



Imperfect Information and the Electoral Connection

REVIEW ESSAY

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By exploring the consequences of imperfect information, R. Douglas Arnold and John Mark Hansen (both intellectual descendants of David Mayhew) make significant contributions to the rational-choice theory of legislator decision-making. Indeed, their books can be usefully understood as the latest stage in the evolution of that theory. Ultimately, however, their contributions to the theory are incomplete. While Arnold and Hansen both highlight an insufficiently emphasized issue, their particular arguments concerning the implications of imperfect information leave unanswered several important questions.

Arnold, R. Douglas. *The Logic of Congressional Action*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990. Pp. 282.

Hansen, John Mark. *Gaining Access: Congress and the Farm Lobby, 1919–1981*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991. Pp. 265.

Two models of congressional behavior provide competing determinants of legislator decision-making. To oversimplify slightly, the “rational-choice model,” inspired largely by David Mayhew (1974), holds that a legislator’s decisions are determined by the “electoral connection,” that is, by how a given choice would affect that legislator’s reelection chances. Mayhew argued that the assumption that legislators are “single-minded seekers of reelection”—that they strive solely to secure their tenure—goes far to explain their decisions. The competing “communitarian” or “republican” model, as represented for example by Maass (1983), Muir (1982), and to some extent Sunstein (1990), holds that legislator decision-making is understood only with due attention to legislators’ desire to further the common good, which legislators ascertain

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through communication and dialogue. According to this account, legislator decision-making is not simply attributable to the reelection calculus.

The more developed rational-choice model dominates the literature on Congress. This is true not in the least because the rational-choice model appears able to explain the many particularistic policies Congress generates. As students of the subject have repeatedly shown, Congress often adopts policies that promote narrow interests and sacrifice broad or general interests. Such policies are predicted by the electoral connection.

Yet a gap remains in the model. Whereas the communitarian model can explain general-interest policies, the rational-choice model cannot. If few and infrequent, Congress *does* from time to time adopt policies considered to be in the general interest, which raises the question whether the rational-choice model can accommodate such instances. Why do reelection-minded legislators ever adopt general-interest policies, given the model's assumptions?

The books under review here, both written by intellectual descendants of Mayhew, begin to fill this gap. They do so by attempting to develop further what is, still, an incompletely specified model of legislator decision-making. In particular, both Arnold and Hansen explore how *imperfect information* affects legislators' decisions. What is more, both of their analyses suggest that introducing the dimension of imperfect information may shed light on the question articulated above.

Not to mislead, *The Logic of Congressional Action* and *Gaining Access, Congress and the Farm Lobby, 1919–1981* seek to explain distinct phenomena. Arnold expressly seeks to explain why Congress sometimes passes general-interest legislation, while Hansen approaches that topic indirectly by seeking to explain why some interest groups and not others enjoy access to members of Congress. Despite these differences of purpose, however, both books begin to show how imperfect information may lead reelection-minded legislators to embrace policies advancing broad-based interests. Indeed, the relationship between imperfect information and the electoral connection—an issue insufficiently developed in many of the classics on legislator behavior—ultimately constitutes the driving engines of their respective theories. For this reason, and also because *The Logic of Congressional Action* and *Gaining Access* exhibit several important methodological and substantive similarities, as well as leave open similar questions, they warrant joint praise and criticism.

Or so I will argue. Part I below very briefly introduces Arnold's and Hansen's arguments and explains why the books can be read productively in tandem. Part II locates them in the evolution of the larger theory of decision-making by the reelection-minded legislator. Part III argues that their contributions to that theory are incomplete.

I. THE LOGIC OF GAINING ACCESS

Arnold begins with the observation that while political scientists can explain “with ease” why narrow interests so often triumph in Congress, and even why Congress sometimes enacts programs that generate substantial general benefits without generating costs for specific groups or geographical regions, they are at a loss to explain why Congress sometimes adopts policies that “deliver substantial general benefits while imposing large group or geographic costs” (p. 4). He seeks to solve the “puzzle” presented by general-interest legislation by introducing the concept of constituents’ “potential preferences” (p. 11). The argument runs as follows.

