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Evaluating Majority Party Leaders in Congress

Daniel Palazzolo

Abstract

Evaluations of majority party leaders come from three main sources: political scientists, media analysts, and members of Congress. Political scientists are the *theoreticians*. They have defined concepts and developed theories for evaluating leadership style, strategy, and strength. Journalists are the *watchdogs*. They regularly evaluate leader performance in response to contemporary events. Members of Congress then serve as the *judges and juries*. They occasionally advise leaders on tactics and strategies, and they ultimately have the ability to sanction or reward leaders.

KEYWORDS: leaders, Congress, leadership, Speaker, majority leader

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Who have been the most influential Speakers of the House or Senate majority leaders, and what explains their influence? Which of them was most effective in terms of advancing institutional, party, or policy goals? Is Nancy Pelosi (D-CA) a “successful” Speaker? Is Harry Reid (R-NV) an effective majority leader? Those questions deserve the attention of political scientists, media analysts, and Members of Congress:

- Political scientists have developed theoretical expectations for evaluating leaders by identifying the roles they play along with the political and institutional conditions and personal qualities that affect their styles, strategies, and strength. A few political scientists have also evaluated the effectiveness of leaders in terms of advancing political, institutional, and policy goals.
- Journalists, serving as watchdogs of ongoing developments in Congress, are much more likely to inquire about and evaluate leadership performance while leaders are in office. Yet they rely upon a broad range of criteria for evaluating these leaders, not all of which correspond with political science theories of leadership.
- Members of Congress, finally, the judges and juries in the evaluation of party leaders, appear to make judgments that involve a kind of synthesis of the standards employed by political scientists and the news media.

Political Science Theories of Party Leadership

Political scientists have contributed to the evaluation of party leaders in three ways. First, they provide the most comprehensive descriptions of leadership roles and explanations of leadership goals, both of which seem to be essential starting points for evaluating leaders. Second, they have developed theories, including the conditions and personal qualities that explain how leaders perform roles, pursue goals, and wield influence. Third, although most political scientists have hesitated to evaluate leader performance or effectiveness, a few have considered how well leaders have advanced the representative and lawmaking functions of Congress. Each of these observations deserves consideration.

Before evaluating majority party leaders, we should begin with their job descriptions. The Speaker of the House, the only House leadership position mentioned in Article I, Section 1 of the Constitution, is elected first by the majority party and then by the whole House of Representatives. Though formally recognized as the presiding officer of the House, the Speaker has always been a political figure (Follett 1896). Today, the Speaker plays a major role in advancing

the electoral and policy goals of the majority party. The Speaker is involved with committee appointments, controlling the legislative agenda through the House Rules Committee, communicating the priorities of the majority party through the media, raising money for the party and its candidates, maintaining party unity, and negotiating the terms of major legislation with Senate leaders and the President.

The Speaker is assisted by the majority (floor) leader, whip, and conference chair, each of whom performs specific tasks for the majority party. The majority leader is mainly responsible for scheduling legislation and managing business on the House floor. The majority whip polls party members to determine support for major bills and persuades wayward members to support the leadership's position. While Congress is in session, the majority whip holds weekly meetings where members offer their views on issues and strategy. The majority party's conference, or caucus, chair (Republicans refer to their party as a "conference," while Democrats call theirs a "caucus") is mainly responsible for formulating and disseminating the party's message.

Although Senate party leaders carry out similar tasks, the Senate has a different leadership structure. Unlike the House which has always had a Speaker, the Senate did not develop a structure for party leadership until the end of the 19th Century, and neither party formally elected floor leaders until 1913. Today, the Senate majority party elects its majority leader, whip, and conference chair. Party leaders in the Senate perform similar roles to their counterparts in the House: they organize their respective parties, negotiate the legislative schedule, and serve as the chief spokespersons for their parties. Yet the legislative process in the Senate is very different from the House, and the differences affect the actions of party leaders.

