HIGH HOPES: BEYOND THE SINGLE-MINDED SEEKERS OF REELECTION

A dissertation presented

by

Claudia Larson

to

The Department of Political Science

In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

in the field of

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Northeastern University
Boston, Massachusetts
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ABSTRACT OF DISSERTATION

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ABSTRACT

Congressional scholars have failed to study systematically the member of Congress driven by a motivation to serve others as a type of legislator. Rather, researchers have assumed members of Congress are narrowly self-interested and investigate them accordingly, only examining individual member’s non-self-interested actions as if such behavior is highly-contingent on specific and rare circumstances. Yet, members of Congress are not universally single-minded seekers of reelection. Although most members seem to want to win reelection, many are motivated by goals besides and beyond reelection. Furthermore, some members of Congress are willing to accept losing reelection in order to serve others. Put differently, there are altruistic members of Congress.

While a comparatively few number of individual political scientists have provided insights about members motivated by an other-serving goal, their research has not culminated into an organized dialogue or coherent body of literature regarding members of Congress who are not primarily driven by narrow self-interest. Thus, scholars and citizens are left with an incomplete and likely inaccurate understanding of the realities of the institution and those who operate within it. To fully understand members of Congress, and congressional action overall, the field must take seriously the legislator who prioritizes the interests of others over individual self-interest.

This project completes the initial stage and necessary first step in studying such members of Congress by constructing a conceptual framework and empirically based method for classifying members as types of legislators, according to their primary motivation orientation. To
do so, it blends together approaches, concepts, and insights from congressional studies, rational choice theory more broadly, evolutionary biology, and original field research comprised of fourteen one-on-one interviews with current members of Congress and current or former congressional staff members. The process developed here for classifying members entails placing members within a conceptual space based on their empirically detectable behavior and decisions, with their final placement within the space denoting their primary motivation and corresponding legislator type.
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Introduction

Embracing the Seminal Work and Looking Beyond

In his 1974 book, Congress: The Electoral Connection, David Mayhew uses the contemporary approach in the field of economics to analyze the behavior of members of Congress. Harnessing the power of parsimony, Mayhew discusses and explains the organization of the First Branch and its members’ behavior according to the singular goal of reelection. Although he states clearly that members most likely have additional or even alternate goals (15-6), Mayhew encourages scholars to engage in the intellectual exercise of treating members of Congress as if they are “single-minded seekers of reelection” (5). He suspects treating members as if they are motivated solely by reelection will provide “a picture of what the United States Congress looks like if the reelection quest is examined seriously” (9), and then shows throughout his book that such treatment does explain a fair amount of both factors related to the organization of the modern Congress and variation in member behavior.

Over forty years have passed since Mayhew’s 1974 seminal work, and it has proven to be one of the most influential pieces in the congressional studies field in the past 50 years. In their review of the “landmark” literature since 1945, Polsby and Schickler state “Mayhew’s landmark has not really been superseded” by other rational choice works within congressional studies (2002, 347), and Carson and Jenkins (2011) note that Mayhew’s electoral connection “has become the theoretical foundation for much of the contemporary research examining the U.S. Congress (27). Thus, Mayhew’s conceptual framework has been both useful and fruitful, as evidenced by the countless number of research projects that use it in some form or another as the
foundation of their studies. Echoing rational choice notions of utility maximization, the scholarship that builds directly on Mayhew typically reduces member motivation to the sole goal of reelection and investigates members of Congress as narrowly self-interested in winning reelection.

Yet, Mayhew’s suggested approach does not provide the conceptual foundation necessary for investigating members of Congress who are not driven entirely or primarily by their respective reelection needs. This is not necessarily a failing of Mayhew or his work. He never claimed his conceptual approach or framework provided such a foundation, nor does it seem that he intended it to. Rather, Mayhew explains his intended scope with, “In the fashion of economics, I shall make a simple abstract assumption about human motivation and then speculate about the consequences of behavior based on the motivation” (1974, 5).

Nonetheless, the fact remains that members of Congress are not universally single-minded seekers of reelection. Although most members seem to want to win reelection, many are motivated by goals besides and beyond reelection. For example, Derthick and Quirk (1985) use the deregulation policies of the mid-1970s and early 1980s to demonstrate that many members regularly behave according to their opinions on the merit of policy as well as what they believe is in the “public interest.” Furthermore, some members of Congress are willing to accept losing reelection in order to serve others. Put differently, there are altruistic members of Congress. In fact, Mayhew provides brief examples of such members, calling them “saints” (1974, 15-6). However, mainstream social science literature on Congress offers little systematic assessment of the altruistic individual as a type of legislator. Rather, congressional scholars generally assume
that members of Congress are narrowly self-interested and investigate them accordingly, only examining a legislator’s apparently other-directed actions as rare and highly contingent on specific circumstances.

While individual political scientists have offered insights about altruistic members and how to approach studying a sentiment as seemingly elusive as “altruism” (see Barber 1967; Fenno 1973, 1978, 2007; Canon 1990; Lascher, Kelman, and Kane 1993; Bessette 1994; Hall 1996; Burden 2007), their contributions to the discussion on altruistic legislators have been piecemeal and largely inadvertent. Furthermore, even as scholars openly acknowledge inaccuracy in their representation of all members as being principally self-serving, the field overall still bases its work on the assumption that legislators will, unquestionably, prioritize their own narrowly understood interests over the interests of others. As a result, scholars and citizens are left with an incomplete and likely inaccurate understanding of the realities of the institution and those who operate within it. To more fully understand members of Congress, and congressional action overall, the field must take seriously the legislator who prioritizes serving others over their individual self-interest.

In the spirit of Mayhew’s interdisciplinary approach and scholarly goal, this project will borrow the approach and concepts from a different field and combine them with congressional studies research to construct a framework that provides scholars an approach for better understanding members of Congress and their behavior. More specifically, this research will construct a conceptual framework and empirically based method for classifying members according to their types of primary goals and motivations by blending 1) the insights, concepts,
and approaches from evolutionary biology with 2) congressional studies and rational choice knowledge and approaches as well as 3) information gathered during fourteen one-on-one interviews with members of Congress and current or former congressional staff members. Thus, the goal of this project is to construct a conceptual framework and empirically based classification scheme for identifying members as types of legislators, with a member’s type corresponding to his/her predominantly other-serving or predominantly self-serving motivation. The broader purpose of this project, however, is to provide a framework and method of classification for future research to study systematically members based on their primarily motivation type. The hope is, by providing such a research tool, scholars can begin to decipher member motivation – as opposed to assuming it – in order to gain a better understanding of Congress, its members, and their collective and/or individual behaviors.

*The Plan of the Project*

In its efforts to develop a conceptual framework and empirically based method for classifying members, this research first examines the existing literature and knowledge base to establish what researchers currently know and how researchers have approached and conceptualized human motivation, purposive actors, and research subjects engaging in goal-driven behavior. In Chapter 1, human altruism is conceptualized and defined as a human motivation and possible propensity to help others while accepting the potential sacrifice required to do so. Then congressional study’s exploration of altruism in Congress is reviewed. Overall, the field has not investigated meaningfully members driven by a primarily other-serving
motivation, although a small number of works, with somewhat limited scopes, have allowed for a non-self-interested motivation to explain members’ purposive behavior.

Consequently, this project enlarges its exploration of existing work in Chapter 2, looking to rational choice theory scholarship for insights regarding how to study more broadly members of Congress not driven predominantly by narrow self-interest. Although this body of knowledge also treats humans as instrumental actors – individuals engaging in behavior to achieve a goal – it too fails to provide insights for investigating members motivated to serve others. Somewhat similar to the majority of works within congressional studies that focus on members’ purposive behavior, most rational choice researchers either name narrow self-interest as the motivation driving behavior or dismiss from their studies investigations of non-self-interested motives. One common method for such dismissal is conflating self-serving motivations with other-serving motivations. This limits scholars’ ability to truly explain instrumental behavior or test the power and accuracy of their explanatory theories because it effectually makes all forms of the explanatory mechanism one in the same. Furthermore, philosophy, psychology, economics, political science, and other social science fields explore and establish the existence of altruism, thereby justifying studying human behavior as driven by an other-serving or self-serving motivation. Accordingly, also in Chapter 2, this project uses rational choice’s approach for investigating behavior motivated by narrow self-interest as a basis for developing an expanded conceptualization of human behavior. The new conceptualization includes both behavior driven primarily by self-interest and behavior driven primarily by an other-serving motivation as distinct types of instrumental behavior.
In Chapter 3, this research turns to evolutionary biology for guidance regarding how to study individual research subjects engaging in goal-oriented behavior that may predominantly serve the subject or serve another. More precisely, this project reviews evolutionary biology’s treatment of altruism, gleaning insight from the field’s conceptualization of social behavior, investigation of altruistic behavior, and ongoing debates regarding how to most appropriately study individuals who are in a somewhat constant struggle to survive. Although this project defines and understands human behavior according to motivation while evolutionary biology uses consequences of behavior for its conceptualization, evolutionary biology provides a parallel method for investigating behavior that is both useful and applicable for this project’s construction of its own research framework.

Shifting direction a bit, Chapters 4, 5, 6, and 7 bring this research out of the ivory tower and into the reality in which members of Congress actually operate. These chapters provide empirical insight into members of Congress and their primary motivations for behavior based on fourteen one-on-one interviews conducted with members of Congress and current or former congressional staff members. Chapter 4 describes the overall interview process, including information on those interviewed and the questions used to guide the conversations. The individual interviews are then reported in Chapters 5 and 6. These chapters provide descriptions of each interview, and an effort was made to keep researcher interpretation of the interviews to a minimum in these chapters. However, sporadic notes regarding how interviewees’ responses speak to certain elements of interest to this research are made within interview reports to help guide readers through the chapters without losing focus on the broader project. Insights from the
interviews are then woven together to produce nine findings in Chapter 7. The findings in Chapter 7 are specific to the fourteen interviews, although they will be used carefully and with the appropriate scope to help create this project’s empirically based method for classification.

Next, the conceptual framework and method for classifying members is constructed in Chapter 8 with the insights, concepts, and approaches used in congressional studies, rational choice research, and evolutionary biology as well as the information gathered from the fourteen interviews. The conceptual framework provides a method for understanding members as somewhat universally struggling to survive their next election, yet still engaging in political social behaviors that may be predominantly motivated to serve others, predominantly driven to serve their political self-interest, or driven simultaneously by an other-serving motivation and their respective reelection needs. The method for classifying members entails placing members in a conceptual space according to their primary motivation for various behaviors, with their final placement within the space indicating their primary motivation type. Thus, the research framework allows scholars to empirically identify members as types of legislators based on their predominantly other-serving motivation (politically altruistic members), predominantly self-serving motivation (politically selfish members), or relatively equal mix of both (politically mutually beneficial members).

