

The First Annual Bernard & Irene Schwartz Lecture on Congress
A Series Presented by the John Brademas Center for the Study of Congress

Synopsis

“Is the power of Congress declining?”

“Are partisan politics in Washington creating an environment hostile to the creation of good policy?”

These and other compelling questions were at the center of discussion at the First Annual Bernard and Irene Schwartz Lecture on Congress, held on September 15, 2005, at the Library of Congress. The John Brademas Center for the Study of Congress, housed at NYU’s Robert F. Wagner Graduate School of Public Service, hosted the event, which was the first in an annual series created to begin a dialogue on the processes by which the Congress of the United States shapes the nation’s policies.

The Brademas Center was proud to bring together for this event Senators Richard G. Lugar (R-IN) and Paul S. Sarbanes (D-MD), who shared valuable insight on how Congress, under a variety of constraints, develops policy.

Senator Dick Lugar addressed the role Congress plays in shaping foreign policy, and described the often-contentious relationship between Congress and the Executive Branch. He noted Congress’ power to declare war and approve war spending, but pointed out that Congress tends to act reactively in these roles. He suggested that foreign policy initiatives are more successful when Congress relies on three of its institutional strengths—staying power, the ability to reflect public opinion and the ability to confer a bipartisan framework on a policy that might otherwise be viewed with suspicion by one or both parties. The Senator discussed the development of the Nunn-Lugar Cooperative Threat Reduction program as an example of policy-making that highlights each of these strengths.

Turning the focus to domestic policy, Senator Paul Sarbanes also discussed the struggle for power among the branches. He emphasized the importance of maintaining congressional autonomy stating, “Effective government in my view needs a strong Congress and it needs a strong Executive. It is not a zero sum game - if one is strong the other need not be weak.” Sarbanes spoke of the Sarbanes-Oxley Act, in which Congress demonstrated its ability to conduct comprehensive hearings to devise effective legislation, as a clear example of effective policy-making on the domestic level.

Dr. Norman Ornstein, the moderator of the event and a Resident Scholar at the American Enterprise Institute, then took the floor and discussed the decline of Congress' institutional identity and loyalty.

He noted, "What I see in leadership in both houses...is much more a sense that members and leaders are lieutenants in the President's army rather than independent actors."

Ornstein added that reduced independence from the President hinders Congress' ability to perform its oversight role because Members are less willing to openly criticize and debate policies supported by the Administration. He further commented that Members are increasingly less respectful to the rules and traditions of Congress, and less likely to work together across parties and chambers to create legislation that reflects ideas at the center of the political spectrum.

In concluding, Ornstein noted the importance of a strong Congress: "There is nothing more important, as I see it, for the future of our country than a vibrant Congress playing an independent and thorough policymaking and oversight role in society."

The session concluded with an engaging question and answer period in which members of the audience were able to pose questions directly to the speakers about presidential power and recent changes in how Congress operates.

The event attracted a diverse audience of over 100 people—including elected officials, federal government personnel, business leaders and academics. Among the numerous distinguished guests were the Honorable Corrine "Lindy" Boggs, the Honorable Cathy Long, the Honorable William Ratchford and the Honorable Paul G. Rogers—all former Members of Congress, as well as Alton Frye, Presidential Senior Fellow Emeritus at the Council on Foreign Relations and Thomas Mann, Senior Fellow in Governance Studies at the Brookings Institution—both members of the Center's Advisory Council. Representatives from the Congressional Research Service, the National Archives and various academic institutions were also present. The event was made possible by a generous contribution from the Bernard and Irene Schwartz Foundation and was hosted by the Honorable Dr. James H. Billington, Librarian of Congress.

For a complete description of this event, please refer to the *Executive Summary* available on the Center's website.

The central mission of the John Brademas Center for the Study of Congress is to advance the understanding of Congress and bring new insights and perspectives to those working on Capitol Hill and to citizens generally. The Center achieves its mission through non-partisan research, teaching, and public outreach activities focused on the role of Congress in making national policy. For more information please visit:

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