The Senate has nothing comparable to a Speaker of the House or the institutions that allow the majority party to control the legislative process. The Senate has nothing comparable to the House Rules Committee and no rules that require amendments to be germane to the legislation before the Senate. Thus, where the majority party leadership in the House can virtually dictate the floor schedule through the Rules Committee and the discretion of the Speaker's power to recognize members on the floor, the Senate operates on the basis of unanimous consent agreements.

The Senate also grants rights to individual members and to the minority party. A single Senator can block progress by putting a hold on a bill, or by offering non-germane amendments to bills under consideration on the Senate floor. A minority of Senators can filibuster a bill or a resolution, and it takes sixty votes, three-fifths of the one hundred Senators, to end debate. The major role of the Senate majority leader is to negotiate with the minority leader to develop unanimous consent agreements and the daily floor schedule, and to accommodate

the wishes of individual senators. Consequently, unlike the Speaker of the House, the Senate majority leader depends more on personal skill than formal powers to carry out leadership tasks. The majority leader also must work on a bipartisan basis in order to move legislation.

With these job descriptions in mind, the logical next step toward evaluation of majority party leaders in Congress would require devising metrics for each of these tasks. Measuring the rate of success is feasible for only some tasks. One could measure fundraising effectiveness and the degree of leadership involvement in agenda setting (Sinclair 1999) and make judgments about how well a leader articulates a message (Evans and 2000). But standard metrics for evaluating member satisfaction with committee assignments, or objective measures of agenda setting, floor management, and negotiating ability are much tougher to develop.

The challenge of evaluating the effectiveness of leaders is complicated by theories of leadership and congressional decision-making that explain the actions of party leaders in an institutional context. Political scientists typically analyze how leaders assist the House and Senate in carrying out their chief functions: lawmaking and representation. Lawmaking requires delegation, deliberation, coalition building, and decision making. Leaders try to use the lawmaking process to advance the majority party's electoral and policy goals: maintaining or expanding majority control and passing legislation that reflects the party's public philosophy or addresses concerns voiced by their constituents. Representation, meanwhile, requires that individual members of Congress are able to express their views on legislation and advance the interests of electoral constituents and groups through committee assignments, bills, and amendments. Leaders can help members attain their individual goals: reelection, advancing public policy, and gaining influence in Congress.

Perhaps the clearest indicators of success or failure for the majority party in terms of lawmaking and representational functions are legislative output, party unity, and number of seats gained or lost in an election. When the majority party achieves these goals, one might be tempted to conclude that majority party leaders performed effectively. Party leaders can certainly make a difference along all three dimensions, but the extent to which we can identify leader effects depends on our theories of leadership. Theories that explain leadership in terms of political and institutional conditions obscure the role of the individual leader.

Given the various factors that affect lawmaking, party unity, and electoral results, it is difficult to say how much success or failure can be attributed to the leader. Legislative output is often affected by the size of the majority, the partisan makeup of the other chamber, the president, public opinion, and party unity itself. Leaders can use various tactics to improve party unity, but the degree of party unity is also affected by external forces. Members who represent districts with

similar types of constituents tend to vote together on bills that come to the floor. Conversely, members from the same party who might represent a different constituent base (say conservative Democrats) are less inclined to vote with most members of their party. And election results are affected by a combination of national conditions or local circumstances that may be unrelated to the performance of party leaders.

In their seminal publication on leadership style, Cooper and Brady (1981) compare the hierarchical leadership style of Speaker of the House Thomas B. Reed (R-ME) and Joseph G. Cannon (R-IL) with the bargaining style of Speaker Sam Rayburn (D-TX). They argue that leadership style is primarily a function of party unity among the members of the majority party. When party unity is high, members are more likely to encourage and tolerate centralized party leadership; when party unity is low, members seek to distribute power away from a central leadership position. Thus, Speaker Reed's considerable powers were based on the high levels of agreement on policy goals among party members at the end of the turn of the twentieth century. He chaired a Rules Committee with only five members, appointed members to committees, had the power to recognize members from the floor, and blocked attempts by the minority party to obstruct legislative business. Republican members viewed a powerful Speaker as the means toward advancing the party's national agenda of economic expansion (Peters 1997), a goal they all shared, rather than a hindrance on their ability to represent their particular constituencies.