Lastly, the concluding chapter assesses the research framework constructed in Chapter 8 for strengths and areas for improvement, names areas of future study, and discusses implications rising from this research. Overall, this project provides a theoretically derived yet empirically based analytical framework to study members of Congress according to their primary motivation
for behavior. By expanding on the current conceptualization of member behavior as effectually
driven universally by narrow self-interest, the framework offered here allows researchers to
channel current knowledge into future studies to refine and improve the field’s understanding of
members of Congress, their behavior, and the First Branch.
Chapter 1

Altruism, Altruism in Congress, and Lack of Altruism in Congressional Studies

The congressional studies field – and political science more broadly – fails to study systematically members driven by the motivation of altruism as a type of legislator, even though congressional scholars acknowledge some members of Congress will disregard or sacrifice their narrow self-interest to serve others. While some congressional studies research does incorporate a motivation beyond narrow self-interest into its analysis, these works either somehow dismiss from their studies a meaningful exploration of a non-self-interested motivation or only provide insight into such motivated members in projects with limited scopes. After first conceptualizing and defining altruism, this project will explore the existence of altruism in Congress by highlighting examples of altruistic members. Next, research within the congressional studies field will be reviewed, with a focus on surveying the field’s treatment of altruism in Congress. Finally, this chapter will discuss the importance of filling this void in congressional studies research.

Altruism Conceptualized and Defined

Due to its central role in this project, the concept of altruism must be explicated and defined. This is no simple task. Although its effects may be very tangible, altruism is intangible, and its definition seems particularly elusive. “Altruism,” as a word, is associated with multiple clusters of concepts (Dixon 2008, 4), which powerfully suggests there most likely is no perfect universal definition of the term. In fact, some argue altruism has one distinct moral meaning used in everyday situations and a different, more technical meaning used in evolutionary biology discussions (see Dawkins 1989, 4; Sober and Wilson 1998, 6-8; Sober 2002; Dawkins 2006,
This project conceptualizes and defines altruism with the definitions, descriptions, insights, and findings from various philosophical and research endeavors. Thus, the conceptualization and explication of altruism here is a refined and coherent presentation of “what we mean when we say ‘altruism’” – fulfilling what Feinberg argues should be the “true goal of conceptual analysis” (Feinberg 1973, 2) – and establishes the conceptual starting point for this project.

Altruism is a self-sacrificing, other-regarding sentiment. The first formal English definition of “altruism” appeared in 1884 in the first publication of the New English Dictionary, which became the Oxford English Dictionary in 1894, as “Devotion to the welfare of others, regard for others, as a principle of action; opposed to egoism or selfishness” (Dixon 2008, 19-22). This secular and sentiment-focused definition aligns closely with what Auguste Comte – the French thinker who coined the word – believed it to mean (Dixon 2008, 4).

Although many understandings of altruism explain it as being the antonym of egoism, altruism is not the exact opposite of egoism. The Oxford English Dictionary defines “egoism” as “Regard to one's own interest, as the supreme guiding principle of action; systematic selfishness” (Oxford English Dictionary Online Edition) Thus, an individual motivated by egoism is one whose actions and attitudes are self-centered and self-serving, regardless of how those actions affect others. While egoism does not require an individual to actually consider the interests of others, altruism is defined by such consideration.

Although egoism and altruism are not exact opposites, the two can be understood as rival passions operating within the human psyche. In fact, Comte conceptualized altruism and egoism as warring sentiments. Comte discussed at length his understanding of human nature (Comte
1858 and 1875-7), ultimately creating a classification scheme that depicts his “Systematic View of the Soul” with a ranked ordering of the “18 internal functions of the brain” (Comte 1875-7, i, opposite 594). His classification shows the altruistic functions to be “higher in dignity” but “lower in energy” than the egoistic functions (Comte 1875-7, i, opposite 594), with Comte referring to altruism’s difficult battle to dominate egoism within one’s psyche as “the great problem of human life” (Comte quoted in Dixon 2008, 52). Adam Smith also saw this struggle within humans, arguing in his *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* the “perfection of human nature” comes from restraining selfish affections and indulging in the benevolent ones (Smith [1759]1982, I.i.5.5).

When victorious in this battle with egoism, altruism may serve as *motivation for behavior* in which an individual promotes another’s interest over his or her own. Behavior resulting from such motivation is altruistic when actors choose to help others benefit even while knowing that doing so will most likely prevent them from benefiting personally. Thus, there are two dimensions to altruistic behavior: the actor is motivated to serve the interests of others over his or her personal interest, and, second, the actor willingly accepts the self-sacrifice most likely required to do so. The accepting of potential sacrifice is an important requirement of altruistic behavior because the sacrifice necessarily places the interests of another ahead of the interests of the individual acting altruistically. Altruistic behavior may be action or inaction, depending on the circumstances surrounding the behavior.

Who ultimately benefits from altruistic behavior – the actor or another – does not indicate whether the behavior was motivated by altruism. Humans often fail to achieve the goals that motivate their actions, but such failure does not change their original intent. Behavior motivated
by altruism is motivated by altruism, regardless of the consequences of such behavior. Therefore, behavior that fulfills both dimensions of altruistic behavior is considered altruistic behavior, even if it does not end up leading to “the good” or results in no actual benefit to others. Altruistic behavior that ultimately hurts others is unfortunate and possibly tragic, but it is altruistic nonetheless.

In the same vein, altruism is not always or necessarily “good.” Although the theoretical concept of altruism is often exalted as the ultimate good or the definitive virtue, altruism can cause pain, burden, and harm to the individual motivated to serve others (Grant 2011) or lead to painful or harmful outcomes inadvertently. Therefore, this research does not need to define “good” in order to discuss or explore “altruism” because the two are not synonymous, the existence of one does not depend on the other, and the degree to which the two are related is contingent on the specific occurrence of altruism.

The motivation for engaging in altruistic behavior is not the “good feelings” that may accompany such behavior. The “good feelings” or subsequent happiness that may result from acting altruistically are a “happy accident.” If such good feelings or happiness are the primary motivation for the action, the individual is acting out of self-interest, and, consequently, is not acting altruistically. Post (2007) refers to these feelings as an “indirect effect” of the altruistic behavior, arguing such a “secondary effect does not constitute motivational selfishness” (3).

Moreover, most people’s happiness does not consist of them making personal sacrifices in order to fulfill an intrinsic need to further the interests of others (see Hill 1993, 9 for this discussion within Kant’s Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals). Rather, an individual has a “natural preference …for his own happiness above other people” (Smith [1759] 1982, II.ii.3.2).
It can, therefore, be expected that an altruistic individual is not always overly pleased with or welcoming of his or her altruism. The self-sacrifice involved in altruism, altruistic behavior, and being an altruistic individual is difficult because it is at odds with what individuals perceive as their own interests. The fact that it is commonplace to see altruistic behavior, yet, at the same time, these commonplace actions are celebrated as “great acts” (Flescher and Worthen 2007, 5-6) suggests the somewhat universal recognition that it is difficult to engage in the self-sacrificing an individual must be prepared to assume when performing altruistic acts. The willingness to sacrifice required of altruistic behavior can be done unhappily or with non-vengeful resentment, as long as the individual voluntarily sacrifices for the benefit of others.

Similarly, an individual does not necessarily need to have compassion or sympathy for others in order to act altruistically. Hill (1993, 1, fn 1) notes one will often act to benefit others because one believes it is the correct way to act. In such situations, altruism serves as a principle for action, motivating individuals to sacrifice their own interests in order to further others’ interests because it is “the right thing to do.” Frequently, those identified as highly altruistic explain they acted altruistically because the situation called for such action (Hallie 1979; Oliner and Oliner 1988; Monroe, Barton, and Klingemann 1990; Monroe 1996). When asked about their altruistic behavior, they frequently responded with answers such as “What else could I do?” (Monroe, Barton, and Klingemann 1990) and stated anyone would have done what they did (Oliner and Oliner 1988; Monroe 1996). It is clear altruism is operating as a principle for action in these situations, creating a duty to act altruistically. Accordingly, those for whom altruism serves as a principle of action are expected to behave altruistically. This is because duty persists
across all situations related to the duty, regardless of how the individual feels about the particulars of the circumstance (Hill 1993, 18).

Because altruism is contingent on one’s willingness to sacrifice, because sacrifice is difficult, and because some sacrifices are more difficult than others, when one engages in altruistic behavior the behavior can be evaluated according to the following maxim: the greater the individual perceives his/her sacrifice to be, the more altruistic the individual’s behavior is understood to be, and the higher the certainty individual is motivated by altruism in the immediate action. Magnitude of sacrifice is not the definitive feature of altruism, especially considering personal sacrifice may be driven by a motivation besides altruism, e.g. spite. Rather, the magnitude of personal sacrifice accepted by an individual in order to serve the interests of others establishes the intensity of the altruistic behavior and the certainty that the individual is motivated by altruism in the immediate action.

When an individual holds the sentiment of altruism or engages in altruistic behavior, the individual is considered to be altruistic. An individual need not be altruistic at all times in order to be altruistic sometimes. However, because altruism seems to dominate egoism much more regularly in certain individuals than others (Flescher and Worthen 2007, 46-7), it seems an inclination towards altruism is typical or normal for certain individuals. Comte noted this in his classification scheme when labeling the three altruism motors and the seven egoism motors as “Propensities, when active; feelings, when passive” (Comte 1875-7, i, opposite 594). As a propensity, altruism appears commonly in an individual as a typical attitude, regularly motivating the individual’s behavior, thereby making altruism a character trait of that individual.
Moreover, when altruism motivates behavior, such behavior may perpetuate and may even “strengthen” the altruistic sentiment and propensity within an individual. This notion rises from looking at people who participate in altruistic activities: Those who perform altruistic acts – such as volunteering – often increase their engagement in altruistic behavior from infrequent and sporadic activities to regular, much more frequently occurring activities (Flescher and Worthen 2007, 46-7, 252-3). Comte would explain such strengthening of altruism with his “Law of Exercise,” which argues the “organs” responsible for both the egoism and altruism functions could be strengthen with regular “exercise” (Dixon 2008, 52).

