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John Brademas Congressional Internship

The Role of a Representative from a Constituent's Viewpoint

As a summer intern in Congressman Patrick Kennedy's (D-RI 01) office, I dealt with constituents on a daily basis, answering their calls and writing responses to their letters. I came into this internship thinking that Kennedy's responsibility as a representative was to write and pass legislation favorable to his constituents, to represent his district by voicing his opinion in committee meetings and on the floor. While that may be the textbook version of his responsibility, I leave this internship knowing that he, like any other representative, is held responsible by his constituents for much more, for any action taken by the Democratic party and the president, for any fault of government at all levels.

As one constituent said on a phone call, "I know that that is not part of his responsibility, but hey he's a bigger voice up there in Washington than I am, right?" As an elementary school teacher, the constituent had been telling me that his students were not allowed to say the word "stupid". Because President Barack Obama had said "stupid" in his health care press conference, the government was setting a bad example for and causing uproar among his students. By far one of the more farfetched requests for Kennedy, this constituent request shows how Kennedy is supposed to be not only a lawmaker but also a sympathizer with a like-minded view and a fellow advocate (hopefully for more serious causes than banning the word "stupid"). Constituents want politicians to understand the issues that most directly impact them, to show empathy even if legislation in that area would prove futile, to provide hope that change will be forthcoming in some form, legislative or not. Thus, the words "representative" and "lawmaker" are not interchangeable.

Though somewhat obvious, this insight has redefined the way I view a representative's role. Not only should representatives vote for laws that benefit the average constituent, but they should understand the average constituent's background and empathize with their struggles. This understanding does not need to be literal and personal but at least genuine and shared. If so, constituents will largely forgive any failure to pass effective laws and will continue to vote for the representative despite a contender's better legislative ability.

Let me offer an example. A month into my internship, a nonprofit group advocating for increased funding for after-school activities visited our office. They brought several children who had participated in their after-school activities with them to tell the Congressman stories of its effectiveness. One high school junior in the group asked Kennedy, "I don't plan on going to college after I graduate. I know there aren't many jobs with the recession going on. What are you doing to help young people in Rhode Island like me who are trying to find a job?"

Kennedy responded, "First of all, you should really stay in school. There's nothing as valuable as an education when it comes to having the skills you need to find a job. But right now, even people who have an education are having a tough time all around the country. The thing is Rhode Island isn't even the worst-hit state. There are places like California and Michigan where 15% of people don't have jobs. For young people like yourself, it's more like 20% or 25%. That's unbelievable, and that's an area where our country really needs to provide some help to our young people."

Everyone nodded along with Kennedy's response, but I thought it was particularly mediocre. He hadn't even answered the question, he hadn't provided a single example of a law or a program to help young people find a job. Afterwards when I brought up this point, a staffer countered, "Actually, I thought Patrick did a good job. Think about why that kid asked that question. He didn't want to hear the

name of some law on the books. We can create hundreds of laws and programs, but people will still be unhappy if they don't have a job. And that's not in our hands. Most of the time, they're just looking for some empathy, to see that Patrick understands them and that he keeps their perspective in mind."

As I thought about this lesson in the coming days, it explained volumes to me. Constituents often do not see representatives in primarily a lawmaking light since laws, even landmark ones, only have indirect, minimal effects on their daily lives and even then only years later when they are enacted. Often amazed at the collective amount of time spent by interns and staffers responding to constituent letters, I had wondered why this time was not better spent writing legislation or researching the effects of current bills so that we could co-sponsor them. I had not realized that a specific letter, in contrast to legislation, addresses each constituent's concerns more thoroughly and much more quickly. It details Kennedy's similar concern and promises future action if a bill arises, letting the constituent know that his perspective is shared and, in that way, is able to impact the government.

By no means am I arguing that a response letter to a constituent is more effective in changing policies and achieving actual gains than a piece of legislation. However, a letter can still have a large effect on individual constituents, on displaying Kennedy's commitment to a specific cause, on gaining favorable publicity and access to constituents. Often, it is not the actual legislation that constituents care about, but the desire to see that their representatives can relate to the same pressures that they face, that their representatives advocate the same causes that they do, that their representatives do not fall back upon a singular piece of legislation every time someone raises a concern about health care but that their representatives have the same perspective so that they can be fellow advocates with a like-minded view. In this sense, passing favorable laws and voicing their constituent's concerns in committee meetings is only part of a representative's job; a less understood part may be sharing a constituent's

perspective through empathy and providing hope. Often this latter part is understood only as a means of re-election, but it is also an integral feature of a representative in a safe district.

Essentially, a representative is a community leader. To fill this role, Kennedy appeared at ribbon-cutting ceremonies, travelled with House Speaker Nancy Pelosi in Rhode Island, and was invited to speak at several events. Undoubtedly, these appearances are designed to help his publicity and his chances of re-election, but that fact in itself shows that re-election is not solely about the laws Kennedy passes or the constituents he helps through his actions in the halls of Congress. Re-election, and thus the successful completion of his job, requires Kennedy, like any other representative, to be a strong voice and personality in his district, to fill a psychological role as a community leader, and to be held responsible for many of the events occurring in that community.

This responsibility is the downside of the expanded role of a representative beyond that of a lawmaker. For example, one constituent asked our office to remove an attorney from the Rhode Island Bar Association due to his inappropriate actions. Another constituent asked our office for help when a restaurant double-charged her credit card and neither institution would return her money. Obviously, pursuing these matters is well beyond the scope of a representative, working hundreds of miles away in Washington D.C. and able only to vote on legislation. However, when representatives and political leaders become community leaders, they undoubtedly take on this responsibility from a constituent's viewpoint. In American culture, this insight may seem somewhat obvious, but in other cultures, spiritual or family leaders often have the role of a community leader, while political leaders are relegated to a limited role of formality. This additional role brings the responsibility of encouraging the president not to say "stupid", of showing empathy for a high school junior worried about finding a job even though Kennedy has no such personal concerns, and of countless other constituent requests. Rather than being

secondary, this responsibility is often equivalent to the more understood responsibility of making laws, at least from many constituents' viewpoints.

For those in or seeking elected office, including myself at some point in the future, this insight offers several lessons. First, it is crucial to engage in all aspects of elected office from writing legislation to holding town hall meetings in order to discuss political issues to participating in parades to appearing in pictures with constituents. Of course, over-emphasis of any aspect lends itself to criticism, but representatives have all these responsibilities and others as political and community leaders. Second, it is crucial to treat as many constituents as possible respectfully. Often constituents care not for a specific vote on an upcoming bill but for the representative's shared concern, like-minded understanding of an issue plaguing the community, and inherent promise to act in the future. Thus, part of a representative's job is to provide hope, to convince constituents that their voice will be heard – if not now then later, if not in this piece of legislation then in another one. Third, it is crucial to realize that some constituents will never be pleased, no matter how many bills are written or how much effort is made to address their concerns. Though representatives are meant to serve all their constituents, there will always be some who are implacable and who will never vote your way.

Otherwise, this internship has offered me many exciting opportunities and experiences, but this insight remains the most poignant, and unanticipated, lesson. Representatives can capitalize on the fact that their constituents hold them responsible for much more than the laws that they pass or the bills that they support. They must remember that their ability to empathize with their constituents' issues, to perform symbolic gestures for their commitment to causes, to act in less defined and traditional ways can garner much more widespread support with much less effort than a landmark piece of legislation. I hope I remember this important lesson as I seek elected office at some point in the future, and I thank the John Brademas Center for the Study of Congress for affording me this opportunity.