Cooper and Brady (1981) further argue that a high degree of party unity among members is derived from the policy preferences of the members' voting constituencies. In simple terms, if voters in different congressional districts share similar views and elect members from the same party to represent those views, then elected representatives of those parties will also hold similar policy preferences. When individual members agree on the direction of the party, they are thus more willing to cede power to a central leader, who can use that power to advance the individual and collective goals of party members. On the other hand, when members of the party represent diverse constituencies and hold different policy preferences, they are less likely to vest power in the hands of a central leader, and power is decentralized among committee chairs or individual members. In this situation, the Speaker must be skilled at bargaining with factions within the party and among committee chairs who have considerable power in their own right. Sam Rayburn (D-TX), who served as Speaker on three different occasions (1941-47, 1949-52, and 1955-61), mastered this style of leadership. Other political scientists (Sinclair 1995 and Rohde 1991) have applied the theoretical premises of Cooper and Brady to the study of majority party leadership.

There are, however, limits to how much contextual theories of leadership can help us to evaluate majority party leaders. The theory has little to say about the effects leaders have on leader effectiveness. Cooper and Brady (1981, 42) define effectiveness as a matter of the “skill with which resources are used,” or “actual results or achievements,” and conclude that “there is no direct relationship between leadership style and effectiveness in the House.” But they do not attempt to assess the effectiveness of Reed and Cannon or Rayburn. A purely contextual theory of leadership seems to offer no basis upon which to evaluate leader effectiveness. If leadership style is a consequence of forces beyond the control of leaders, or if the institutional context constrains leaders from acting independently of their followers, one can hardly assign a value to the effectiveness of leaders.

Studies that incorporate the individual qualities and discrete actions of leaders can specify the roles key leaders played in periods of great institutional change (Rohde 1991; Peters 1997; Strickler 2001; Strahan 2007) and judge when they have exceeded the limitations on strong leadership (Jones 1968). They can also evaluate their effectiveness in terms of facilitating both lawmaking and representation. Randall Strahan’s (2007) study of Clay, Reed, and Gingrich combines the effects of institutional context and individual leader qualities, specifically the leader’s personal goals and propensity to take risks, in order to explain leadership behavior. Strahan argues that all three leaders exercised considerable influence over the policy agenda and institutional development of the House of Representatives. He concludes by asking if assertive leaders are effective leaders: “Does Congress work better under strong, risk-taking leaders?” (Strahan 2007, 189)

The answer depends on how their actions affect the balance of deliberative, representative, and lawmaking functions of Congress. Strahan argues that among the three Speakers in his study, Clay did the best job of striking that balance. By contrast, leaders, like Reed and Gingrich, who prized efficiency in order to advance legislation, may seriously compromise the deliberative and representative functions of Congress (see also Evans and Oleszek 1997) and jeopardize the party’s ability to maintain its majority (Schickler 2001).

Richard Fenno (1997) criticizes the leadership of Speaker Newt Gingrich and his Republican colleagues after gaining majority control of the House in 1994 for the first time in forty years. Fenno argues that Gingrich’s lack of experience led to mistakes in interpreting the election results and governing thereafter. In essence, Gingrich’s lack of experience caused him to overstate the importance of the elections as a source of power in translating the *Contract with America* into legislation. He also failed to set priorities, underestimated the power of the presidency, and ignored the features of the political system that strongly bias American politics toward incremental policy change.