Finally, some question the possibility of the existence of true altruism because they cannot reconcile their belief that human beings are “rational actors” with the apparent “irrational behavior” of self-sacrifice for no personal gain (Post 2007, 3; see Dawkins 1989; Axelrod 2006). However, the reconciliation is quite simple: Altruistic behavior is not driven by calculated self-interest. This does not mean altruistic individuals are irrational. Rather, it means humans’ tendency towards benevolence is the primary force behind altruistic behavior, not calculations based on self-interest. Although reason is neither the cause nor the motivation for altruism (or egoism, for that matter), reason can “provide guidance to emotional inclinations” so that the benevolent tendency materializes into altruistic behavior (Post 2007, 3).

Hume explains this in “Of the Influencing Motives of the Will” in his A Treatise of Human Nature ([1739-40] 1948, II.iii.3). According to Hume, 1) pleasure and pain come from an individual’s passions, 2) reason provides the individual with knowledge regarding what objects or actions bring pleasure or pain, and 3) the individual’s interests are the realization of pleasure and the avoidance of pain. Thus, by providing knowledge regarding what objects or actions bring
pleasure or pain, reason allows an individual to identify what is in his or her interest. Although reason provides individuals with the knowledge necessary to decipher and pursue their interests, interests are ultimately determined by the individual’s passions because the individual’s passions determine pleasure and pain. Interests are therefore driven by passion, with reason providing the individual with a method for identifying and achieving his or her interest. Accordingly, sacrificing one’s self-interest in order to serve the interests of others is no less reasoned than working to serve one’s self-interest. Both types of behavior require reason because reason is what allows individuals to identify and pursue various interests.

Altruism in Congress

Although Hibbing and Theiss-Morse found the American public “believe[s] members of Congress could be using their power for the good of the country, but instead use if for their own self-interested advantage” (Hibbing and Theiss-Morse 1995, 62), not all members of Congress work primarily to serve their own narrow self-interest. True public servants – those willing to sacrifice the advancement of their own interests in order to protect and further the interest of the people – do serve in “the first branch.” Simply put, there is altruism in Congress.

Congressional scholars and historians extensively document and celebrate individual members of Congress for their strong character and demonstrated ability to make “tough,” principled decisions. Individual members of Congress have been, and mostly likely will continue to be, awarded the prestigious Profiles in Courage award for their “politically courageous leadership” in “do[ing] what is right, rather than what is expedient” and “choos[ing] the public interest over partisanship” (John F. Kennedy Library Foundation). As Caroline Kennedy further explains, the award is given to elected officials who “carry on the tradition” of the eight US
senators her father, President John F. Kennedy, celebrated in his 1956 book, *Profiles in Courage* (Kennedy 2002, 3). She describes this tradition with, “each of these men displayed a rare form of courage, sacrificing their own future, and that of their families, to do what they believed was right for our country” (Kennedy 2002, 3). Since the creation of the award in 1990, ten members of Congress have received it for embodying the tradition (John F. Kennedy Library Foundation).

Yet, congressional scholarship mostly treats such members as commendable and anecdotal outliers, praising them as aberrations to some disappointing norm as opposed to investigating them as part of a larger group of members who are dedicated to serving the public. Bessette contends the “serious lawmaker” – one who prioritizes making good public policy over reelection – is both more prevalent in the modern Congress as well as more influential in policy making than modern theories on Congress acknowledge (Bessette 1994, 140, 150-81).

In addition to the members of Congress given the *Profiles in Courage* award and the US senators in Kennedy’s 1956 book, other famous cases underscore this observation. Senator Frank Graham (D-NC) lost his 1950 primary election for his stance on civil rights, explaining in his final address to the Senate that his loss was because he “took sides in the South and in the nation for the fairer consideration of Jews, Catholics, Negroes, and the foreign born” (quoted in Pleasants and Burns 1990, 227). Senator George W. Norris (R-NE), a Progressive who often acted against his party’s and constituency’s expressed instructions, explained such shirking when writing, “In the end, the only worth-while pay in congressional services is that which comes from a satisfied conscience in the knowledge that you have done your duty as God gives you light, regardless off the effect it may have on your political fortune” (Norris 1945, 198).
More recently, Representative Chris Shays (R-CT) defied the powerful House Republican Party leadership for three Congresses in order to pass the Bi-Partisan Campaign Reform Act (Farrar-Myers and Dwyre 2008), and Senator Russ Feingold (D-WI) boldly ignored his party and constituency when he cast the sole Democratic vote against dismissing the impeachment case against President Bill Clinton before hearing all of the evidence (US Congress 1999). Reflecting on that particular vote, Senator Feingold explained he was determined to keep politics out of his decision, with his oath to uphold the Constitution making him “mindful of the duty we bore to the American people, to the Constitution, and to history” (Feingold 2003, 2). He finished his reflection with, “I have often thought that the very worst job in Washington, D.C. or Wisconsin was answering the phones in my office after I cast that vote” (Feingold 2003, 2).

Representative James Rogan (R-CA) also took a stand for what he believed was right in the impeachment of Clinton, but Rogan lost his next election for doing so. When recounting his decision to vote in favor of impeaching Clinton, Rogan shared, “As a Republican in a heavily Democratic district… I knew voting for the President’s impeachment would jeopardize my reelection. As a former judge and prosecutor, I reviewed the evidence and concluded the president committed perjury and obstructed justice. I voted to impeach him (Frey and Jewett 2009, 25). Rogan was also selected to serve as one of the House Managers who tried the case before the Senate. The concluding paragraph from Rogan’s closing argument further demonstrates his dedication to principle, even while knowing his dedication would most likely lose him his next election:

From the time I was a little boy, it was my dream to one day serve in the Congress of the United States. My dream was fulfilled two years ago. Today, I am a Republican in a district that is heavily Democratic. The pundits keep telling me that my stand on [impeachment] puts my political fortunes in jeopardy. So be it. The revelation produces
from me no flinching. There is a simple reason why: I know that in life, dreams come and dreams go, but conscience is forever. I can live with the concept of not serving in Congress. I cannot live with the idea of remaining in Congress at the expense of doing what I believe to be right. I was about 12 years old when a distinguished member of the Senate, the late Ralph Yarborough, gave me this sage advice about elective office: “Always put principle above politics; put honor above incumbency.” I now return that sentiment to the body from which it came. Hold fast to it, Senators, and in doing so, you will be faithful both to our Founders and to our heirs. (Frey and Jewett 2009, 25-6)

Rogan lost his next election. He reflected on his loss with, “In following his rule I lost my election, but learned I could live quite easily with the concept of no longer serving in Congress. I never could live with the idea of remaining in Congress at the expense of doing what I believe was right” (Frey and Jewett 2009, 26).

Altruism in the Congressional Studies Field

Thus, contrary to conventional opinion, there are members of Congress whose actions seem driven by motivations beyond self-interest narrowly understood. Yet standard political science scholarship on Congress does not seem to study seriously the actions and endurance of these types of public servants in Washington. The field has done very little to systematically investigate the category of legislators who go to Washington to “make a difference” and whose primary purpose of serving the people remains their top priority while in office. Therefore, while this type of member serves in Congress, very little is known about how or why they stay focused on serving others while other members seem to pursue narrow self-interests.

Early studies of Congress focused primarily on the institution’s formal structure and procedures or its legal and/or constitutional powers, often including a normative assessment of Congress’s institutional tendencies and abilities (Polsby and Schickler 2002). Most of these works are descriptive studies in which scholars describe the institution, its official operations,
and its formal, technical processes (Ahuja and Dewhirst 2003; see Wilson 1885; Follett 1896; McConachie 1898). Attempts at explaining congressional behavior looked to formal institutional arrangements and rules for answers (Searing 1991), with very few early studies investigating the human elements of those serving in Congress (Matthews 1960). Accordingly, the early literature does little to explore traits of individual members – such as whether they are personally driven to serve the interests of others or their narrow self-interest – or the actions of individual members.

In the 1950s, with the rise of the behavioral approach within political science, congressional scholars began to shift their focus from the more formal, institutional factors of Congress to its more human features. Their unit of analysis was no longer the legislative body, but now rather the individual behavior, and researchers sought to identify patterns of behavior across individuals and groups (Wahlke 1979). Congressional scholars wanted to explain, not just describe, this behavior (Harris 1967), arguing a member’s individual attitudes and behavior “must be examined in the light of the various social and political systems in which he operates” in order to be explained accurately (Peabody 1969, 4). However, the behaviorist scholars approached members as mere parts of these more significant systems, investigating legislators as members of groups as opposed to distinct individuals and looking to group qualities or traits for explanations for behavior. These studies found members’ behavior as resulting from such social elements as chamber norms (see White 1957; Huitt 1957, 1961; Matthews 1960; Clapp 1963), members’ roles (see White 1957; Huitt 1957, 1961; Matthews 1960; Clapp 1963), and members’ group affiliations (see Truman 1951).

Overall, these studies did not explain or describe behavior as resulting from individual member traits. Instead, behavior was largely determined by the social system in which the
member operated, itself comprised of norms, roles, and informal organizational structure/rules (Searing 1991). When behavioralist scholars did investigate personal attitudes and orientations, they consistently failed to or were unable to connect an individual’s attitude and beliefs to the individual’s subsequent actions (Wahlke 1979). Thus, while behavioralist scholars incorporated individual behavior into their studies, they did not (or could not) explain behavior – either individual or aggregate – as being driven by member motivations.

The next era of congressional research focused on the goal-oriented behavior of individual members (Polsby and Schickler 2002). These scholars, powerfully influenced by economics theories of rationality, began studying members of Congress as purposive actors, or individuals who rationally choose how to act in order to achieve their goals (Shepsle and Weingast 1994). In such rational choice theory approaches, legislative behavior is understood to result from members’ respective reasoned decisions, not formal institutional structures or the social and political system in which the behavior occurs. Studying individual actors and their purposive decisions for action allowed researchers to explain variance in members’ actions according to variance in their motivations. Consequently, scholars were finally incorporating members’ intentions and motivations for action – stated and inferred – into their typologies of and differentiations among types of members and legislative actions.

Studying members of Congress as purposive actors is still the dominant approach in the field. Although the purposive actor studies have the potential and a research approach well-designed for investigating the member who sacrifices furthering his/her self-interest in order to further and protect the interests of others, congressional researchers have still failed to study seriously this type of member and his/her actions. One reason may be that the tacit and resigned
supposition that Congress is filled with, as Mayhew put it, “single-minded seekers of reelection”
looms over most portrayals and explanations of the institution and its members (see Mayhew
1974 for the original argument; see Fiorina 1977 for a more extreme version). While many
scholars seem to allow members of Congress to be driven by goals other than reelection, they
tend to dismiss a serious examination of such other goals, arguing members must be reelected in
order to pursue other goals, and, ceteris paribus, reelection is at least a proximate goal for all
members (see Fenno 1978; Arnold 1990; Cox and McCubbins 1993).

