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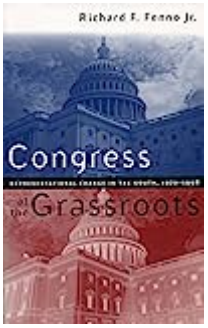

Richard F. Jr.. Fenno. *Congress at the Grassroots: Representational Change in the South, 1970-1998.* Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000. xiv + 152 pp. $34.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8078-4855-5.

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The Folks Back Home–Constituent Change and Influence in the Two Party South

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In *O Brother Where Art Thou*, the intriguing film that attracted widespread acclaim last year, the Cohen Brothers cast the venerable Charles Durning as Governor W. Lee O'Daniel in Depression-era Mississippi (in spite of the fact that O'Daniel served as a Texas demagogue, not a Mississippi one). In one memorable scene, the governor and his entourage disembark at a dusty crossroads radio station where he can deliver his homespun message of homilies and politics. When pushed by his son to stop and press the flesh with a handful of downtrodden but potential voters, O'Daniel (During) waved his hands and admonished his son. "We're not here to press the flesh ... we're mass communicatin'."

Richard Fenno's work, *Congress at the Grassroots*, provides an in depth look at the decline of the old time politics of the South in the late twentieth century. Fenno's case study examines a more recent era but confronts some of the same problems faced by the fictional governor. With changing times and technologies, how do the politics and politicians of the past fare with the modern era? In an effort to examine the recent political shifts in the Deep South and its Congressional districts, the author selected a noteworthy area–the district held by former House Speaker Newt Gingrich. Instead of selecting the controversial Gingrich as an illustration of change, Fenno chose a long-time Democratic predecessor and the Republican heir to the Georgia district. The area south of Atlanta, for generations a rural, conservative Democratic area, quickly changed to a suburban, Republican-dominated one from the 1950s to the 1990s. Fenno's goal was to provide an in depth look at this dramatic change that impacted the South and the entire nation. He also sought to examine these relationships as a cause in the increasing "polarization, along party lines" of the House of Representatives which made Congress "less civil, less manageable, and, to many, a less satisfying process" (p. 151).

In order to conduct this study, Fenno examined the careers and role of Democratic Congressman who served the district prior to Gingrich. Jack Flynt served for twenty years as the representative from the South Georgia district until his retirement in 1978. During that pe-

riod he defeated two challenges from Gingrich in 1974 and 1976. He also selected Mac Collins, the former Democrat turned Republican, who succeeded Gingrich in the 1990s. In his analysis, Fenno explored what historian Dewey Grantham described as the "nationalization of southern politics" in *The South in Modern America* (pp. 281-310). The political realignment that began with the modern Civil Rights movement accelerated during the Reagan presidency. An influx of new residents, resentment directed towards the federal government and troubled racial relations, white middle class flight to the suburbs and better financed candidates contributed to the rise of the Republican Party at the state and district level in the 1980s and 1990s.

One of the strengths of this study is the author's decision to focus on the relationships each representative developed with his constituency. Rather than having a focus on voting records as an indicator of the individual member and his district, Fenno chose to go beyond an empirical study. He wanted to explore how these individuals "kept in touch" with citizens, and define patterns from which historians might determine how the process of representation actually plays out over time. As such, Fenno believed a separate "representative strategy" can be identified which is distinctive from the modern campaign and Congressional service–"policy strategy." In the former, the representative maintained the ability to break with his party's major policy initiatives and leadership due to his strength with the folks back home. In the modern version, policy and party loyalty go hand in hand. In Fenno's view, this orientation reflects a change in the institution that began at the grassroots level of the congressional district.

