

Rejoinder: Congressional Informal Groups—Sideshow or the Changing Nature of Congressional Representation?

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I am grateful to Thomas Longoria and Susan Hammond for their comments, and for the opportunity to respond to several points raised concerning my article. The essay dealt with several issues, some of which deserve additional explanation, as both Longoria and Hammond point out. Nonetheless, I believe my article and the ensuing commentaries suggest a rethinking of the issue of congressional informal groups in the modern Congress.

I shall begin with the three main methodological issues that Hammond and Longoria raise: the overlap between role and activity variables, response bias of survey data, and the use of elite interviews. Next, I address Hammond's issue of the distinction between legislative service organizations (LSOs) and non-LSOs. Finally, I close with a response to Longoria's comments on congressional groups testifying before congressional committees with two cases of the Hispanic Caucus and the 1980s immigration reform efforts.

Hammond raises the point that there is overlap among the different roles and types of activities used in my survey of congressional groups. At the outset, let me clearly state that the role, activity, and locus of activity variables were treated individually and separately across and within categories of variables. The variables then were combined under factor analyses to distinguish the underlying dimensions of the roles and activities. Two separate sets of analyses were applied: descriptive and comparative analyses to determine distinctions between the groups' roles, activities, and locus of activities; and factor analyses to abstract the underlying dimensionality of congressional group roles and activities.

My thesis propounded that congressional groups were changing the modern form of congressional representation. Survey data, elite interviews, factor analyses and cases were employed to tap into the "multidimensionality" of the representative responsiveness of congressional groups' roles and activities and "to move us away from discrete functional analyses" (Vega 1993, 357, 358).

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Table 1. Survey Item for Group Roles

The actual survey item read as follows:

Caucuses undertake a variety of functions and activities (e.g., legislative research and information and agenda-setting and agenda-maintenance). Using the scale below RANK the following roles and activities in their order of importance to the caucus in terms of achieving its goals and objectives. (5 = Very Important, 4 = Important, 3 = Somewhat Important, 2 = Not Very Important, 1 = Not Important at All).

- _____ Information generation and dissemination to caucus members and non-caucus members alike.
 - _____ Congressional agenda-setting and/or congressional agenda maintenance (i.e., bringing and maintaining an issue/viewpoint to the forefront of Congress, such as trade or social security).
 - _____ Representation of specific interests, needs, and/or perspectives (e.g., human rights or family farms).
 - _____ Socialization of caucus members (e.g., to caucus activities, legislative briefings/seminars for caucus members).
 - _____ Coalition and/or network building (e.g., co-sponsoring legislation or joint statements with other caucus or non-members).
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The *role variables* were used as estimates of the groups' role orientation(s) or the groups' expectations of the kind of behavior they feel they ought to exhibit in their individual and collective legislative performance of their duties (see Table 1).¹ The attempt here, as noted, was to have survey respondents make normative evaluations of the principal role or essential expectations they adhere to as a group—what they thought was the most important role(s) they emphasize as a congressional group to achieve their legislative goals and objectives. I use *expectation* for principal role, instead of the groups' tangible goals or objectives, to allow for the multidimensionality of groups' representational expectations. Groups that emphasize an information role (generating and disseminating information for caucus and non-caucus members) also can emphasize a representation role (representing a specific interest, need or perspective), they are not mutually exclusive categories. I argue that all of these are representative roles, as Hammond points out, but with varying degrees of emphasis or as varying degrees of representative responsiveness. The group that emphasizes an information role is fulfilling a different type of representational expectation than the group that also emphasizes a direct representation role (“we, as a

group, expect to act directly and specifically on behalf of x interest or issue” [e.g., human rights, Viet Nam veterans]). It is equally conceivable that certain congressional groups emphasize a representation role and not an information role, or *vice versa*. Respondents next were asked to rank activities in terms of their importance in achieving caucus goals, objectives, and functions. Here the issue was to distinguish between what they said they thought they should be doing (roles) and what activities they actually do to fulfill that expectation. Finally, respondents were asked to indicate how much time or resources were spent working on a number of activities or with congressional actors. Here, again, the attempt was to move beyond ranking activities to actually seeing how much time they spent on each activity.

Hammond also calls attention to the distinctions between LSOs and non-LSOs, which she considers “a distinction without a difference . . . [that] may in fact be misleading . . . (Hammond 1993, 377).