Other scholars have not been so quick to dismiss non-election goals from their studies
(see discussion of these works below). Most projects that study members of Congress as
purposive actors who can have goals beyond serving their own narrowly-defined self-interest or
reelection needs fall into three main groups: 1) research investigating the internal organization of
Congress; 2) research based on a conceptualization of members’ personal goals as fluid and
transient across policy issue areas; and 3) research studying the motives of congressional
candidates. Yet, even these works fail to investigate systematically the actions and perseverance
of the member of Congress primarily driven to serve others.

While there has been a fair amount of research seeking to explain congressional
organization according to members’ purposive actions, five major works that allow for members
to be driven by non-self-interested goals capture the main threads of research in this area. In
Congressmen in Committees (1973), Fenno demonstrates how the variance in members’ personal
dominant goals – either reelection, making good public policy, or gaining personal power in their
chamber – explains how members choose to structure the internal decision-making process of
their respective legislative committees.
Using Fenno’s tripartite arrangement of members’ respective goals, Rohde (1991) argues the structured power-arrangement between party leaders and rank-and-file members in the House is the result of the aggregation of House members’ individual dominant goals and the common need that must be fulfilled in order for all goals to be achieved. When a large enough majority of House members believe they need certain policies enacted to fulfill their personal goals and believe they need someone to crack the party whip in order to get the policies enacted, members willingly change the internal organization of the House and their party to empower party leadership to encourage and/or coerce the party vote necessary for policy passage. However, members are careful not to permanently forfeit their independence to party leaders for fear that doing so could potentially lead to members’ inability to achieve their respective goals. Thus, the organizing power-relationship between party leaders and rank-and-file members is conditional, depending on whether a majority of the members perceive that empowering leaders will help them fulfill their individual goals.

Wawro (2000) also asserts Congress’s internal power hierarchy can be explained by the simple need of all members to create policy in order to fulfill their individual goals. However, Wawro contends passing legislation serves the additional goal all members share to of protecting their institution’s power and legislative prerogative. Therefore, purposive members in Congress structure power within the institution so that a member’s personal goals – whether it be getting reelected, passing good policy, gaining influence within the chamber, furthering his/her political career, or a mixture of these goals – will more likely be achieved if the member fulfills the role of legislative entrepreneur. By using a member’s personal goal to encourage all members to become legislative entrepreneurs, members of Congress are answering their common need to
enact legislation. Doing so universally serves their individual and collective goals, separate from the even further fulfillment of individual goals experienced by the members who actually become legislative entrepreneurs.

Krehbiel (1991) also contends the shared need of all members – regardless of their personal goals – can explain the purposive organization of Congress. Yet, Krehbiel argues this shared need is not the need to pass legislation, but is rather the need to reduce uncertainty regarding the effects of the different policy options they consider. All members need to reduce this uncertainty because all members want to increase the likelihood that their personal policy decisions achieve their respective intended purposes. Krehbiel allows for both self-serving and other-serving members to have the same shared goal of reducing uncertainty with his explanation that individual members’ respective and differing motivations all drive members to work to ensure their policy decisions have the intended result. Yet, Krehbiel does not differentiate between members’ respective and differing motivations. Often called the “informational model,” Krehbiel’s theory argues members will organize their chamber to maximize their ability to reduce uncertainty when creating policy proposals and subsequent policy. Krehbiel uses his information model to explain members’ multiple collective choices regarding chamber organization: they choose a committee system to organize their chamber, they design their committee system to foster policy expertise, and they have established that the norm for making both committee request and committee appointment decisions is to use members’ personal expertise in specific policy areas. Krehbiel contends all of these decisions create an organization designed specifically to reduce uncertainty surrounding the effects of various policy options.
Conversely, Schickler (2001) asserts Congress’s various organizational arrangements over the course of American history result from numerous and shifting confluences of members’ individual goals and interests. He bases his theory of “disjointed pluralism” on the premises that individual members have multiple goals, and that there are always multiple groups within the institution whose members share a common goal that differs from goals held by other groups. According to Schickler, Congress’s internal arrangement at any point in time can be explained by 1) the coalition of multiple groups created to change congressional organization, 2) goals held by the respective groups in each coalition, 3) compromises necessary to build the coalition, and 4) the previous organizational arrangement and its organizing coalition.

While the research that focuses on Congress’s internal organization lends insight into the institution, its members, and its policy outputs, these studies do not investigate members or their actions beyond their choices regarding institutional organization. As a result, they are limited in what they can claim to understand or explain about members working for the interests of others.

A second set of studies allows purposive actors to be driven by something other than reelection or narrowly-defined self-interest by arguing a single member’s goals are unstable across issue areas and policy environments. At the core of these works stands the premise that members are motivated by multiple and contingent goals. This conceptualization of goals, explained particularly well by Hall (1987), is often used by research that explores why, when, and in what capacity members participate in the legislative process (see Hall 1987 and 1996) as well as by studies that examine when members serve as trustee versus instructed-delegate representatives (see Kalt and Zupan 1984; Lascher, Kelman, and Kane 1993; Uslaner 1999; Burden 2007; Burgin 2009). Most of these studies look at members’ work in the legislative
arena, typically investigating members’ individual decisions in specific legislative situations to
determine which goals drive member action under which circumstances.

One of the most significant of these projects is John Kingdon’s *Congressmen’s Voting
Decisions* (3rd ed., 1989). Here Kingdon constructs a “consensus model” that explains how
members vote in Congress. His model shows legislative votes as resulting from members seeking
to align their vote with their immediate policy environment, including the opinion of political
actors the members deem as being the most significant for the specific vote at hand. A member’s
personal goals – which Kingdon asserts is a member-specific combination of satisfying
constituents, gaining intra-Washington influence, and pursuing good public policy – may enter a
member’s decision-making calculus in varying intensities, depending on the vote being
considered.

Studies that operate according to the situational-based conceptualization of goals
data powerfully explicate members’ specific decisions. However, the ontological focus of these
projects is the discrete, often isolated, *decision*, not the individual member. When these works do
include empirics of member traits, the researchers tend to define or categorize members based on
their respective relationships to the characteristics of the immediate decision or issue, such as if
the member has personal experience with the issue being considered (see Burden 2007) or if the
member’s personal position on an issue differs from that held by various constituencies (see
Uslaner 1999). Thus, this research analyzes particular decisions, not individuals, and builds its
theories with policy environment or issue-related factors without differentiating among members
according to their long-term primary goals. Consequently, these studies fail to explain the actions
of members who consistently, although perhaps not constantly, prioritize the needs of others over individual, narrow self-interest.

The final group of studies that allows for members of Congress to be driven by non-self-interested goals focuses on why individuals initially choose to run for Congress. Such a focus would seem to offer rich insights into personal motivations, yet many of these works simply breeze through the assumption that an individual has some sort of motivation for running for Congress before launching into a cost-benefit analysis of the decision to run (Fowler 1993, 60). Typically these studies focus on the political and institutional factors that either encourage or dissuade potential candidates in their decision whether to run for Congress without meaningfully investigating the personal motivation or goal that leads one to even considering running at all (Fowler 1993, 61-2). Even research that directly asks candidates about their personal perceptions of the race and their decision to run often fails to explore candidates’ goals beyond simply winning the election (see Kazee 1980; Fox and Lawless 2004).

Other studies in this research area posit ambition as the motivating factor in an individual’s decision to run for Congress. These works examine the varying intensities of potential candidates’ ambition to serve in Congress, the impact such ambition has on the decision to run, and, often, the effects candidate ambition has on a candidate’s election outcome (see Fowler and McClure 1989; Ehrenhalt 1991; Fulton et al. 2006; Maestas et al. 2006). Even here, however, most of the research fails to consider seriously why candidates have the ambition to serve. If these studies address personal goals or motivations to serve, they are considered incidental to, yet relatively insignificant in one’s decision to run (see Fowler and McClure 1989) or are treated as if all types of goals are equally significant in such a decision (see Maestas et al.
2006). Within these studies, a candidate’s ambition to serve becomes a factor that varies according to intensity, not according to a candidate’s reason for running for Congress. Consequently, these works do not incorporate into their studies whether individual candidates are seeking office to serve their own interests or to serve others. Moreover, save for Ehrenhalt (1991) and Canon (1990), most of these studies cannot explain members of Congress who are driven primarily to serve others because these works do not investigate candidates after they are elected.

Ehrenhalt (1991) does continue his study of legislators after they win their elections, but ultimately argues, once elected, legislators will prioritize their reelection needs over serving others. Basing his argument on intensive case studies that follow different legislators at varying points in their respective legislative careers, Ehrenhalt contends almost all people who run for and serve in Congress1 “want to devote most of their waking hours to politics” (14) and believe government is an effective tool for bettering society and improving people’s lives (20-1). However, he then explains members rarely sacrifice their careers to fulfill such goals, and instead portrays members of Congress as the victim-heroes of the tragedy that is American politics: members may want to improve society, yet cannot enact important policy that the public opposes lest they get voted out of office. When forced to choose, most members opt to secure their reelection rather than go down as noble failures. In the end, then, Ehrenhalt too casts legislators as reelection seekers, failing to explain members of Congress who sacrifice their self-interest to serve the interests of others.

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1 Ehrenhalt’s theory applies to members of all professional legislatures in the US, including professional state legislatures.
Conversely, Canon (1990) argues different candidates and subsequent members have varied types of goals which powerfully shape members’ actions. Basing his study on “amateur” members of Congress – those serving their first term in the institution – Canon shows amateurs and their actions can be categorized according to the member’s primary goal: establishing a long-term political career (Canon’s “ambitious amateur”), creating good public policy (the “policy amateur”), winning/maintaining a seat for their party (the “hopeless amateur”), or getting the thrill from the competition in the campaign (also the “hopeless amateur”). While Canon contends amateurs, their campaigns, and their actions while serving can be understood according to his typology, he does not carry this line of investigation beyond first term members. Rather, he assumes most non-freshmen “will evolve through predictable stages from dominant concern with reelection to interest in institutional positions of power” (157), and only looks at non-freshmen in the aggregate to demonstrate their difference with various amateurs. Thus, while Canon systematically studies amateur members of Congress according to their goal types and prioritizations, he fails to extend his investigation to members who serve more than one term.