Thomas Mann and Norman Ornstein (2006) describe how the actions of leaders can weaken the institution of Congress. They specifically cite Majority Leader Bill Frist's efforts to challenge the super-majority requirement for ending a filibuster of the President's recommendations for Supreme Court justices. By encouraging the Senate to pursue the so-called "nuclear option," which would have allowed a simple majority of the Senate to end debate on judicial nominees, Frist risked undermining the tradition of minority rights that had distinguished the Senate from the House. They also describe how Majority Leader Tom DeLay's abusive employment of earmarks and his shady dealings with corrupt lobbyists undermined the ethical standards of the House. These are two examples, among many, in which leaders contributed to the rise of partisan polarization and the decline of accountability in Congress.

Thus, complex forces that affect leadership and congressional decision-making limit our ability to evaluate how leaders affect legislative output, party unity, and election returns. Still, not all party leaders escape accountability for success or failure in the murky waters of the legislative process. Some party leaders are more inclined to take greater risks, establish clear goals (Strahan 2007), and thus assume responsibility for their party's legislative record and electoral success. It is no wonder that both Reed and Gingrich wound up abruptly resigning from the House of Representatives.

What can political scientists theories tell us, then, about the performances of Nancy Pelosi and Harry Reid? According to contextual theory, leaders must be responsive to member concerns about advancing policy goals and re-election. Having gained majorities in both chambers after the 2006 midterm elections, for the first time in 12 years, Democratic constituents would be eager for major policy changes. During the 2006 campaign, Democrats pledged to advance policy in six areas ("Six for '06") including college access, affordable health care, energy independence, jobs and wages, retirement security, and ending the war in Iraq. Democrats were especially interested in ending the war, and Members also sought ethics reform to end the "corruption of culture" in Washington (Sinclair 2008).

Yet Pelosi and Reid would be operating with very narrow majorities and would have to contend with a larger number of centrist or conservative Democrats, representing districts and states won by George Bush in 2004. Half of the forty-two freshmen Democrats elected in 2006 actually represented districts where George Bush won a majority of the vote in 2004, and four of the nine new Democratic Senators hailed from states won by Bush (Cohen and Friel 2008). The Blue Dog Coalition consisted of 49 fiscally conservative Democrats, including 13 freshmen who would face stiff Republican challengers in 2008 (Friel 2008). In addition, Pelosi needed to deal with powerful senior committee chairs (Sinclair 2008), Reid did not have a filibuster-proof majority, and both had to live with the

reality of a Republican president who could veto legislation that passed both chambers.

It is not surprising that Pelosi and Reid have engaged in broad consultation with members and committee chairs, and it is also not surprising that they have had mixed success in terms of controlling the agenda and keeping the party unified (Sinclair 2008). Both chambers managed to pass major legislation dealing with lobbying reform, energy, and intelligence surveillance, but factions of the party have splintered off on budget issues, funding for the war in Iraq, and, most recently, drilling for oil. The Republican minority parties in the House and Senate have proven to be a nuisance. In the House, the Republicans have managed to thwart progress on legislation by skillfully using the motion to recommit legislation, and in the Senate they have filibustered major legislation forcing an unprecedented number of cloture votes (Sinclair 2008).

Given the institutional and political context, it is hard to determine how much Pelosi and Reid are responsible for legislative record of the 110th Congress. Scott Frisch and Sean Kelly (2008) argue that Reid had no chance of scoring major legislative victories in a highly polarized Senate, but they suggest that Reid has been modestly successful in terms of shaping public opinion on the Iraq War debate. To this point, however, political scientists have yet to report findings from any in-depth qualitative analysis on how the personal qualities of Pelosi or Reid affect the lawmaking and representative functions of the House. Research by Cindy Rosenthal and Ron Peters (2008) on Speaker Pelosi may soon offer more insights into the role of personal factors in her leadership of the House. (See the Peters and Rosenthal article in this issue of *The Forum*.)