I have not seen any data—either here or elsewhere—that supports the conclusion that LSOs and non-LSOs are qualitatively different if there is a representation issue of concern to a caucus (Hammond 1993, 377).

I do not make these points in the article as directly as Hammond suggests. My article points out that neither did I expect, nor did I find but a few qualitative representative differences between LSOs and non-LSOs. LSOs did place heavier emphases on an information role and information and research products, such as legislative reports and newsletters, but these were the only differences between LSOs and non-LSOs among the varied role, activity, and locus of activity variables used in the survey.

In terms of factor analyses, LSOs were dominant in the service dimension rather than the guardian and mediator dimensions. I argue that congressional groups structured (organizationally) as LSOs tend to be involved more in the service dimension than in any other dimension of group representation. This is not to suggest that LSOs do not undertake other representative dimensions. The Democratic Study Group, organized as an LSO, is the best example of the service dimension: recall Conlon’s description of it as “day-in and day-out, a research service.” This service dimension has not precluded the DSG from involvement in legislative reforms or legislation.

Longoria questions the response bias in the use of survey instruments and the reliance on elite interviews, two principal methods used in congressional research. This point raises reliability and validity questions. Clearly researchers must be attentive to these issues, and a combination of approaches (survey data, elite interviews, secondary sources and cases) is used here in the attempt to deal with such questions. However, short of Fenno-type participant observer methods (which present different sorts of

reliability and validity questions), there is an “on the outside looking in” quality present in most congressional research, and, consequently, a need to rely on (but verify) what people say they do. Other empirical methods are possible but, as illustrated below, present other shortcomings.

Longoria also raises the “talk is cheap” perspective in questioning the impact of congressional groups and policy making. By way of example, he points out that while informal groups say they spend time working on or with congressional committees, in terms of actual testimony they participate very little (Longoria 1993, 383). Longoria acknowledges that examining “only committee hearing activity underestimates the total level of caucus activity,” and notes that the statistical analysis he presents is only for “illustrative purposes” (Longoria, 1993, 383). However, in illustrating the paucity of congressional group testimony before committees, he applies the ‘sideshow’ label (i.e., interesting, but not central) to congressional groups.

My survey responses showed that congressional groups estimated they spent nearly one-fifth of their time with congressional committees. My attempt here was to find *the loci* of congressional group activities, not to specify *the nuances* of their activities. The time congressional groups spend on or with congressional committees may entail a broad range of activities, including following hearings (that is, listening as well as giving testimony), providing information to appropriate committees in the form of ‘Dear Colleague’ or ‘Dear Chairperson’ letters, responding formally and/or informally to committee inquiries via member-to-member or staff-to-staff responses. Thus, although congressional group testimony before committees may not abound, as Longoria seeks to illustrate, this does not necessarily mean that they do not work with congressional committees.

Two examples of the Hispanic Caucus’s activities in the 1980s immigration reform legislation demonstrate the problem of approximating caucus activities by counting the times a group testifies before a committee. In the first instance, the Hispanic Caucus’s legislative strategy changed several times. Initially, the Hispanic Caucus led and collaborated with other Hispanic organizations in testifying before congressional committees with jurisdiction over immigration. As the legislation moved to later stages, the Hispanic Caucus increased its activities but only in opposition to the measure. Interviews and secondary sources indicate that the strategy of the Caucus was to allow the legislation to play itself out in the early subcommittee and committee stages and to expend its limited resources only as the legislation progressed.

Several explanations can be offered for this strategy. With no Caucus members on the House Judiciary Committee and operating from a relatively weak bargaining position in terms of numbers and in terms of the context of

the issue, the Caucus leadership may have believed that there was little they could do, other than wait out the bill. In addition, the Caucus leadership believed that the bill was so controversial that it never would be reported out, and thus reasoned it was unwise to expend its resources unnecessarily. After all, the more senior members of the Caucus—Roybal (D-CA), Gonzalez (D-TX), de la Garza (D-TX), and Lujan (R-NM)—had witnessed similar efforts stall in the Senate in the 1970s. Given its history and the diversity of the Caucus itself, it is reasonable to believe that the Caucus viewed an outside strategy to be the optimal approach to the issue. The outside strategy would place the Caucus in opposition to the reform effort without having to put the Caucus itself through the gut-wrenching process of developing its own alternative. Staying outside the bill's committee development and progress, the Caucus then reasonably could reject the final product as insufficiently responsive to their objections and concerns, while keeping the Caucus together in their opposition to the various aspects of the Simpson-Mazzoli bill.