As the above review of the congressional studies literature shows, congressional scholars have not investigated meaningfully or systematically members of Congress motivated primarily to serve others. The more recent scholarship that examines members and their behavior as purposive allows researchers to study members based on motivation type, but most of this research assumes members are driven by reelection or other forms of narrow self-interest. The works which do incorporate a non-self-interested motivation into their projects either have a scope which limits the extent to which the project’s insights and findings can be used to study
members of Congress, or the works dismiss from their studies any real exploration of differing motivations and their consequences for behavior.

The Importance of Studying Altruistic Members and Altruism in Congress

Even as scholars openly acknowledge inaccuracy in their representation of all members of Congress as being principally self-serving, the field overall still bases a fair amount of its work on the assumption that members will, unquestionably, prioritize their own narrowly-understood interests over the interests of others. The research that does study members as sometimes driven by a motivation to serve others only contributes to the field’s understanding of such other-serving members in a limited and piecemeal fashion. Thus, while some members of Congress sacrifice their narrow self-interest to serve others or a broader public interest as they define it, little research systematically studies this type of member. As a result, scholars and citizens are left with an incomplete and, I would argue, incorrect or only partial understanding of the realities of the institution and those who operate within it.

To help its research provide more complete understandings and explanations of members of Congress and congressional action, the congressional studies field must take seriously the member who prioritizes some notion of serving others over serving his/her individual self-interest. Although some members of Congress may be motivated predominantly by narrow self-interest, assuming all members are driven by this motivation and then treating members accordingly has real consequences for research within the congressional studies field. First, by limiting the explanatory factor in their research – explaining purposive behavior with the single motive of narrow self-interest – yet effectually extending it through assumption to all members analyzed in their studies, congressional scholars are limiting their ability to provide holistic
understandings of Congress and its members. Second, by neither empirically establishing the presence of the narrowly self-interested motivation nor distinguishing narrow self-interest from other motivations for behavior, researchers may be producing less than accurate explanations for member behavior. This project produces a conceptual framework and process for empirically detecting a member’s motivation, thereby providing scholars with a research tool for establishing, distinguishing, and removing the limitations from their explanatory factor.

This project also creates an empirically based method for classifying members as types of legislators according to their primary motivation for behavior. In doing so, it offers scholars a research means for extending the exploration of the effects of various motivations beyond the relatively narrow scopes of the research project that do use different types of motivation to explain different member behavior. Accordingly, this project’s research framework can be used to generate fuller and perhaps more accurate understandings of members of Congress and their behavior.

Beyond furthering the field’s effort to produce research with powerful theories and explanations of empirical phenomena (see Binder’s 2015 call for such research among legislative scholars in volume 40, number 1 of Legislative Studies Quarterly), citizens and congressional scholars alike need this fuller understanding of Congress and its members, one that includes the presence of principled representatives driven to serve others. This shared need rises from the reality that the distrust or lack of trust that accompanies the public perception that government officials are working primarily to further their narrow self-interest impacts federal policy as well as the policy process. The general demand for “government in sunshine” seen in the U.S. in the 1960s and 1970s – a demand at least partially stemming from the rising distrust in government
during this time – has negatively impacted Congress’ ability to deliberate seriously the best method for promoting and protecting the public’s interests (Bessette 1994). Additionally, Americans’ broad lack of trust in government has led to dramatic cutbacks in or the elimination of federal programs aimed at helping the poor and sick (Hetherington, 2005). Although some citizens may believe wholeheartedly such programs should not exist, the decision to reduce or eliminate these programs should be based on citizens’ political opinions, not misinformation or only a partial understanding of their elected officials and officials’ behavior.

Citizens’ distrust or lack of trust in members of Congress more specifically also affects members’ ability to create policy they believe will best serve the public interest. For example, Fenno (1978) contends citizens must trust Congress in order to be willing to make the personal economic sacrifices necessary for Congress to make sound and economically responsible policy. In fact, Americans’ perception of members of Congress as motivated predominantly by their narrow self-interest has led to Americans turning to judges to make policy in certain policy realms. As Waldron (2003) shows, the American people want policies regarding rights and morality to be made by judges because Americans perceive judges as operating in a “forum of principle”\(^\text{2}\) as opposed to the corrupt, disingenuous, and deceit-driven land of the legislator (Waldron 2003).

Furthermore, the distrust or lack of trust in government officials perpetuates itself with a growing intensity: when citizens distrust government officials, they are likely to increasingly interpret the actions of officials as being suspicious and increasingly determine officials are performing at unsatisfactory levels (Levi and Stoker 2000). Thus, the perception that all

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\(^2\) The phrase is Dworkin’s, which he originally used to refer to the US Supreme Court in his 1985 *A Matter of Principle*. The finding that Americans want the courts to decide issues of rights and morality comes from Waldron (2003), not Dworkin, and is cited accordingly.
members of Congress are solely and universally motivated to serve their narrow self-interest must be reassessed and, if and when appropriate, rectified in order to prevent public misperception from unsuitably affecting public policy and the policy process.

Therefore, congressional scholars must begin to investigate empirically members’ respective motivations and must allow for the potential of altruism in Congress. This requires research projects to include an empirical examination and the conceptual possibilities of altruism existing regularly in Congress, of altruism affecting member behavior and congressional action, and of the altruistic member of Congress type serving alongside their more self-interested colleagues. This project’s conceptual framework and method for classifying members provides scholars with the research tool critical for such studies.

*The Rational Next Step*

Overall, the works within the congressional studies field that provide insight into studying members of Congress as altruistic individuals do so in a limited and largely fragmented manner. Yet, their conceptual approach for studying member of Congress as purposive actors – individuals motivated in their behavior by goals – provides a basic research orientation that may be used to analyze members and explain their behavior as motivated by altruism. The approach is more fully developed by rational choice scholars, and, consequently, is where this project turns next.
Chapter 2

Allowing for Altruism

In order to investigate the altruistic member of Congress, behavior must first be reconceptualized within research approaches to allow for members motivated to serve others. The rational choice approach currently dominates political science studies of individual actors’ respective motivations for purposive behavior and does not adequately afford for a systematic study of behavior driven by an intention to serve others. Nonetheless, the rational choice approach provides a solid foundation and useful methodological tools for constructing an expanded conceptualization of human motivation and behavior, one that allows for altruism.

Purposive Behavior, Rational Choice, and Self-Interest

At its most basic level, the study of purposive behavior investigates the intentional choices and actions of individuals, identifying an individual’s intent or motivation for behavior as the ultimate causal mechanism. A foundational assumption often underlying such research is that individuals act in their perceived self-interest, narrowly understood (Etzioni 1988, ch. 1 and ch. 2). The drive to serve one’s self-interest has been the explanatory mechanism for a majority of recent behavioral research in numerous fields, including evolutionary biology, economics, and political science (Murphy 1996). The motivation of self-interest is often taken as a given (Sober and Wilson 1998, 275), with research rising from the observation of the puzzling phenomena comprised of individuals appearing to act against their self-interest (see Tsebelis 1990). Due to the general acceptance of the self-interested actor, those claiming that individuals can and do work to serve the interests of others are typically assigned the proverbial burden of proof.
(Friedman laments this trend 1996, 2-3; for an example, see Chong’s treatment of claims of other-serving behavior, 1996, 46).

Within the social sciences, the rational choice approach or paradigm currently dominates research analyzing the intentional behavior of individuals, with the self-interested individual serving as the crux for most of these projects (Lane 1996; Amadae and Bueno de Mesquita 1999). The rational choice paradigm is not based on a single theory, but is a “body of ideas” (Kelley 1996, 96) underlying and built upon the “rational actor,” a concept of the individual human engaging in purposive behavior. Implicit in the understanding of purposive behavior is the understanding that the rational actor has an “instrumental rationality,” meaning humans engage in a behavior or take action to achieve some sort of objective, with the action or behavior not having a value in and of itself (Chong 1996, 39). Beyond the belief in instrumental rationality and a few operational assumptions, researchers working within the rational choice paradigm agree on very little. As Morris Fiorina, a prominent political scientist who uses the rational choice approach, says about the rational choice community, “I suspect the only thing that all RC people would agree upon is that their explanations presume that individuals behave purposively. Beyond that, every manner of disagreement – theoretical, substantive, methodological – can be found” (1996, 87).

Lichbach briefly presents the few agreed upon assumptions that define the rational actor with, “First, actions are purposeful behavior directed towards attainment of a goal. Second, there is a choice, so rational actors choose their strategies and tactics from among a repertoire of available alternatives. Third, given their situation, agents “quest for the best,” their optimization or maximization problem being to choose the most desirable alternative available” (2003, 38, 43).
original emphasis). Operating according to these assumptions, social science researchers employing a rational choice approach vary in their incorporation of factors that influence or constrain an individual’s decisions and actions. Lichbach explains the range of rational choice scholars as falling on a continuum between extremes: “Thin” rationalists “see reasons as causes,” analyze individuals as if they have perfect information, and tend to treat temperament and culture as superfluous factors due to their idiosyncratic nature, while “thick” rationalists expand their approach by “deepening the micro” to include culture, institutions, and decision rules as opportunities and constraints on the individual’s preferences, choices, and understood realistic actions (2003, 21).

To be clear, the rational choice approach, in its broadest form, does not require individuals to act solely, or even principally, to serve their respective self-interests. As a decision-making heuristic, the rational choice approach requires only that people have preferences, that their preferences are minimally coherent, and that they make decisions according to their preferences (Binmore 2009, ch. 1), thereby removing type of motivation from investigation all together. Some researchers employ this broad approach to rationality, either ignoring the difference between or conflating the self-serving and other-serving motivation into a single, nebulous “interest,” often in the name of creating parsimonious theories or maintaining empirical tractability (Green and Shapiro 1994, 17).

