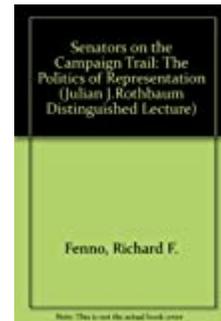


# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

**Richard F. Fenno, Jr.** *Senators on the Campaign Trail: The Politics of Representation.* Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1996. xii + 375 pp. \$24.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8061-2827-6.



**Reviewed by** Ronald Vardy (Houston Community College/University of Maryland)

**Published on** H-Teachpol (December, 1997)

Richard Fenno, Jr.'s *Senators on the Campaign Trail* is another significant addition to the literature of political science focusing on campaigns, campaigning and the candidates. *Senators* is part science and part art, and it adds to our collective knowledge of Congress and electoral connection.

The essential style of *Senators on the Campaign Trail* will remind the reader of those skills used by journalists—asking questions, listening and recording filtered impressions. Fenno spends days and miles on the campaign trail during eighteen different elections, following candidates for various seats. The trail includes both winners and losers; challengers as well as incumbents. Five were challenger campaigns, one was a losing open seat attempt, and twelve were candidates seeking re-election.

The book's methodology is a technique that Fenno calls "drop in/drop out, tag along/hang around kind of research" (p. 4). Fenno's book is able to distill meanings, patterns and linkages between campaigning-governing-campaigning systems and various tactics and strategies of those involved in a political career. The book's central and organizing theme is the campaign and representation; campaigns establish the legislator-constituent relationship, or, as Fenno tells us, "representation is, at bottom, a home relationship" (p.277).

Fenno is able to spin a story of trail lore that is engaging, informative and easy to follow. Fenno's approach to covering the campaign is to look at senatorial careers as a means of exploring representation. For example, he follows ten non-incumbent and twenty-one incumbent campaigns over a period just shy of twenty years. He follows up the pre-election lives of his subjects as challengers or incumbents with their lives as Senators. His analysis is focused on careers, candidates and their campaigns.

On a different level, the book is about standard fare for those interested in more of a grassroots look at the day-in and day-out art and science of running a campaign for the United States Senate. It is about politics, of course, but more importantly, it focuses on the gritty details of core issues in our democracy: representation and the relationship between the candidate and the electorate, or at least the potential supporters. *Senators on the Campaign Trail* describes the links between legislators and constituents, building on one of his favorite themes and adding to our understanding of representation, this time between senators and the voters where they live.

*Senators on the Campaign Trail* is organized around Fenno's major theme, not strictly chronological, nor what one would normally consider sequential. Fenno's book covers the material via what might be considered

hopping between campaign and candidate to campaign, in a self described drop in/drop out, tag along approach.

The strengths of the book are many. First, it is easy to read and follow. The names of the candidates and events are familiar to those likely to read the book. The general narrative style is very engaging and coaxes the reader to turn the page to discover who won, who lost and what Fenno makes of it all. The book does not contain long explanations of statistical rationale or sophisticated modeling paradigms or daunting tables, which may discourage readers. Fenno's "what's going on" conversational style of writing is indeed a breath of fresh air compared to some the more weighty tomes written by academics chasing an elusive explanation of some ponderous variable. The author uses an interesting variety of case studies, again adding to the book's readability. The book is a veritable how-to and how-not-to for the aspiring or the would be members of Congress. Fenno's clear and easygoing style enhances the book's ability to convey to the reader the relationship between politics as a career, and representation of the home constituency. For example, Fenno's discussions of candidates' pre-political careers easily moves to the quickening pace of senatorial campaign and, in some cases, to the lengthy post campaign careers some of the winners have enjoyed (e.g., Paul Tsongas). *Senators on the Campaign Trail* also covers with equal fervor and gusto the stories of unsuccessful challenges, such as Dick Leone; to successful challengers, Paul Coverdell; as well as incumbent senators who lose, such as Wynce Fowler. Fenno discusses quite candidly problems common to most failed election bids, e.g., lack of focus, failure to negotiate constituency representation, debates and priorities, and treatment of the media and one's own campaign staff, over-confidence, and, in some cases, underestimating the quality of challengers by not taking the re-election seriously.

The weaknesses are few and do not in any way detract

appreciably from the book's achievement. *Senators on the Campaign Trail* covers a limited number of cases, which may limit the book's value in terms of generalizability. The few (limited) cases may skew the author's conclusion somewhat regarding elections and election strategies. It is not altogether clear how one should avoid the pitfalls of unsuccessful campaigns in other times and places given the specific elections covered in *Senators on the Campaign Trail*. Fenno's conclusion concerning representation as a negotiated relationship between constituents and politicians that develops over time may be difficult to actually apply without the twenty-twenty hindsight of the past.

Overall, Fenno accomplishes his goal and clearly convinces readers of the important connections between campaigning, governing and campaigning again within the negotiated representation context and constituency appeals. The cases provide a rich focused view of being inside the campaign headquarters and the candidates' view of the process even if the view is not continuous or chronologically intact.

The book is suitable for an audience made of students of American politics and the nitty-gritty of campaigns. The book is particularly rich in descriptions of the do's and don'ts of winners and losers regarding their opponents' strengths and constituent concerns, as well as the salient issues. Those interested in the day-to-day history of a particular senatorial race would certainly find *Senators on the Campaign Trail* a must read. Beyond that, the book also serves as a good secondary reader for those interested in democratic processes because of its detail and focus on actual races where success is elusive, and re-election can slip through the hands of even fairly successful incumbents.

Copyright (c) 1997 by H-Net, all rights reserved. This work may be copied for non-profit educational use if proper credit is given to the author and the list. For other permission, please contact H-Net@h-net.msu.edu.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-teachpol>

**Citation:** Ronald Vardy. Review of Fenno, Richard F., Jr., *Senators on the Campaign Trail: The Politics of Representation*. H-Teachpol, H-Net Reviews. December, 1997.

**URL:** <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=1535>

Copyright © 1997 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication,

originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at [hbooks@mail.h-net.org](mailto:hbooks@mail.h-net.org).