Suppose a reelection-minded member of Congress is contemplating whether to support some proposed policy. Sensitive to the electoral consequences of supporting (or refusing to support) the policy, the legislator will try to determine how his or her constituents will react. Specifically, the member will estimate constituents’ *potential* policy preferences—that is, the policy preferences they actually have *or* might plausibly come to have—and the likelihood that constituents will act on those potential preferences in the voting booth (pp. 14–15). These estimations require two calculations. First, the legislator will consider the policy’s effects on those benefited or burdened by it. Second, he or she will consider whether those benefits and burdens will be attributable to the policy decision in question.

Occasionally, such calculations will lead the legislator to support a general-interest policy, and herein lies the solution to the puzzle. Whenever a member determines that constituents’ potential policy preferences favor some general-interest policy, *and* whenever that member determines that constituents are likely to express their support for that policy in future elections, the member will favor the policy. Thus, even where a member’s constituents may today be unaware of the benefits they would enjoy from a given general-interest policy, and even where those on the losing end understand today how the policy will adversely affect them, the policy will nevertheless command the support of the member who anticipates constituents will appreciate those benefits on election day.

The conventional view misses this logic by overlooking the future:

According to the traditional view of representation, citizens who have no opinions about a policy at the time it is being considered cannot possibly have any impact on legislators’ decisions. . . . Under my view of representation, citizens who have no opinions about a policy at the time it is being considered can still have a large impact on legislators’ decisions as long as legislators anticipate and respond to these citizens’ potential preferences as if they already existed. (p. 11.)

The shadow of the future—constituents' *potential* preferences, coupled with the possibility they will act on those preferences in the voting booth—ensures that legislators keep general interests in mind.

In Part II of the book, "The Theory Applied," Arnold uses this theory to explain certain general-interest economic, tax, and energy policies, designating a chapter to each. These three chapters share a common theme: Congress often caters to particular interests to the detriment of diffuse interests, but sometimes reverses itself to vindicate diffuse over strong particular interests. Such reversals are inexplicable by the conventional view, which holds that electoral pressures inevitably lead Congress to serve particular interests. They are explicable by Arnold's logic, however, which recognizes that whenever the advocates of general-interest policy persuade Congress that constituents will appreciate the policy on election day, Congress will abandon particular interests in favor of broad interests.

Gaining Access seeks to solve a different puzzle: Why does a legislator grant access to some influence-seeking interest groups and not others? By way of introduction, Hansen states that he aims to reconcile two competing schools of thought in the "time-honored debate over interest group influence in Congress" (p. 1). Scholars on one side of the debate, represented by Schattschneider (1935), argue that organized interest groups dominate legislators' attention and deliberations. Others, represented by Bauer, Pool, & Dexter (1963), argue that the great volume of demands put on legislators limits the extent to which organized groups can influence them; legislators simply do not have time to be influenced by many groups.

Hansen attempts a synthesis of these opposing schools by arguing that Schattschneider is right for the very reasons articulated by Bauer, Pool, & Dexter. According to Hansen: "Limited in time, attention and resources, lawmakers cannot attend to all ["problems and pressures"], but they must attend to some" (p. 2). Legislators are dominated by the problems and pressures of interest groups, Hansen argues, but they control *which* groups will influence them. Consequently: "The decisive stage of interest group influence . . . is the choice of the problems and pressures to which to respond. Lobbies achieve influence in Congress to the degree that legislators choose their counsel [over other lobbies' counsel], to the degree that legislators grant them access" (ibid). It is this crucial choice which Hansen seeks to explain.

