or in committee. Leaders of both houses would often tell new members to use their first years in Congress to observe the process, learn the intricacies of committee work and, most importantly, vote the party line.

Inevitably, having cameras in the chamber affected not only the member's participation in debates but has, to some extent, altered the standard of procedure. A prime example can be found in the practice of one-minute and special order speeches. One-minute speeches occur at the beginning of each legislative day and entitles members to speak on any subject. These opening speeches are, in many ways, a made-for-television event. A study by the Congressional Research Service stated that today's technology permits members to use one-minute

Harry Grundy is a visiting research fellow at the Department of Politics and International Relations at the University of Kent at Canterbury, UK. This is a revised version of a paper delivered at the 1999 American Political Science Association meeting in Atlanta.

speeches as a visual press release. Members can plan to address a subject of particular interest to their constituents and have the videotape sent back to local news stations for airing. Many members have made one-minute speeches a regular part of their press operations because of their short length, the lack of restriction on their content, and their normal occurrence at the beginning of the day, which allows for transmittal home in time for the evening news broadcasts.²

Similar findings were reached in the study of special order speeches. Special orders allow members the opportunity to speak on any topic for up to 60 minutes once the House's legislative business has concluded. In some cases, more than one member may participate by sharing their reserved time with others and yielding periodically for questions or comments. This "colloquy" is often arranged in advance of the special order speech.³

A study of the first month-and-a-half of the televised Senate proceedings showed that there was a 250% increase in the number of special order speeches compared to the same time period in the previous two Congresses. Likewise, the total amount of floor time devoted to these speeches nearly doubled from the time in both 1984 and 1982. However, the average time for these speeches was halved from 12 minutes to nearly 6 minutes due to the change in time, from 15 minutes to 5 minutes, allotted to each senator.⁴ In the House there was an increase in the number of one-minute speeches. For many members whose schedule is full of appointments and committee hearings, it is their one opportunity each day to come to the floor and speak on the topic of the day or of an issue relating to their constituents. Cynics, no doubt, would call this political opportunism or an indirect way to campaign but these opening sessions are there for *all* members to take advantage of. Some members have become media celebrities by appearing in the well of the House or Senate on a regular basis. It may be the one time during the transaction of congressional business where members, directly or indirectly, play to the cameras.

Attendance patterns have also changed due to availability of C-SPAN in every members office. Members not only monitor the floor debates but they can gauge when it is the best time to come to the floor either to vote or make a speech. Thanks to their own office monitors, members today are also better informed as to the daily schedule of events and what is specifically occurring on the floor. A consequence of this in-house system is the fact that members are less reliant on their whips for information on pending legislation and when to go to the chamber and vote. Senator Byrd once noted that since the inclusion of cameras "debate has improved from a substantive standpoint" and that senators "are making better speeches."⁵ This stands to reason since viewers are

judging members on substance as well as appearance. The cameras have become a window on both the debating process and of the performance of members. Members must be seen as having done their homework while participating in a debate. The risk of being perceived as unprepared could damage one's reputation with colleagues and voters.

Opponents of televised proceedings believed that the presence of cameras would result in members grandstanding and resorting to theatrics once they were in front of the lens. This has long been the defense of those unwilling to allow cameras into the legislative arena. It is a defense built not on their ignorance of the power of television but more on the worry that the internal workings of the chamber would be affected.

The floor of both the House and Senate has never resembled a three-ring circus, much to the disappointment of those who saw the cameras as representing an end to civilised debate and behavior. Confrontation has clearly been the exception and not the rule. In the Senate, debate has at times been emotional – such as the vote to deploy troops in the Persian Gulf or the Supreme Court nominations of Robert Bork and Clarence Thomas – but never what can be described as confrontational. There have been occasions when some members have come to the floor either wearing a pig's nose to symbolize pork barrel politics or waving a checkbook during the House banking scandal. But, for the most part, the cameras have acted as a deterrent against unruly or outrageous behavior with members knowing that their actions are being watched by the public and by news organizations.

While grandstanding may be at a minimum, partisan rhetoric is at a premium. On the floor of the House or Senate and in the committee rooms, wherever the cameras are present partisan rancor seems to follow. Partisan rhetoric and rancor was there for the cameras to record during the recent impeachment proceedings against President Clinton. Both the House Judiciary Committee proceedings and the House floor debate became, in the end, partisan debating chambers. Many analysts believed that the public's support for President Clinton and the desire to see the impeachment proceedings end was due, in large part, to the partisan dynamic of the debate they were witnessing thanks to television.