Veteran Democratic Congressman Jack Flynt, a "career politician" (pp. 13-14) who symbolized the one-party politics of the Solid South, portrays this representational process. Effectively unchallenged after his election in 1954, Flynt secured his position through a continuous round of chicken dinners, church socials and courthouse visits. He maintained his contacts through his personal relationships with the business, civic and religious communities of the mostly rural, small town Congressional district. His solid base of support provided independence in Washington, where he steadily rose through the seniority system. The security from a challenge at home allowed him to challenge powerful Speaker Sam Rayburn (pp. 45-48) and his successor, Speaker John McCormick (p. 39). He distanced himself from Democratic presidential nominee Hubert Humphrey in 1968 (p. 50). Flynt reluctantly supported Georgia's only son in the White House, President Jimmy Carter (p. 87). In these examples and others, Fenno provides a clear, coherent explanation of the power of Flynt and other Southern Congressman who maintain their hold through the Civil Rights era and into the 1970s.

The transition from Flynt's representational style to Republican Congressman Mac Collins in the 1990's was significant on many fronts. Flynt's district of farmers and textile mills has changed in both size and context. Textile mills have given way to suburbs. Instead of large numbers of people working close to their farms and hometowns, people are now "driving to Atlanta every day" (p. 97). In place of the friendly conversations around the shops and Sunday dinners that sustained Flynt, a new "policy orientation" replaced the older representational model. From the end of Flynt's career in 1978 to Collins' ascendancy in the 1992, Newt Gingrich held the seat until redistricting forced a move to a "safer" district (p. 94). The district as a whole began voting Republican with Ronald Reagan's 1984 landslide victory. By the 1990s, what was once a strong Democratic district became more suburban and trended towards voting for more Republicans for President to down ballot races at the district and county level.

Collins departed from the press the flesh, back slapping and pie socials that served as Flynt's mode of operation. He followed the style advocated by the fictional Governor O'Daniel who discerned that he could be in touch with a more mobile constituency by "mass communicatin' " with his growing district. With a more issue-oriented style and operation, Collins and his office relied on web pages, e-mail, and computer-generated letters. Unlike Flynt, who became isolated from other Democrats, Collins enjoyed a rising tide of Republican support at home and in Washington. Furthermore, Collins was more comfortable in this new atmosphere and in his changing district –a fact that led to Flynt's retirement in 1978. A former Democrat, he liked to compare himself with Flynt and Georgia Senator Herman Talmadge (p. 131). With only a few exceptions, such as Collins' attempts to build relationships in the black community, Congressman Flynt and the old politics are a relic of the past.

In support of the policy initiatives, Fenno describes Collins' identification with the sociocultural traditions that carried forward from Flynt's era: race, abortion, gun control, crime and welfare. These hot button issues receive more attention through Flynt's modern campaign and district operation. Social and fiscal conservatism re-

main the norms. In comparing voting records, both Flynt and Collins are roughly equivalent on these domestic issues. Thus Fenno concludes that the primary distinction is the party label and the more partisan and policy oriented politics that emerge from this setting. This supports the views of political observers and others who note the polarization of the two parties in Congress during the 1990s and the difficulty the Congressional leadership faces in building consensus.

Fenno provides an in depth, local study reminiscent of V. O. Key's *Southern Politics in State and Nation* (Knopf, 1949), the landmark work on the early twentieth century South and its political system. His work takes its place alongside recent comprehensive Congressional histories such as Nancy Beck Young's *Wright Patman* (SMU Press, 2000). The work also complements in depth examinations of race and labor as presented in Michelle Brattain's *The Politics of Whiteness: Race, Workers, and Culture in the Modern South* (Princeton, 2001). Fenno's work has one void. I would have enjoyed a full examination of the third transitional figure between Flynt and Collins– former House Speaker Newt Gingrich. As a transitional figure, he clearly played a major role in the transformation of the once Democratic South, but Fenno offered only a brief discussion of his role as a polar opposite of Flynt and was "policy intensive" in his district relations (p. 131). Gingrich certainly added to the partisanship and the declining esteem in which Americans now hold their political leaders. Including him in this study would have provided an even fuller portrait of this pivotal district.

All in all, Fenno provides us with a thorough, well-organized, and comprehensive look at this era and the individual representatives. His focus on representational style should be followed by future historians of the modern political era who all too often focus on the business of Washington instead of the folks back home.