Like Arnold's, Hansen's argument is straightforward. Suppose a reelection-minded legislator is faced with a decision about which among many different interest groups will win his or her scarce attention—that is, will win "access" on a given issue.¹ Sensitive to the electoral consequences of granting access

¹ Hansen borrows the term "access" from Truman (1951).

to certain interest groups, the legislator will grant access to those groups that will best provide information about how constituents will react to policy choices the legislator must make between now and election day. Specifically, a member will grant access to one particular interest group among a competitive set of interest groups on two conditions.

First, the group must enjoy a “competitive advantage” over its rivals (pp. 13–17). A group enjoys a competitive advantage when that group has the ability to provide informational and electoral resources at lower cost and with greater effectiveness than its rivals can. Second, the member must expect that that group’s competitive advantage will be “recurring,” that is, that the circumstances under which the group seeks access will persist into the future (pp. 17–19). Where a member perceives that a given interest group satisfies both of these conditions, the member will grant the group indefinite access—access lasting so long as neither condition is violated. Where, however, a new group emerges that satisfies both conditions, the member will grant access to the new group instead. Hansen argues that his theory of access is supported by his empirical review of the shifts of farm-lobby access to legislative deliberation on agricultural policies. (His empirical narrative, which constitutes the bulk of the book, is admirably rich.)

The Logic of Congressional Action and *Gaining Access* merit simultaneous consideration, for reasons now becoming clear. For one thing, the books employ the same basic methodology. Both begin with “soft” rational choice arguments about how reelection-minded legislators make decisions: Hansen’s “theory of access” corresponds to Arnold’s “logic.” Both then “test” their theoretical arguments with careful empirical case narratives aimed to corroborate their theories: Hansen’s history of access to the agricultural committee corresponds to Arnold’s examination of certain economic, tax, and energy policies.²

Second, Arnold and Hansen share the same theoretical point of departure. As mentioned above, both begin with and seek to explore further the rational-choice model’s animating premise that legislators seek above all else to secure reelection (Arnold pp. 5, 60; Hansen p. 12). Accordingly, both Hansen and Arnold focus on a particular phenomenon that results from legislators’ attempts to secure reelection. For Arnold that phenomenon is the enactment of general-interest legislation; for Hansen, the decision to grant access to particular interest groups.

² Incidentally, Arnold at one point also uses agricultural price supports (sugar and milk) to illustrate what he considers Congress’s puzzling tendency to serve concentrated interests at one time, only to reverse itself later and serve broad interests and the expense of the concentrated interests it had previously favored (pp. 123–28).

In addition, when focusing on the consequences of members' attempts to secure reelection, Arnold and Hansen both argue that legislators are keenly attentive to their constituents' policy preferences (Arnold p. 17; Hansen pp. 18, 105). They also argue that, as a result of such attentiveness, members will under certain conditions ally themselves with a given policy's advocates. Those advocates are "coalition leaders" in Arnold's analysis (and Arnold's conception of "coalition" encompasses interest groups), and "interest groups" in Hansen's (Arnold p. 7; Hansen, p. 3). According to both, coalition leaders and interest groups win legislators' attention and support precisely because they are able to persuade legislators that they represent a broad base of constituents who, at the polls, will reward attention and support.

Furthermore, both Hansen and Arnold seek to specify the conditions under which members will ally themselves with a policy's advocates. Both stress two. And, their specifications of those conditions are similar, at times differing only in emphasis. Indeed, their terminologies can be combined: Interest groups or coalition leaders satisfy the recurrence condition and thus enjoy congressional support by persuading legislators that broad segments of their constituency will reward them on election day. In short, Arnold's and Hansen's theories are not only logically and empirically compatible, but begin to merge once the similarities between coalitions and interest groups, and between voter memory and recurrence, are recognized.