At least along one dimension—maintaining majority control of the chambers—both leaders seemed to be poised to enjoy success, though positive results for the Democrats in 2008 are far from certain. In July, Democrats were expected to pick up anywhere from 5 to 7 Senate seats and 10 to 15 House seats. If these predictions hold, Pelosi and Reid will have more breathing room to drive legislation. Yet, polls taken after the Republican convention in September of 2008 show increases in party affiliation for Republicans, increasing support for Republican candidates, and very low approval ratings for Congress (Saad 2008; Jones 2008). Thus, while Democrats are almost certain to hold their majorities in the House and Senate, the gains may be less than were expected before Labor Day. Moreover, intra-party factions will not disappear; a good number of members will still be responsive to the more conservative districts and states they represent. It will take skillful leadership to manage the policy agenda and keep the party unified.

If Barack Obama is elected President, Pelosi and Reid would benefit from having a Democrat in the White House, though this too will change the strategic situation for the 2010 midterm elections. A unified Democratic government

would enter Washington with huge expectations for change, a large policy agenda, and total accountability for policy outcomes. A successful record over the next two to four years could pay huge dividends for the party, yet Democrats need only look back to 1993 and 1994 for a sober reminder of the perils of unified government. If, on the hand, Republican John McCain is elected, the overarching message may be that the public wants the two parties to work together. Pelosi and Reid would need to deal with the disappointment most members will have over losing a presidential election that seemed almost certain for the Democratic candidate, while at the same time satisfying moderates and conservatives who ran for office to address challenges with energy, the economy, health care, and national security.

Media as Watchdog

On April 7, 1995, Speaker of the House Newt Gingrich gave a televised address to announce the completion of the first 100 days of the historic 104th Congress. The House of Representatives had just fulfilled Gingrich's promise that legislation dealing with all ten items contained in the Contract with America would be voted on by the House. At the outset of his speakership, news media evaluations of Gingrich's leadership were both frequent and plentiful. News reporters and editorial writers across the country chimed in to offer their views on Gingrich's performance. His leadership of the House was variously described as remarkable, compelling, convincing, audacious, and divisive, to mention just a few adjectives.

Later that same year, in its last issue of 1995, *Time* magazine featured on its cover Newt Gingrich, man of the year, and *Time* reporters were eager to judge his performance. Nancy Gibbs and Karen Tumulty (1995, 54) dubbed Gingrich the "Master of the House." In his feature article, "Newt's World: How One Man Changed the Way Washington Sees Reality," Lance Morrow (1995, 50) proclaimed: "Leaders make things possible. Exceptional leaders make them inevitable. Newt Gingrich belongs in the category of exceptional. All year—ruthlessly, brilliantly, obnoxiously—he worked at hammering together inevitabilities..." He continued: "Gingrich has changed the center of gravity..." and "...transformed both the House of Representatives and the speakership into unprecedented instruments of personal and political power. It has been an amazing performance."

Less than three years later, Gingrich would be found again on the cover of *Time*, but fortunes by then had been totally reversed: the title mantra "Man of the Year" had been replaced by "The Fall of Newt." Gibbs and Michael Duffy (1998, 40) criticized Newt for "turning opportunity into rubble" after the Republicans lost five House seats in the 1998 midterm elections. Meanwhile, *Newsweek*

(1998) contemporaneously portrayed a grim-looking Gingrich on its cover, entitled “The Loser.” The Speaker who had invented the *Contract With America*, led the Republicans to their first House majority in forty years, and declared that “one of my goals is make the House co-equal with the White House” (Gettinger 1995, 1206) resigned from office. He was widely blamed for having steered the party in the wrong direction by making the election campaign a referendum on the character of scandal-ridden president Bill Clinton.

Thus, where political scientists looking back on the Gingrich speakership after he left the scene would debate whether Gingrich’s leadership could be explained entirely by institutional and political context plus the expectations of his followers (Sinclair 1999), or by some combination of context and his individual qualities (Strahan and Palazzolo 2004), the news media did not hesitate to evaluate Newt’s performance at the beginning, middle, and end of his speakership. While Gingrich is an exceptional case, this brief review of media coverage exemplifies the distinctive role of reporters and the news media in evaluating congressional leaders. The news media are the watchdogs of Congress, and their evaluation of leaders is an extension of their efforts to describe and help their viewers and readers understand what is happening on Capital Hill. The news media can hold leaders accountable to the public and offer a window into how those leaders are running critical lawmaking institutions. They may also provide fodder for interest groups and political parties looking for ways to engage their followers in the legislative process, in fundraising, and in election campaigns.