A second example is found in the Hispanic Caucus's activities in the Fall of 1983, with Simpson-Mazzoli heading for a House vote. As the session was coming to an end, Speaker O'Neill exercised his authority over the House calendar to pull the bill from floor consideration. Among the justifications that O'Neill cited for his actions was the Hispanic Caucus's opposition to the bill. O'Neill, envisioning divisions within the Democratic Party over the measure (as in the previous Congress), felt compelled to pull the bill from House consideration. Roybal and the Hispanic Caucus had used the previous congressional recess to succeed in privately convincing O'Neill of the political repercussions of the bill's passage. O'Neill also had been the guest speaker at the Hispanic Caucus Incorporated's annual fund-raising dinner in mid-September, and had met informally with the Caucus on the issue. According to the Hispanic Caucus members, the Speaker did not clearly understand the implications of the bill for Hispanics until their meeting with him.

In both of these cases the *mediating* actions of the Hispanic Caucus would be missed if Longoria's criterion were used. Can empirical measures of collaborative group strategies tap this group's representative responsiveness? Can empirical measures of the number of times the Speaker meets with a congressional group in an informal setting tap the group's representative actions? Both questions can be answered affirmatively, but, in doing so, the measures miss or discount the qualitative effects of such actions. Longoria raises an important methodological and empirical question regarding appearances of congressional groups before committees, but his proposed approach misses the qualitative, transactional nature of representative responsiveness, as illustrated by the above cases.

Finally, Longoria correctly concludes that “caucus activity increases when there is a specific issue which is of intense interest to caucus members and their constituents” (Longoria 1993, 386). As he acknowledges, this supports my assertion that caucuses are dynamic and responsive to changes in the decision-making environment. He closes by questioning the extent to which they are becoming institutionalized as part of the congressional policy making system.

This point is relevant not only to congressional groups, but equally applicable to members as well. Clearly, some groups, as some members, are more effective than others. Yet, this does not discount the potential of these groups to become more or less effective. David Truman’s discussion of latent and potential interest groups certainly applies to congressional informal groups. “In any society certain of these group patterns will be characterized by a “relatively high degree of stability, uniformity, formality and generality” (Truman 1971, 26). If we are to recognize the dynamic nature of congressional groups, the complement of Truman’s view must also be true: certain groups will be characterized by low degrees of stability, uniformity, formality, and generality. The biologist ignores neither the tadpole nor the frog as units of analyses because of the varying stages of physical development. Hammond et al. refer to congressional group institutionalization as “(1) increasing complexity of the group organizations; and, (2) increasing specialization of group personnel, both members and staff” (Hammond et al. 1981, 15). They add that

Informal groups are bounded groups in that they are (1) on-going; (2) have purposes; and (3) have an explicit and stable structure. Many groups are becoming institutionalized . . . (but) for some caucuses organizational structure continues to be minimal, and little if any institutionalization occurs (1981, 15).

Congressional groups vary: some are more institutionalized than others; some are currently more active than others, as more salient issues for the group exist; some are dormant-but-potential groups, awaiting new members or new issues to revive them.

Do we simply dismiss congressional groups, then, as some kind of freakish sideshow, or should we pay more attention to the changes they exemplify or portend for congressional politics? As James Madison wrote in *Federalist* 10, the tendencies toward such groupings are “sown in the nature of man” Discounting the biological imperative implicit in the statement, why should we expect members of Congress to be immune to the tendency to form groups? Through group affiliations and experiences the individual comes to know, interpret and react to his/her environment. Members of Congress are not immune from their environments. Moreover,

members of Congress bring ideological, partisan, gender, ethnic and religious group baggage to the Congress. They respond and react to the congressional environments that they encounter as they seek to enhance their own individual positions within the institution. Part of this response is the tendency to enter into or formulate groups and coalitions. Congressional groups exist as part of the process of enhancing the ability of members of Congress to fulfill collectively and individually their duties of legislator and representative, while they attempt to realize their goals of reelection, influence, and constituent service. Congressional groups provide members of Congress mechanisms for representative responsiveness within a legislative and political system that is often slow and indifferent. Dismissing congressional groups as non-important seems detrimental to understanding many aspects of modern congressional politics.

NOTE

¹The five roles used—information, agenda setting, representative, socialization, and coalition-building—were listed as individual items. Respondents were asked to rank them in their order of importance to the caucus in terms of achieving its goals and objectives.

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