Finally, having provided a way to formalize the question of who influences legislators and under what conditions, both Arnold and Hansen argue that their theories explain "shift points in congressional decisions" (Arnold p. 15), or in other words, "the ebbs and flows of interest group access over time in Congress" (Hansen p. 3). Both conclude with a sanguine, but not a panglossian, picture of the connection between voters' preferences—transmitted through coalition leaders and interest groups—and legislators' decisions (Arnold pp. 273–74; Hansen pp. 226–28, 230). And having argued that coalition leaders/interest groups sometimes persuade Congress to enact policies reflecting "citizens' potential preferences" (Arnold p. 272) or "common interests" or "popular demands" (Hansen pp. 229, 230), both close their books by registering skepticism toward familiar proposals to revitalize political parties in order to rescue the citizenry from the malign influence of organized groups (Arnold pp. 274, 276; Hansen pp. 224–26).

II. THE CALCULUS OF REELECTION

The Logic of Congressional Action and *Gaining Access* contribute in important ways to the still-evolving theory of legislator decision-making developed by Mayhew, and also by Fenno, Kingdon, and Wilson, among others. Indeed, in my view, Arnold's and Hansen's contributions to that theory constitute the

most important merits of their books. To appreciate those contributions, it is necessary to locate Arnold and Hansen in the development of the theory, that is, to situate them in the collective effort to identify both the set of variables that inform reelection-minded legislators' decisions, and the set of constraints that affect legislators' decision-making calculus. I believe those variables and constraints are best conceptualized in the following way.

Members of Congress seeking to prolong their tenure must consider the electoral consequences of their support or lack of support for a given policy (more precisely, for a whole portfolio of policies) in the light of three basic questions:

First, who will bear the costs, and who will enjoy the benefits, of the policy in question? Call this the "cost-benefit variable."

Second, will those bearing the costs realize they are bearing them, and will those enjoying the benefits realize they are the beneficiaries of that policy, come reelection time? The answer to this question depends on the answers to several more specific questions. How large will the costs be for those who will bear them, and how large will the benefits be for those who will enjoy them? Further, will those costs and benefits be attributable to members' voting decisions, or will the causal link between the legislator's vote on a policy and that policy's costs and benefits be imperceptible? Supposing the costs and benefits are initially attributable to a member's vote, will the policy's beneficiaries still remember the benefits on election day? If instead those costs and benefits are not initially attributable, might electoral opposition later expose the link to those bearing the costs? Call this second variable the "accountability variable."

Third, what electoral resources will the policy's beneficiaries provide, and what countervailing electoral threats will the policy's cost-bearers pose? Put bluntly, which affected interests are most powerful? Call this third variable the "electoral-advantage variable."

None of these variables taken alone is sufficient to lead a legislator to support or refuse to support a given policy. For example, even where the benefits of a policy will be extremely high to one group and the costs will be low to another, a reelection-minded legislator has no incentive to support that policy if its beneficiaries will be unaware of their gain. Similarly, even if that policy's beneficiaries will fully appreciate their gain, the legislator will still have no incentive to support the policy if those beneficiaries have no electoral resources to supply. In short, rational decision-making by reelection-minded legislators requires information about all three variables: Who wins/loses? Will they realize their gain/loss? What effect will any positive/negative response have on reelection prospects?

Nor are these three variables together sufficient to understand whether a legislator will lend support to a proposed policy's advocates. A complete description of a member's reelection calculus requires specification not only of (1) all of the variables relevant to a legislator's choice, but also some account of: (2) how the legislator makes trade-offs among them; (3) the legislator's time horizon; (4) the legislator's level of risk-aversion; and (5) whether and how the legislator's information-gathering or decision-making processes skew the legislator's calculations due to individual or institutional biases. Without specifying all of these factors, it is not possible to provide explanations or to generate predictions about how a reelection-minded legislator will behave; virtually any behavior can be attributed to the under-specified element(s) of an incomplete theory.