In addition to offering more frequent evaluations of congressional leaders than political scientists, the news media emphasize different criteria. Though journalists often consult with political scientists and mention some of the institutional and political conditions that affect leaders, they are more inclined than political scientists to assign credit or blame for a party’s or an institution’s performance to the personal skills or qualities of the leader. Leaders are judged to be effective or not as a consequence of personal strengths and weaknesses more so than the situation with which they are faced. Reporters typically refer to caricatures of leaders based on their experiences and backgrounds. Gingrich the history professor was thus a transformational leader, a revolutionary. His successor Dennis Hastert (R-OH) was the soft spoken, burly, wrestling coach. Bill Frist (R-TN) was the even-tempered physician.

Media coverage of Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi (D-CA) fits the pattern applied to other party leaders. Cindy Rosenthal and Ronald Peters (2008) have identified the broad and eclectic range of personal criteria used to describe her approach to leadership: “unfailingly gracious,” “relentless fighter,” “politically shrewd,” with “collaborative skills,” and “the ability to make merry while reaching for the jugular.” And the most prevalent frame of reference is her personal background; she would bring to the speakership the nurturing qualities of

a mother and grandmother along with the cagey political instincts she learned from her father, a former Member of Congress and Mayor of Baltimore.

Intuitively, a leader's performance relates to his/her personal background and particular skills, but political scientists are more inclined to specify the conditions that affect leaders, some of which may offer better chances of success and effectiveness than others. Political scientists explain the consequences of leadership actions with reference to the combined effects of political conditions and personal qualities. Without a clear concept of the individual qualities that matter most to leadership *and* a full understanding of the conditions that constrain or permit leaders to act, news reporters may attribute too much credit or blame to the discrete actions of the leader.

Compared with political scientists, reporters are also more inclined to focus on how leaders affect the legislative rather than the representative aspects of Congress. A leader is judged successful if he or she presides over a productive Congress. As noted in *The Economist* (2007, 42), "Nancy Pelosi, the new Democratic Speaker of the U.S. House of Representatives, has an impressive record so far. Pelosi has pushed through a number of popular reforms in rapid succession. In addition, she has secured a vote of no confidence in President George W. Bush's new Iraq policy, allowing her party members to vent their anger without cutting off funding. Pelosi has achieved all of this while looking cool and stylish, but it remains to be seen whether she can maintain her performance in the months ahead when she will have to deal with much more difficult issues."

As a result of the watchdog role, the news media are also more likely to monitor and judge the ethical conduct of leaders. Actions taken by party leaders may harm the public trust as well as advance the public interest. Investigative journalists are the first line of inquiry into leaders who abuse power for personal gain or who use unethical or unlawful means to advance the interests of their party, constituents, contributors, or associates. Notwithstanding the work of Mann and Ornstein (2006), political scientists are less likely than news reporters to monitor and evaluate the ethical failings of party leaders.

Finally, although public approval ratings of congressional leaders are not anywhere near as prevalent as approval ratings of the president, reporters refer to poll results to evaluate party leaders. Though such ratings provide a succinct measure of public perceptions of leaders, they offer minimal information to evaluate most party leaders. The polls are too infrequent and the vast majority of Americans cannot possibly know enough about Congress or the functions of congressional leadership to make a reasonable judgment about a leader's performance. Still, data collected from polls offer a few insights about what the public knows about party leaders.

First, the public is more likely to register opinions about leaders who gain a lot of public exposure, either because of their public relations efforts, scandals, or their place in history. Second, the approval ratings of well known leaders generally reflect the public persona cast in the media, or the state of their party in Congress. Thus, Speaker Tip O'Neill, who was the first Speaker to hold press conferences and who emerged as the liberal Democratic counterweight to President Ronald Reagan's efforts to reduce government spending, was relatively well known to the public. In 1981 he had a 51% favorable rating, while 23% held an unfavorable opinion of O'Neill. He left office in 1986 with 67% favorable rating, while again just 23% had an unfavorable view.