The art of political compromise and comity has given way to bickering and dilatory tactics. It is not uncommon to watch morning speeches in either chamber and be treated to Republicans criticizing the Democratic president while Democrats criticize the content and pace of legislation offered by the Republican leadership. A very noticeable case of role reversal from the Congress of the early 1980s when congressional television was in its infancy!

Another result of televised proceedings has been the inevitable recognition factor that comes with appearing in front of the cameras.

Several members have become media stars - their political careers formed and, in some cases, ended by the cameras. Perhaps no other member of Congress owed his rise in power more to the televised proceedings than Newt Gingrich. He used the televised House proceedings and, specifically, special orders, to further both his career and his conservative brand of politics. His effective use of the media led to his election as House majority whip in 1989. By 1994, with the Republicans winning control of the House for the first time since 1954, Mr. Gingrich became Speaker. In an ironic twist, television which so ably assisted him in his rise to power, also hastened his downfall. As Speaker, Gingrich was on television *too much* according to several viewer surveys. He was the symbolic leader of his party and, as such, paid a heavy price in the opinion polls over his handling of the government shutdown in 1995. The unexpected loss of seats in the 1998 midterm elections - results that further reduced an already thin Republican majority - along with his already low public opinion ratings, prompted his resigning first as Speaker and then later from Congress.

Others have been more fortunate. Trent Lott gained leadership positions in the House before moving on to the Senate and becoming majority leader. Dick Armey and Tom De Lay have used the televised House proceedings to their advantage in their rise up the current House leadership ladder. Robert Walker and Robert Donan were frequent participants in special order sessions and became media celebrities.

Republicans were not the only ones to take advantage of the cameras presence. Al Gore, the first member to speak during the televised proceedings of both the House and Senate, used his familiarity with the media to great advantage in becoming Bill Clinton's vice president. After the Democrats recaptured the Senate in 1986, George Mitchell's election as majority leader was due, in large part, to the belief among his colleagues that Mitchell would be an articulate party spokesman and debator in a chamber that was newly equipped with television cameras. Robert Byrd, whom Mitchell replaced, was not viewed as someone either comfortable in front of the cameras or photogenic enough to be a party spokesman. Tom Daschle, the current minority leader, is seen by his colleagues as being a good performer in Senate debates -

offering a counterbalance to Trent Lott - as well as an articulate party spokesman.

When voting occurred on the televising of both the House and Senate, those who supported allowing the cameras in the chambers reasoned that the time was not only right for their inclusion but that allowing the cameras in would also improve the image of Congress. While the cameras have provided an invaluable window to the workings of each chamber, the overall public perception of Congress remains rather low. This is not the fault of C-SPAN nor of the cameras. The cameras are there to provide insight into the legislative process. However, the view provided may not appeal to all concerned. It may be that over the last two decades of congressional television viewers have developed a contempt for the institution. Simply providing live gavel-to-gavel coverage of Congress is not enough to fully satisfy the public's desire for an efficient and accountable system of government. However, when viewing these proceedings, we have to realize that we are seeing the Congress 'warts and all'. To their credit, lawmakers never fully attempted to mask the rather archaic and tedious procedure that occurs daily in the Congress. It is to the credit of these congressional modernists and realists that the public should see their government in action - without any alteration to the rules or procedure. The proceedings may not be lovely or entirely stimulating to watch but it is there for the public to watch - from a mundane quorum call to the voting on a cabinet or Supreme Court nominee.

With television the primary means by which political information is obtained, it was inevitable that Congress would televise its legislative sessions. It was also inevitable that the cameras would remain since no legislature has ever voted to remove them once they have been installed. It is just as well the cameras have remained for without the opportunity to view the proceedings of Congress we, the public, could never fully appreciate the legislative process.

Notes

1. Stephen Frantzich and John Sullivan, *The C-SPAN Revolution* (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1996) p. 64.
2. Ilona Nickles, "One-Minute Speeches: House Practice and Procedure," Report 90-47 GOV, Congressional Research Service, January 19, 1990, p. 3.
3. See Ilona Nickles, "Special Order Speeches in the House of Representatives," Report 93-578 GOV, Congressional Research Service, June 9, 1993, p.2.
4. *Congressional Record*, February 4, 1986, p. s929.
5. Paul Rundquist and Ilona Nickles, "Senate Television: Its Impact on Senate Floor Proceedings," Congressional Research Service, July 21, 1986, pp. 25-26.