Yet, most contributors to the theory of legislator decision-making have not attempted to provide a comprehensive account. Rather, scholars have identified the above variables singularly, with insights that seem obvious only in retrospect. Wilson (1973), for example, borrowing from Olson (1965), emphasized the accountability variable by arguing that not only the incidence but also the distribution of the costs and benefits of policy decisions is relevant in predicting congressional behavior. Where the costs of a policy are spread thinly and the benefits are concentrated, Wilson pointed out, those on the losing end of the policy are unlikely to realize that they are losers, while those on the winning end are likely to appreciate their gain. Where those bearing even large costs will not feel the pinch, the argument implies, a member may do well electorally by supporting a policy that will generate smaller, but appreciable, benefits to grateful beneficiaries.

Kingdon (1989) emphasized another aspect of the accountability variable, arguing that even where the costs and benefits of members' policy choices are not initially attributable to the member, the threat of revelation by potential electoral adversaries influences members' decisions in the present. By interviewing legislators about their floor votes, Kingdon discovered that potential political opposition actually influences members' decisions on policies the costs of which may not be initially traceable to a member's vote. In particular, Kingdon found that legislators worry about how issues could in the future be framed for constituents by electoral opponents. One implication of Kingdon's finding is that where the costs generated by a policy that would otherwise command a member's support might later be revealed by electoral opposition, a member may not side with the policy's beneficiaries.

Mayhew's contribution to the theory emphasized the electoral-advantage variable by arguing that a reelection-minded legislator has incentives to "service" the interests of groups with "disposable electoral resources." (Mayhew 1974: 131). It may well be, Mayhew's analysis implies, that the beneficiaries of a

policy will appreciate their gain, but unless that appreciation will be converted into tangible electoral advantages, the member has no incentive to deliver policy benefits. Instead, the member will support those who would bear a policy's costs, even where they are less aware of their potential losses than the beneficiaries are of their potential gains, insofar as the losers will convert their (dim) appreciation into electoral advantages. Fenno (1978) complemented this basic point with the important empirical observation that in practice legislators are not equally sensitive to the costs and benefits that all subgroups of their constituencies will realize, but rather expect those who supported them in the last election to be especially aware of the consequences of the legislator's decisions.

Enter Arnold and Hansen. Taking cue from Wilson's emphasis on the accountability variable, Arnold argues that in certain circumstances policies generating diffuse benefits while imposing concentrated costs can nevertheless prevail. At the same time, Arnold provides theoretical support for Kingdon's finding that legislators care about silent publics—Arnold calls such groups “inattentive publics” (p.68), borrowing from V. O. Key (1961)—by emphasizing the importance of the traceability of policy choices and the possibility of electoral retaliation by those on the cost-bearing end of a member's policy decision.³

Building on the same tradition, Hansen explores the electoral-advantage variable by considering interest groups' differing abilities to provide electoral resources. A legislator will grant an interest group access, Hansen argues, in exchange for the information and electoral propaganda that the group can provide. Consequently, groups most likely to win a legislator's attention are those with the greatest resources to supply. Thus Hansen, like Arnold, further develops the nexus between legislator decision-making and the reelection quest.

Yet Arnold's and Hansen's contributions go farther than that. In contrast to much of the classic work on legislator decision-making, Arnold and Hansen explore the consequences of the fact that legislators are imperfectly informed with respect to the three variables central to their reelection decision-making calculus.⁴ If only members were perfectly informed about those variables, that calculus would be straightforward. But, as Arnold and Hansen recognize, in reality members do not know for sure who will bear the costs and benefits

³ Arnold explains that he intends “to capture in theory what Kingdon observed in reality” (p. 11).

⁴ Mayhew, for example, observed that legislators cannot foresee the future and asserted that minimax would be their response (1974: 47), but he did not develop that observation or defend that assertion.

associated with policy alternatives, whether those winners and losers will appreciate their status, or who among them will deliver electoral resources or support electoral foes. In short, legislators cannot predict the future. Consequently, they must make decisions under conditions of imperfect information by gathering and processing such information as best they can. Unsure of what the future holds, Arnold's legislator responds to imperfect information by trying to predict when constituents are likely to appreciate the benefits of general-interest legislation and to act on that appreciation in the voting booth, while Hansen's legislator responds to imperfect information by trying to ascertain which interest groups are likely to provide the most electorally useful information and propaganda. *The Logic of Congressional Action* and *Gaining Access* thus constitute significant first steps in an important new project: adding to the theory of legislator decision-making the dimension of the unknowable future and, with it, the (benign?) consequences of imperfect information.