By contrast, his successor, Jim Wright, was not well known to the public until a scandal forced him out of office. In July of 1998, only 23% of the public had an opinion of Wright (12% favorable and 11% unfavorable). Less than a year later, when Wright was forced to resign from office, 58% of people had an opinion, and 40% held an unfavorable view. Naturally, Newt Gingrich regularly drew opinions from over 70% of the public, and his unfavorable ratings were always higher than his favorables. Ironically, his highest approval rating (42%) was registered in October of 1998, about a month before he resigned from office. His successor, Dennis Hastert (R-OH), was much less well known, but his favorable ratings were better than his unfavorables until 2006, when several Republican members were enmeshed in scandals. (All poll results in this paragraph were reported in Cohen 2007.)

The approval ratings for the current Speaker of the House, Nancy Pelosi, and current Majority Leader, Harry Reid (D-NV), seem to be following traditional patterns. Pelosi, the Minority Leader before the Democrats won the majority in the 2006 elections, was generally unknown to the public prior to becoming the Speaker, albeit more well-known than Hastert, who rose from relative obscurity as the Majority Whip of the Republican Party in 1998. Just over half of the public held opinions of Pelosi in October of 2006, and opinions were evenly divided between those who held favorable and unfavorable views. (Cohen 2007). By April of 2007, four months into her speakership, Pelosi was known by a larger percentage of Americans and her ratings were favorable. A CNN/Opinion Research Corporation Poll showed that 45% had a favorable view and 30% had an unfavorable view of Pelosi, while only 13% had never heard of her. Yet Pelosi's favorable ratings have declined over the past year. The same polling firm found by August of 2008 that Pelosi's favorable rating had dropped to 38%, while her unfavorable rating was 37% (see www.pollingreport.com).

Harry Reid is less well known than Pelosi. Several polls taken in December of 2006 and January of 2007 indicated that 65-70% of Americans had never heard of him, though his favorable ratings were slightly higher than his unfavorables (CBS News Poll, 2007; Los Angeles Times/Bloomberg Poll, 2006).

By August of 2007, more people had opinions of Reid, and they were on balance unfavorable: 27% favored him and 43% gave him an unfavorable rating. The most recent poll results show that his favorable ratings (22%) continue to be much lower than his unfavorable ratings (41%) (Rasmussen, 2008).

Members of Congress: Judges and Juries

Though only a handful of political scientists or journalists have been elected to Congress, members of the institution seem, unconsciously, to blend elements of the theoretician and watchdog perspectives in evaluating leaders. Members of Congress have a vested interest in the success of their leaders, and since they elect their leaders at the outset of every Congress, they are ultimately the judges and juries of leadership performance. They can act as team players, supporting the goals of their party, but they are essentially independent actors. Like journalists, Members of Congress tend to see politics as a contest of personalities and often explain behavior in terms of personal qualities of leaders.

In addition, Members of Congress periodically evaluate leader performance. After all, their careers may depend upon the success or failure of their party. Members may be particularly attentive to polling data on the performance of leaders who draw a lot of media attention or who are under investigation for ethical reasons. Yet the way Members evaluate their leaders are aptly described by political science theories of leaders. Like political scientists and in contrast with journalists, Members of Congress are more sensitive to the contextual factors that affect a leader's ability to perform his/her job and perhaps even more forgiving when problems arise.