Other researchers allow self-interested and other-interested motivations to explain behavior by incorporating both into their studies. These works, however, typically present the motivation to serve others as a proximate motivation for behavior, with self-interest latently driving the motivation to serve others. This turns serving others into a means of serving an
ultimate self-interested end. The distinction between proximate and ultimate motivation plays a critical role in these explanations for human behavior as well as in biological explorations of adaptation-driven evolution. Proximate motivation or causes are those that provide an immediate explanation for the phenomenon, trait, or behavior under investigation, while ultimate motivation or causes are those that account for the proximate motivation/cause. Sober and Wilson (1998) use the example of an ivy plant growing towards light to illustrate this idea: “Why do present day ivy plants grow towards the light?... [B]ecause they contain internal mechanisms that make them do so. A second answer traces the behavior back to still earlier facts about the organisms’ phylogeny; ivy plants now grow towards the light because natural selection favored this behavior in their ancestors.” (199-200). In this example, the plant’s internal, light-seeking mechanism is the proximate cause for ivy plants growing towards light, while natural selection, causing the proximate cause, is the ultimate cause at work. The ultimate cause and the proximate cause both contribute to the phenomenon being studied, but the ultimate cause is recognized as being the “real” influential force or more absolute explanatory factor. Causal relationships that include both ultimate and proximate causes are understood as a “three-step causal chain” (Sober and Wilson 1998, 200) of: ultimate cause $\rightarrow$ proximate cause $\rightarrow$ phenomenon being explained. Accordingly, research that asserts self-interest drives the motivation to serve others identifies self-interest as the stronger, underlying, “real” motivation at work.

For example, Barreto (2009) persuasively demonstrates that individuals engage in personally costly behavior to serve their nation – including sacrificing one’s life – to attain the nontangible or emotional personal benefits of honor, pride, and shame avoidance. For Barreto, individuals’ proximate motivation to serve the nation is driven by a powerful, ultimate self-
serving motivation. In fact, most social science or humanities theories that investigate the existence or evolution of altruism in human societies assert that altruism results from cultural pressures or group norms that persuade or coerce the individual to do what is best for the community, if not the individual (Sober and Wilson 1998; Boehm 2012). In such explanations, altruism arose from social orders that made other-serving behavior in an individual’s social or legal personal best interest to do so.

Clearly there is a difference between a motivation to serve others that is driven by blatant and conscious self-interest and a motivation to serve others encouraged by norms or societal rules that teach individuals they should further the interests of others. The latter motivation could be understood as genuinely other-serving, insofar as the individual is not intentionally working to further his/her own interests when following the other-serving norm. However, when rational choice scholars investigate individuals operating according to norms or other societal rules, they tend to depict norm/rule adherence as being driven by self-interest in some way, incorporate norms/rules as simply shaping an individual’s self-serving preferences, or remove the individual’s ability to actually choose to follow or ignore norms/rules (Yee 1997). The latter treatment entails scholars using norms/rules to construct the opportunities or constraints present in an actor’s decision-making environment, thereby effectually eliminating the potential for an actor to choose whether or not to obey the norm/rule (Yee 1997, 1009). By removing an individual’s choice to adhere to norms/rules that encourage other-serving behavior, rational choice scholars are also removing an individual’s ability to be motivated to serve the interests of others – one is not following the norm/rule in order to serve another’s interest, but is rather following the norm/rule in order to obey the norm/rule.
Furthermore, rational choice scholars have argued that even if individuals do not consciously or deliberately calculate the benefit of adopting certain societal values and norms, such adoption can be driven by an individual’s self-interest because “they are likely to see that they have an interest in conforming to group norms, because conformity can be a value in itself” (Chong 1996, 56-7). Treating self-interest or adherence to norms as the driving force for behavior does not necessarily make these explanations incorrect or inaccurate, but it does remove serving others as the motivating factor – and, thus, the causal mechanism – behind the purposive behavior under investigation.

Therefore, while the rational choice approach does not require individuals to be solely self-interested, most rational choice theories describe individuals as either being driven by a non-descript “preference” or ultimately driven by self-interest. Moreover, when researchers attempt to test their theories empirically, preference is typically operationalized into a self-interested goal. Thus, most research within the rational choice approach is built on a de facto assumption of individual self-interest, even if it does not require such an assumption. Munger (2011) illustrates this propensity when discussing how scholars using the rational choice approach to study political or collective-choice phenomena – the so-called the public choice school – “really” treat the motivation of individual actors. Munger first reviews the ongoing debate about the self-interested assumption, making clear that self-interest is not required by public choice theory (PCT) and that models operating according to the assumption of the self-interested individual are only one type of model allowed by PCT. He then, rather bluntly, states, “The sketch of the PCT that I have given suggests that it is one basis for theorizing, and that there are others. But that’s not really true. PCT is quite single-minded in its insistence on narrow egoism” (2011, 344).
Contributions and Critiques of Rational Choice

Although there are others (see Tsebelis 1990, ch. 2; Kelley 1996; Levi 1997; Lichbach and Zuckerman 1997; Amadae and Bueno de Mesquita 1999, 283-9), the contribution of the rational choice approach most pertinent here is its ability to sort and order the dense and otherwise chaotic world surrounding humans with an individual human ordering principle. The ordering principle is: humans will behave according to their respective goals and the perceived costs and benefits associated with each goal, ultimately choosing to act in such a way that allows them to achieve their highest priority goal at the lowest cost. This ordering principle provides a general understanding of human behavior that may be able to explain the purposive decisions or intentional actions of most people, most of the time, while still allowing the individual human to maintain a degree of individuality. Tsebelis discusses this strength of rational choice, calling it “interchangeability of individuals,” noting that this allows researchers to study human behavior in a variety of settings and to explain behavior as logically resulting from the particular context in which the actor operates (1990, 43-7).

The rational choice approach is not without its critics (see Green and Shapiro 1994, 5-6; Amadae and Bueno de Mesquita 1999, 291-2; Lichbach 2003, preface). Although some of the critiques of, concerns with, and outright attacks on rational choice have more merit than others, this project is concerned most with the limiting nature of the self-interested motivation assumption. This research accepts the usefulness of rational choice in explaining self-interested behavior. However, to base behavioral research on the assumption that individuals always, or even primarily, act in their self-interest potentially limits the scope and accuracy of the potential explanations. Friedman (1996) expresses a similar concern in his introduction to an edited
volume of rejoinder essays to Green and Shapiro’s 1994 critique of rational choice. When discussing researchers’ tendencies to use the self-interested or other-interested assumption to explain all behavior, Friedman asserts, “It would be foolish to deny the possibility that public choice theory will be applicable in a given instance, but it is equally unwise to assert in advance that is must apply in all cases merely because it applies in some” (1996, 4, original emphasis).

Furthermore, to the extent that individuals act to serve the interests of others, this assumption necessarily limits the scope and accuracy of explanations. Perhaps this is why Olson – in his *The Logic of Collective Action*, one of the most formative works in the rational choice paradigm – states that his theory, “is not at all sufficient where philanthropic lobbies, that is, lobbies that voice concern about some group other than the group that supports the lobby,… are concerned (1965, 160).

**Serving Others**

In order for the self-interested assumption to limit rational choice, humans must, in fact, be motivated to serve the interest of others, at least some of the time. Western philosophers, psychologists, and social scientists have worked to demonstrate and explain how humans both can be and are regularly driven to serve the interests of others.

Western philosophers have explored human motivation for behavior along two main lines, either considering human nature and its capacity to serve others or discussing the moral or normative requirements of self-serving versus other-serving behavior. Not immediately concerned with how people should behave, this research will review the key western thought on the human capacity to be driven to serve others. A large portion of western philosophy posits
that humans are only driven to serve their own interests – an argument fairly similar to some rational choice explanations – and that serving others is ultimately driven by self-interest (see Batson 1991, ch. 2). However, other western thinkers contend that humans are not universally self-interested and can, in fact, be motivated to serve others independent of their individual self-interest.

Auguste Comte – the French thinker who coined the word “altruism” – grappled, at length, with understanding human nature (see Comte 1858 and 1875-7). He described altruism as a sentiment that focuses on the welfare of others, juxtaposing this other-regarding sentiment with egoism (Dixon 2008, 4). Although not behaviors, Comte believed that the sentiments of altruism and egoism drove human behavior, and they played critical roles in his explanation of human nature, which he called his “Systematic View of the Soul” (Comte 1875-7). This classification scheme divided Comte’s named 18 internal functions of the brain into the two categories of altruistic and egoistic functions (Comte 1875-7, i, opposite 594), thereby asserting that the motivation to serve others and to serve one’s self are both innate to humans and distinct from each other.

Hume also saw the drive to serve others and the drive to serve one’s self as separate entities present in human nature, at times explicitly arguing against the notion that self-interest motivates other-serving behavior. In Of the Dignity or Meanness of Human Nature, Hume directly attacks the contention that humans only serve others because they derive some sort of pleasure from doing so ([1741-2]1946, 155-6). Hume declares that humans can only feel pleasure when serving others because they genuinely care about the interests of others. Such pleasure results from human’s other-regarding sentiments (love of or a sense of friendship with others);
such pleasure cannot cause the *friendship or love that is an antecedent of the pleasure*. Hume uses a different tactic to dismantle the universal self-interest argument in *Of Self-Love*. Here Hume asks that one simply use one’s common sense and human experience: “To the most careless observer there appear to be such dispositions as benevolence and generosity; such affections as love, friendship, compassion, and gratitude” ([1751]1946, 140).

Other philosophers have concentrated on the relationship between an individual and others when arguing against the universal self-interest claim. Taking on Kant, Blum (1980) asserts that the motivation to further the interests of another does, and should, flow from an individual’s personal relationship with that other. This does not mean, however, that furthering the interests of others is ultimately driven by self-interest, in either the relationship or pleasure derived from helping a friend. According to Blum (1980), “Caring for a close friend is not a form of extended self-interest but (in healthy relationships) involves an appreciation of the other in his separateness from oneself” (5, original parenthetical expression). Nagel (1970) also contends that an individual’s perceived separateness plays a significant role in one’s ability to be driven to serve others, but he asserts that it is human’s rationality and objectivity that allows for a genuine other-serving motivation. According to Nagel, by understanding others as separate but equal to one’s self, and when approaching situations objectively (without passion or desire), humans *will* rationally choose to help others when there is no perception of a resulting personal benefit (and no perceived reason *not* to help).

The philosophical beliefs and theories regarding other-serving behavior are critical for conceptualizing self-serving and other-serving motivations as well as building logical arguments about what is possible. However, current research parameters typically also require empirical
“evidence” to “prove” the existence of an entity or phenomenon. Scholars working in psychology and sociology have investigated empirically the motivation to serve others, demonstrating its existence in both extreme and more mundane form.