III. THE NEBULOUS CONSEQUENCES OF IMPERFECT INFORMATION

Yet, just here, where *The Logic of Congressional Action* and *Gaining Access* most advance that theory, they may be vulnerable to several criticisms, for both raise unanswered questions concerning those consequences. Recall that according to Arnold a legislator's best estimates of constituents' potential preferences and constituents' tendency to vote those preferences sometimes leads the legislator to support a general-interest policy. In effect, Arnold's legislator is kept in check by the future possibility that electoral foes will later expose the link between his vote and the costs borne by an otherwise inattentive public.

It is unclear, however, just how introducing imperfect information about constituents' responses to costs imposed upon them, without more, solves the puzzle Arnold identifies. Why does Arnold's solution not merely restate that puzzle in a different form, that is: Why do legislators looking to the (imperfectly predictable) future ever conclude that the electoral advantages of general-interest legislation will likely outweigh the electoral advantages of special-interest legislation? Granted, inattentive publics might be made aware of the costs of some policy by future electoral foes, but the beneficiaries of that policy are likely to be even more attentive.

Olson (1965) (to whom Arnold's title of course alludes) explained why narrow interests will as a rule prevail over diffuse interests, who will be relatively less able to organize in order to reward friendly legislators, even assuming that those with diffuse interests know perfectly well what their interests are. By explaining that sometimes a legislator imperfectly informed about the future will anticipate that the beneficiaries of general-interest policies will appreciate their gains and will provide electoral advantages to the legislator, Arnold does not answer *why* that is so. In other words, he provides

no reason why a legislator would anticipate that concentrated groups will be less likely to possess electoral resources in the future than in the present. After all, concentrated interests are better equipped to supply the kinds of electoral resources required to win the support of members of groups with diffuse interests, as Arnold recognizes (p. 84). Given that that is so, why would a legislator ever conclude that, with respect to the electoral strength of particularized *vis-à-vis* diffuse interests, the future is likely to be much different from the present?

Perhaps Arnold's view is that legislators' risk-aversion, triggered by lack of information about the future, sometimes leads them to support general-interest rather special-interest policies. He does emphasize that it is the "cautious legislator" who is concerned about the possibility of inattentive publics becoming attentive (pp. 68–69). But, first, just how risk-averse are members? Arnold posits that members pursue goals besides reelection only when their decision would make no "significant difference" in terms of their reelection prospects (pp. 60, 85 n. 53). As formulated, however, that premise is a little vague. Is the assumption that members may vote against their electoral interests, once the probability of reelection reaches some threshold? Or is the assumption instead that members do not vote against their electoral interests whenever those interests are implicated, no matter how secure their reelection prospects seem?

Consider an exaggerated but useful hypothetical. Congresswoman A, virtually assured of getting 54 percent in the next election, is faced with a decision about supporting a policy that with a probability of .5 would increase her vote to 65 percent (because, for example, the policy's beneficiaries would supply substantial electoral resources to A's next election effort), and with a probability of .5 would decrease her vote to 51 percent (because, for example, an inattentive public would be alerted to the costs the policy imposed upon it). Would Congresswoman A support the policy, according to Arnold? Clearly doing so threatens to have a significant detrimental effect on her reelection prospects. Yet, so long as the worst case scenario still leaves her with enough to win reelection, it is not clear why she would be risk-averse. More generally, legislators with a background expectation of getting at least 51 percent of the vote in the next reelection, even when their "bets" on policy decision prove to be "losing" bets, may not be risk-averse. They may, over some threshold, be risk-neutral or even risk-seeking.