Consequently, in-between elections, Members of Congress give advice to their leaders from time to time about the management of the party, the agenda, and the work of the House or Senate. Because they are ultimately accountable to members, most majority party leaders heed their counsel. Adaptation to changing expectations is a part of leadership in a representative body, and member evaluations of leader performance may cause leaders to change their ways. Steven Smith (1987) and Barbara Sinclair (1983) describe how Speaker Tip O'Neill (D-MA) responded to changes in the more transparent, decentralized House of the late 1970s and 1980s. O'Neill adapted by including more members in decision-making and structuring choices on House floor votes to protect and advance the interest of individual members. Thus members and leaders negotiate the terms of their relationship during the course of a given Congress, much in the way elected representatives negotiate their relationship with constituents in the face of changing conditions (Fenno 2000).

Political scientists have been especially interested in the effects of leadership elections on the relationship between leaders and Members. Elections

for party leaders at the beginning of each Congress (every two years) give Members a chance to make a judgment on their leaders' performance. Members elect leaders whom they can trust and whom they believe have the skills suited for the challenges the party faces at any given time. Scholars who apply principal-agent theories, derived from organizational economics, argue that the election of a leader represents a bargain. Inherent in that bargain is that leaders must be responsive to the expectations of the Members because Members have the ultimate sanction—remove the incumbent leader and replace him/her with someone who is more trustworthy (Sinclair 1995).

Yet scholars also point out that Members of Congress realize that removing a leader from office brings its own costs, so that they are not likely to act hastily (Cox and McCubbins 1993; and Rohde 1991). Members understand the challenges leaders are faced with, whether they be internal party divisions, an ossified Senate, or a President of the opposite party. Thus Members will tolerate disagreements between themselves and the leader and even mistakes or poor judgments by the leader. As Jones (1968) illustrates in his classic article on Speaker Joe Cannon (R-IL) and Rules Committee Chair Howard W. Smith (D-VA), Members will send a leader plenty of signals about their concerns and expectations. But the leader must not have a tin ear or turn a blind eye, because there are limits to strong leadership in a representative body, and the majority of members have the final say in deciding who should serve as their leader.

True to form, House and Senate Democrats seem to sympathize with the challenges Pelosi and Reid have had to address in the 110th Congress, at least after the first session. Congressional Democrats may have been anxious about Congress's dismal approval ratings and frustrated with the progress of legislation blocked in the Senate, but Barbara Sinclair (2008, 92) notes: "despite their frustration, neither House nor Senate Democrats blame Reid and his leadership team. And the House leadership is solidly ensconced and well regarded by its members." Sinclair attributes the general level of satisfaction to leadership efforts to help members get re-elected through choice committee assignments, chances to amend bills, and help with fundraising.

Of course, the final election results of 2008 will be the ultimate test. If Republican candidates gain ground with late campaign tactics that hold Pelosi and Reid responsible for a "do-nothing Congress," confidence in the two leaders may be somewhat diminished. Yet so long as the Democrats maintain majorities in the House and Senate, Pelosi and Reid should be reappointed as Speaker and majority leader, and their work will turn toward the business of governing.

Conclusion

The perspectives of political scientists, journalists, and Members of Congress provide a range of possibilities for evaluating congressional leaders. The differences in the topics they evaluate, the criteria they use, and the approach they take toward evaluation reflect their professional interests. Political scientists are, above anything else, interested in developing theories to explain how Congress works, and as a subset of that mission, it is not surprising that they want to explain how leaders behave. Journalists serve a different purpose: informing their readers, viewers, and listeners, who are more interested in the daily developments and the individuals who shape them. Members of Congress have the greatest stake of all in the evaluation of their leaders. Interestingly, they seem to blend the perspectives of political scientists and journalists toward the distinctive goal of serving as judges and juries.

As a member of the political science profession, I wonder how our discipline can contribute more to the evaluation of party leaders. One suggestion might be to devise a ranking of the most influential and effective party leaders in history, as presidential scholars have done with presidents. We might need to let down our inhibitions about making normative judgments, but the gains might be worthwhile. Journalists might be more inclined to make better use of our theories, and we might offer members and leaders a better sense of which of their predecessors were most successful at managing the representative and lawmaking functions of Congress and how they were able to do so. By making our theories and findings more accessible, we might do the public and the institution more good.

Sources

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