Monroe’s research on those who rescued Jews in Nazi Europe (Monroe, Barton, and Klingemann 1990; Monroe 1996) and philanthropists and other “heroes” (Monroe 1996) concentrates on both understanding and explaining other-serving behavior. Monroe and her collaborators conclude that these individuals were genuinely motivated to serve others, making clear that they did not perceive the possibility of or consider any self-benefit associated with their other-serving behavior. Many of the interview subjects answered questions regarding why they were willing to sacrifice so much in order to help others with responses such as, “What else could I do?” (Monroe, Barton, and Klingemann 1990), indicating a sort of submission of self to the situation. Oliner and Oliner (1988) also investigated those who rescued Jews in Nazi Europe, and they find that most (roughly seventy percent) felt more responsible “for the welfare of others, including those outside their immediate familiar or communal circles” (249) than those who chose not to participate in rescue behavior. Thus, the other-serving behavior Oliner and Oliner studied seems to rise from a sense of being responsible for the welfare of others regardless of – or even in spite of – the actor knowing of the extremely high personal cost potentially associated with the behavior.

Moreover, such behavior did not seem to be taken for the emotional or other self-regarding satisfaction of fulfilling this responsibility. In reviewing her earlier study of the rescuers, Monroe states clearly, “[T]he rescuers risked their lives and those of their families to save strangers. They did not pursue their own self-interest. Nor did psychic gratification serve to
disguise a thinly veiled self-interest. Honor or praise were not sought, and despite the fact that their actions were well documented by others, all the rescuers minimized their actions” (1991, 83-4). She continues, “The existence of such altruistic behavior, no matter how rare empirically, poses a significant theoretical challenge to any theory founded on self-interest” (1991, 84).

Instead of exploring understood heroic behavior or other forms of relatively rare and acute other-serving actions, Batson’s work centers on the motivation to serve others as he believes most people experience it in their everyday lives (1991 and 2011). Batson answers The Altruism Question – if humans can be driven to serve others without expecting some sort of personal benefit – with a “yes” after reviewing and performing social-psychological laboratory experiments (1991). Here Batson demonstrates a powerful link between a human’s empathy for a person and a resulting altruistic motivation to help, a connection Batson further analyzes in his 2011 work, Altruism in Humans. In Altruism in Humans, Batson again uses social-psychological laboratory experiments to support his argument that an altruistic motivation can exist and “is neither exceptional nor unnatural. Rather,…altruism is a motivational state that virtually all of us frequently visit” (2011, 4).

Especially significant for this project, researchers have also demonstrated that individuals can and do work to further the interests of others in the economic and political realm, as opposed to reserving altruism and other-serving behavior for their personal sphere. Before proposing a method for incorporating morality into decision-making models, Etzioni (1988) reviews economics studies that show people frequently make economic decisions based on factors other than a narrowly-defined self-interest. Looking at analyses of people’s saving behaviors, willingness to take on consumer debt, and firms’/executives’ complex array of goals, Etzioni
demonstrates that economic actors regularly act “unselfishly” (see ch. 4 for a fuller review). He cites a finding particularly useful for this project with: “Phelps (1975, 5) notes that in the same world in which people sell unsafe products, gouge, and short-weigh, one also finds ‘the prevalence of altruistic behavior: a producer may advertise his product truthfully when he need not, a labor union may refrain from breaking the law when it could do so for gain,…a benevolent butcher may abstain from short-weighing’” (55). It should be noted that research in economics, including that reviewed by Etzioni, tends to focus much more on behavior than on motivation for behavior, with research often implying or inferring motivation from behavior. This being said, the significance of other-serving behavior in the economic arena allows for a reasoned inference that something beyond self-interest just may be at work. To the extent that researchers want to understand and explain behavior as accurately as possible, they must take seriously the clear possibility of a motivation to serve others illuminated by these works in the economics discipline.

Shifting from behavior to motivation and economics to politics, Lewin (1991) provides empirical evidence that individuals in the political world are not driven principally to serve their own interests and are often motivated to serve the interests of others. He starts by showing that voters in the United States, Western Europe, Canada, and Japan are not always primarily guided by self-interest, but rather regularly cast economy-based votes according to what they think is best for their country, even if it is at odds with their personal economic interests (ch. 2). Years earlier, Tullock (1984) stated that some citizens will vote to further the public interest over their own because most people are somewhat motivated to help others. However, Tullock as unwilling to disagree with the classic assumption that individuals will vote primarily to serve their
respective self-interest. Lewin has no such reticence, stating, “The extensive empirical material…makes it impossible to uphold the first assumption of the public choice school that voters are primarily guided by self-interest” (59).

Lewin also takes on the hypothesis that bureaucrats maximize budgets to serve their individual self-interest (1991, ch. 4). Although his evidence does not decisively demonstrate bureaucrats’ motivation for behavior, Lewin does persuasively argue that they are not driven primarily to maximize budgets or predominantly by self-interest. Thus, Lewin establishes there is something besides narrow self-interest motivating bureaucratic behavior, leaving the door open for plausible and likely other-interested explanations. Munger (2011) walks through that door when defending his field’s treatment of bureaucrats’ budget maximization against Lewin’s assessment. After referring to Niskanen’s explanation for how bureaucrats dedicated to serving the public can easily maximize budgets in the name of the public interest (see Niskanen 1971, 39), Munger then provides his own creditable and logical explanation that bureaucrats could be driven entirely by a motivation to serve others and still actively maximize their budgets (352-3). Thus, although Munger and Niskanen ultimately treat bureaucrats as if they were driven primarily by self-interest, they and Lewin agree that nothing about bureaucrats’ behavior must be explained according to self-interest. Moreover, each scholar develops his own alternate and plausible account of such behavior being driven by the motivation to serve the public interest.

Finally, the cases presented in this project’s first chapter demonstrate that members of Congress are, at times, driven to serve the interests of others. Taken together, the insights and findings of western philosophers, psychologists, and social scientists provide theoretical and empirical grounds for contending that humans sometimes are motivated to serve others.
Consequently, insofar as behavior is understood and explained as being driven by a motivation, the conceptualization of intentional human behavior must be expanded to include behavior taken to serve the interests of others as well as one’s self.

*Intentional Expansion: The Extra-Rational*

Because this project seeks to investigate human behavior according to motivation, it will focus on “intentional behavior,” allowing for other types of behavior to exist beyond the scope of the project. Explanations of social and political phenomena based on the intentional behavior of individuals “are privileged in the social sciences” (Ferejohn and Satz 1996, 74), and by making intentional behavior the subject of inquiry, this project can contribute to important discussions about these “intentional explanations.”

Intentional behavior will be defined by the type of motivation driving the behavior. Psychological research is currently working to better understand the complex relationship between intention and behavior, but has demonstrated that conscious thought powerfully influences behavior (Baumeister, Masicampo, and Vohs 2011) and that people’s purposeful behavior typically aligns with their intentions (Ajzen 2005). Therefore, examining purposeful behavior according to intent and motive is both warranted and appropriate.

Intentional behavior is action or inaction purposefully chosen by an actor in an effort to realize a particular goal. Research employing the rational choice approach also investigates this type of behavior, with such behavior defining the “instrumental” part of an actor’s rationality. Physical/emotive (re)actions – such as jumping up and down with delight – are not included in the category of intentional behavior unless the actor deliberately engages in the behavior for a
specific goal – such as purposefully signaling to an observer that s/he is delighted. Additionally, decisions or actions taken when the individual does not care about the consequences – such as choosing between two equally favored restaurants for dinner – are not considered intentional behaviors here. Because the goal in the example is to eat dinner, the actor sees no real difference in the achievement of the goal when comparing the respective consequences of each choice. Either way, s/he gets to eat. Thus, choosing the restaurant is not considered an intentional behavior. Behavior that is not performed in an effort to realize a particular goal will be referred to as extemporaneous behavior, thereby encompassing both physical/emotive (re)actions and decisions or actions made with no real regard for the associated consequences.

Intentional behavior can be further defined based on the type of motivation driving the behavior. Here intentional behavior is subdivided into two categories: behavior taken to serve one’s self-interest and behavior taken to serve the interests of others. Behavior taken to serve one’s self-interest will be referred to as “rational,” and actors engaging in such behavior will be understood according to the broadest operating rules of the rational choice approach: individuals act to achieve a self-interested goal at a minimum perceived cost to themselves. Intentional behavior taken to serve the interests of others will be referred to as “extra-rational.” Extra-rational behavior shares the intentional nature of rational behavior – individuals acting to achieve a goal – but is extra-rational in that the goal is motivated to serve others, thereby the actor accepts or disregards a perceived personal cost.

The key factor distinguishing type of behavior here is primary motivation. Thus, behavior that may prove beneficial to both the actor and others could be rational, extra-rational, or extemporaneous, depending on the actor’s motivation or intent (or lack thereof). Additionally,
even if actors perceive a personal benefit potential resulting from the behavior, as long as their principal motivation is to serve others, the behavior should be considered extra-rational. Therefore, this project conceptualizes all human behavior as being either intentional or extemporaneous, with intentional behavior being either rational or extra-rational. Simply put, behavior is understood as:

Rational or Extra-Rational or Extemporaneous.

*Justifying Intentional Expansion*

At its most basic level, the conceptualization of behavior used here is an expansion of rational choice’s operating approach to behavior. Similar to the rational choice approach, this project focuses on purposive or intentional behavior, acknowledging the existence of extemporaneous decisions or actions, but effectually dismissing them from investigation. Although people engage in non-instrumental behavior (Abelson 1996), this project will not study intentional behavior by focusing on the unintentional. This research agrees with the tacit assumption of rational choice that intention or motivation causes purposive behavior, but bases its agreement on the psychological research cited above. Also similar to the rational choice approach, the conceptualization of behavior used here understands actors engaging in intentional behavior as working to achieve a goal, and thus actors make decisions and choose behavior based on their perspectives and beliefs regarding how to effectively realize their respective goals. Finally, this project augments the rational choice position that all behavior is essentially motivated by self-interest by creating a second category of intentional behavior: the extra-rational.
This research developed and uses the expanded conceptualization of behavior because it 1) allows individuals to be motivated to serve themselves or serve others, 2) provides a foundation upon which testable and explanatory theories can be built, 3) is appropriate for studying members of Congress, and 4) encourages the testing of its enabled theories against previously existing theories. Thus, this conceptualization of behavior provides the basis essential for creating a useful framework for studying members of Congress according to their respective types of behavioral motivations.