Legislators may be risk-seeking, for example, where they have a chance at a "romp." This is true considering that legislators have a strong preference for decisive victories, which they believe discourage possible future challengers, who will perceive the incumbent as invincible (see Fenno 1978: 13; Mayhew 1974: 46). Thus, a legislator might well take a "bad bet" to move

from 53 to 60 percent, where the expected result on that bet is to move from 53 to 52 percent. Winning the bet would mean moving out of the “vulnerable” into the “invincible” category, whereas losing the bet—by hypothesis the likely outcome—would mean a modest slip in the same category. Taking the bet, which rational, reelection-minded legislators would seem likely to do, would be risk-seeking.

Furthermore, legislators who do not expect to win the next election would presumably be risk-seeking. That is, given a background expectation of defeat, they would gamble on a policy decision probable to hurt their (already losing) reelection prospects but possible to put them back over the 50 percent mark. In short, reelection-minded legislators seem likely to be either risk-averse, risk-neutral, or risk-seeking depending on what percentage of the vote they otherwise expect to receive. Insofar as risk-aversion is doing much work in Arnold’s analysis, then, his argument may rest on a weak premise.

More important, even assuming that all legislators are risk-averse, it is not clear how risk-aversion could make a legislator more likely to support general-interest policies. A risk-averse legislator would seek to “play it safe,” that is, to err on the side of caution when choosing between two alternatives about which she is imperfectly informed. But that could mean supporting particularized interests just as well as general interests. For example, where a risk-averse legislator was faced with a choice between a “sure bet” of winning a modest amount of electoral support by backing some narrow interest, and a “long-shot” of winning a much greater amount of electoral support by backing some general interest, the legislator would back the particular interest. In short, while risk-aversion clearly would have an impact on a legislator’s decision-making, there is no reason to think that it would make the legislator systematically more prone to side with general interests. In fact, to the extent that supporting general-interest policies generates high electoral benefits at low probabilities while supporting particular-interest policies generates lower electoral benefits at high probabilities, risk-aversion might lead legislators systematically to support particularized interests.

Hansen’s analysis raises still more questions. First, Hansen posits that members pursue reelection goals by minimizing uncertainty about their next election, but exactly what he means by “minimizing uncertainty” (p. 2) is unclear. Perhaps Hansen means that members seek to maximize their share of the vote in the next election. Such an interpretation does seem consistent with his central claim that members seek to please groups of voters whose issue are are most likely to recur. Yet this interpretation is problematic.

Consider the following hypothetical. Congressman A compares two strategies to guide him in his relations with interest groups. Congressman A does

not have perfect information about how interest groups in his district will react to various stands he might take on the issues. Instead, he has only enough information about those groups to know that strategy I will produce: a .6 percent chance of winning him 70 percent of the vote in the next election, a .2 chance of winning him 60 percent of the vote in the next election, and a .2 chance of winning him 40 percent of the vote (in other words, there is a 20 percent chance strategy I will backfire). Strategy II, in contrast, will produce: a .6 chance of getting 57 percent of the vote, a .2 chance of getting 53 percent of the vote, and a .2 chance of squeaking by with a 51 percent of the vote. If Congressman A seeks to maximize his share of the vote in the next election, he will adopt strategy I, which gives him an expectation of getting 62 percent of the vote, in contrast to strategy II, which will give him an expected 55 percent of the vote. Strategy II, however, assures Congressman A of reelection, whereas strategy I does not.

Perhaps Hansen means not that members seek to maximize their share of the vote in the next election, but rather to maximize the probability that they will win the "next election" (p. 107), irrespective of their share of the vote. This interpretation leads to another question, however. Suppose Congresswoman A is confronted with a choice between a strategy for granting access to some interest group that virtually assures her of winning the next election by a large majority, but may leave her vulnerable in the following election (because, for example, an interest group denied access will by then be able to retaliate electorally), and a strategy that is likely to produce a narrow victory in the next election but is also likely to insulate her from hostile retaliatory opposition in the following election. To the extent Congresswoman A seeks to maximize her chances of winning the *next* election, she will adopt the first strategy. To the extent she seeks to remain a career congresswoman, however, she may well adopt the second strategy, although it renders her reelection chances in the very next election *less* likely. Which strategy does Congresswoman A choose, according to Hansen's theory of legislator decision-making? How do members trade off a decreased probability of winning the next election against an increased probability of winning future elections? What, in other words, are legislators' time horizons? And how do their time horizons affect their decisions about granting access to those who seek it?

In any event, Hansen argues that legislators will grant access only to interest groups whose issues and interests are likely to recur. But his definition of "recurrence" does not seem to map onto any of the reelection variables outlined above. According to Hansen: recurrence obtains "when groups, issues and circumstances persist" (p. 17), or in other words when there are "indications that the competitive advantage [a group enjoys] will continue into the future" (p. 106). But why would a legislator care about whether an interest

group's goals and/or circumstances will recur, that is, about whether its competitive advantage will continue? Why would a reelection-minded legislator not instead seek "to score" on many highly salient but non-recurring issues by pleasing one ephemeral interest group—for whom the electoral-advantage variable was large—followed by another as the first group's issue passes into oblivion, followed by a third, and so on. If an issue or interest that is not recurrent also is, by definition, no longer salient, then a member adopting such a strategy would seem to run little risk of alienating voters along the way. In any case, to the extent a member does care about recurrence, might not that concern be outweighed by differentials in competing groups' abilities to provide electoral advantages?

Furthermore, *how* do legislators gather information about the electoral advantages potentially provided by competing groups? Neither Hansen nor Arnold offers much on this question. Arnold suggests that Congress as an institution, and especially congressional committees, perform the necessary calculations (p. 85). Hansen suggests that legislators use their own "workaday theories" to try to anticipate the future (pp. 18, 107). But, for both, the mechanisms are unclear. It seems likely that even rational legislators are to some extent plagued by certain decision-making biases. It also seems likely that Congress has its own set of institutional decision-making biases. To what extent do individual or institutional biases affect legislator decision-making? Hansen himself suggests one institutional bias. He explains that legislators get their information about recurrence from interest groups presently enjoying access. But those groups have incentives to overstate the extent to which they will satisfy Hansen's recurrence condition, since they will retain access so long as a legislator believes the policies they advocate will recur. To the extent legislators rely on information from groups seeking to prolong their access, then, they would seem likely to act on the basis of skewed information.

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As some of the above questions suggest, a complete account of the reelection calculus requires considerable specification of how legislators estimate the electoral consequences of supporting alternative policies. Not only must all input variables be specified, but so too must legislators' weighing of those variables, as well as their attitudes toward risk, their time horizons, and how they acquire and process information. Where these factors are not reasonably well specified, it is not possible to explain or predict legislators' behavior, since, again, apparently deviant behavior can always be attributed to the operation of some under-specified variable or constraint. Consequently, we cannot say with much confidence what a reelection-minded legislator would

do. Indeed, we cannot even say to what extent legislators are reelection-minded or instead public-spirited, or—to the extent those overlap—both.

While *The Logic of Congressional Action* and *Gaining Access* do not answer all of the questions we might like them to answer, they deserve applause nevertheless. In addition to their merits others have already recognized, they bring to the forefront a dimension of legislator decision-making—the dimension of imperfect information—heretofore not sufficiently emphasized. Future work in this area will, I predict, build on Arnold's and Hansen's beginnings by examining further just how legislators respond to imperfect information, and what the relationship is, if any, between those responses and general-interest policies. By pointing in a new and important direction, Arnold and Hansen have advanced the project of understanding the calculus of the reelection-minded legislator.

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