Some may argue that the rational choice approach already allows individuals to be motivated to serve others, and, therefore, this expansion is neither necessary nor consequential. Separate from the above demonstration that rational choice does not, in fact, permit other-serving motivation to enter research in a real way, creating two distinct categories of motivation is critical for all rational choice projects that understand or explain behavior based on actors’ type of motivation. Instead of conflating the motivation of self-interest with the motivation to serve others, differentiating between these types of motivations allows both to exist discretely and independently of each other. By erasing the line between the motivation to serve others and the motivation to serve one’s self, researchers are effectually eliminating the ability of either motivation to truly explain behavior. Insofar as researchers want to understand behavior according to motivation, the distinguishing features of motivation must be kept intact.

Additionally, this expansion makes possible the development of testable theories. Theories can become empirically untestable if researchers do not keep the defining features of their explanatory concepts distinct from similar, but non-explanatory concepts. Olson (1965) argues against combining or interchanging the motivation to serve one’s self and the motivation
to serve others – even if theories are broad enough to allow it – for just this reason (160, fn 91). This expansion provides both those studying self-interested and those studying other-interested behavior with a firmer grasp on their theoretical causal mechanisms.

Furthermore, the manner in which this conceptualization of behavior was built encourages its use in the development of sound explanatory theories. After stating that economic self-interest cannot explain “many important aspects of everyday economic and political behavior” (519), Harsanyi (1969) argues for caution in expansion with: “[I]f our theory is to have any real explanatory power then our motivational assumptions must be kept at a very low level of complexity – even if they do not have to be made quite as simple as to postulate economic self-interest as the only important motive in human behavior” (521, original emphasis). This research developed its conceptualization of behavior following Harsanyi’s recommendation for caution: After reviewing the demonstrations that humans are, at times, motivated to serve the interests of others, the expansion of the motivation concept adds a single yet distinct significant factor to the rational choice operating assumption that individuals universally act to serve their own interests. Using Elster as a foundation, Lichbach (2003) argues that the step-wise addition used here is the best way to increase the explanatory power of theories without creating the tautological or empirically unmanageable theories that often result from beginning research with theories comprised of numerous explanatory factors. Although this project’s conceptualization of behavior is not, in and of itself, an explanatory theory, its cautious expansion provides the foundation for the development of theories that can, in the words of King, Keohane, and Verba, “maximize leverage” (1994, 29-31).
The conceptualization of behavior used here provides the foundation for the construction of explanatory theories in a second way: It allows researchers to employ useful insights, findings, and methods of other fields that operate according to the extremal principle. The extremal principle asserts that “objects of inquiry behave in such a way as to maximize or minimize the values of certain variables” (Murphy 1996, 137). As Murphy illustrates, the extremal principle serves as the basis for theories in multiple fields – including physics, economics, political science, and evolutionary biology – whose subjects of study are explained as being axiomatically driven to realize goals (Murphy 1996). Although this project acknowledges that some human behavior is not instrumental, actors engaging in intentional behavior are understood as making decisions and choosing behavior based on their perspectives and beliefs regarding how to effectively realize their respective goals. Thus, actors are treated loosely as “optimizers” here. Accordingly, this conceptualization of behavior affords researchers the opportunity to employ the insights, findings, and methods from the multiple fields built on the extremal principle (where appropriate), thereby increasing the tools available to researchers when developing their theories.

More narrowly, the conceptualization of behavior developed here is appropriate and useful for studying members of Congress. As a cautious expansion on the rational choice approach to behavior, this project’s behavior conceptualization can help researchers understand or explain behavior in settings similar to those well suited for the rational choice approach. Kelley (1996) enumerates five conditions that render situations appropriate for a rational choice analysis: “Uncomplicated goals for agents, widely available knowledge about ways and means to achieve these goals, choices that continually repeat themselves, agents who care a great deal
about their goals, and situations that reward (appreciably) choices of efficient means and punish (severely) choices of inefficient ones” (101, original parenthetical expression). Kelley continues, “It is no accident that microeconomic theorists and many students of Congress find the rational choice approach a congenial way to think about the phenomena they study” (101). Although this research expands on the rational choice approach’s treatment of behavior, it shares with rational choice the emphasis on instrumental behavior resulting from individual’s intentional decisions to effectively pursue their individual goals. Thus, similar to the rational choice approach, the conceptualization of behavior developed here is also well suited to study members of Congress.

The final strength of the behavior conceptualization developed and used in this research lies in its ability to help construct theories that may be able to challenge rational choice’s self-interest-driven explanations. Clearly, the theories developed with this research’s conceptualization of behavior will be distinct from the rational choice theories based exclusively on the self-interested individual. Yet, insofar as they are well suited to investigate the same phenomena as rational choice approaches, theories employing the behavior conceptualization used here may be useful in testing the accuracy or explanatory power of rational choice or similar theories’ analyses of behavior.

Evolving the Approach

Now that the conceptualization of behavior has been expanded, this project will turn to exploring and considering the ideas surrounding “self-serving” and “other-serving” behaviors in the field of evolutionary biology. Adaptation, a crucial causal explanation in evolutionary biology, requires subjects be driven by the self-interest to survive (Parker and Maynard Smith
1990), yet evolutionary biologists have been investigating altruism among biological individuals for decades (West, Griffin, and Gardner 2007). Admittedly, motivation and behavior are different concepts. However, by looking at how evolutionary biology understands, studies, and delineates self-interested behavior and other-interested behavior, this project can use the insights and ideations arising from evolutionary biology’s treatment of self-interest and altruism to develop a framework that allows both altruism and self-interest to motivate members of Congress.
Chapter 3

Self-serving and Other-serving Behavior in Evolutionary Biology

As reviewed in Chapter 2, the dominant approach within the social sciences for studying individuals’ purposive behavior effectually does not allow for individuals to be motivated primarily to serve others. In its effort to fill the resulting conceptual void, this project turns to explore evolutionary biology’s treatment of other-serving and self-serving behavior. Darwin’s natural selection theory of evolution – the theory that underlies most modern evolutionary biology research and debates – does not initially appear to allow for principally other-serving behavior (Hoffman 1981, 121). However, instead of ignoring other-serving behavior or conflating it completely with self-serving behavior, evolutionary biology has attempted to explain the observed existence of other-serving behavior – both mutually beneficial and altruistic forms – within its broader framework of natural selection. Because evolutionary biology understands its subjects of inquiry as “optimizers” in a continuous struggle for survival, the field’s treatment of self-serving and other-serving behavior provides insights that are both useful and usable in constructing a framework for studying members of Congress engaging in rational or extra-rational behavior.

Optimization of Biological Behavior

Charles Darwin’s natural selection theory of biological evolution is a cornerstone in modern evolutionary biology (Mayr 1991, vii; Dennett 1995). Although Darwin’s theory was neither immediately nor is universally accepted (see Mayr 1991, Jablonka and Lamb 2014, ch. 1 on challenges to Darwin’s theory; Amundson 1998 on the ongoing debate between evolutionary structuralists and evolutionary functionalists; Lewens 2007 on the divergent types of and views
on adaptation), his natural selection theory and its component parts typically monopolize discussions of evolutionary theory (e.g., Brandon’s 1980 *A Structural Description of Evolutionary Theory*). Thus, before exploring the field’s treatment of self-interested and other-interested behavior, it is useful first to review Darwin’s natural selection theory and its typical use within evolutionary biology.

At its most basic level, Darwin’s theory of natural selection is an organizing principle for studying the success of differentially inherited traits according their relative fitness and their relative degree of adaptation (Brandon 1980). Darwin’s theory posits that the more adapted a biological individual is to its environment, the higher the individual’s expected fitness (Darwin [1859] 1991, ch. 4). Because evolutionary biology typically defines an individual’s fitness as the individual’s reproductive success (Mills and Beatty 2006; see the review of the debate regarding how to best measure fitness below), Darwin’s theory is often understood as asserting the more adapted a biological individual is to its environment, the more offspring that individual will produce. Therefore, as a causal explanation for the evolutionary transformation of population-defining traits, Darwin’s theory contends that traits that make an individual well suited to its environment are “naturally selected” to continue in subsequent generations due to the individual’s higher reproductive success. Conversely, individuals lacking that trait (or having an alternate version rendering them less well suited) will have lower reproductive success. Consequentially, the alternate trait or absence of the trait will exist with less frequency in subsequent generations.

The process of natural selection optimizes the degree of adaptation of the population over time, always selecting traits that make individuals better suited to their environment over traits
that make individuals less well suited, and operating within the constraints and opportunities provided by the current state of the population and their environment. Working within the broad framework of natural selection, evolutionary biologists treat their subjects of inquiry as local “optimizers.” As Maynard Smith (2006) explains, “It is assumed that evolution has occurred by natural selection, hence that complex structures and behaviors are to be interpreted in terms of the contribution they make to the survival and reproduction of their possessors – that is, to Darwinian fitness” (99).

It should be noted that evolutionary biologists do not all investigate the same form of “individual.” The debate over which “unit” should be analyzed in order to study properly the real dynamics of evolution is long and heated (see Brandon 1999). For example, while some researchers assert the gene is the most appropriate unit of analysis (empowered by Fisher 1930 and famously argued by Williams 1966 and Dawkins 1976). Others contend researchers must focus on biological characters, which are parts of an organism which both serve a causal function in biological processes and are used to identify the organism (Wagner 2001, 3-5). Moreover, some evolutionary biologists use one unit to explain their theories or findings while investigating an entirely different type of unit. For instance, Hamilton explains his inclusive fitness concept according to the fitness of discrete individuals to “help clarify the notion” and then states, “[W]e were not concerned with the inclusive fitness of individuals as described here but rather with certain averages of them which we call the inclusive fitness types. But the idea of the inclusive fitness of an individual is nevertheless a useful one” (Hamilton 1964a, 8).

Although the unit of selection debate can be consequential for particular evolutionary biology projects, it is (luckily) not consequential for this project. Following Hamilton’s lead, this
project strives for clarity by using the word “individual” to describe the unit being analyzed – be it gene, genotype, phenotype, character, organism, population, group, etc. – while reviewing evolutionary biology’s work, unless a distinction needs to be made to report accurately the insights and concepts of interest to this research. The factors most significant to this project arise from exploring *how evolutionary biologists approach* their subjects of inquiry and *treat social behavior*, regardless of which subjects researchers believe to be the most appropriate.

Whatever their chosen unit or subject of inquiry, evolutionary biologists work within the conceptual framework provided by the theory of natural selection, and thus, investigate individuals as working to optimize their behavior according to the relative impact each option for acting will have on the individual’s fitness. Accordingly, when evolutionary biologists observe biological altruism – an individual’s behavior that increases the fitness of others and decreases the fitness of the individual – they are faced with behavior that initially seems to violate the explanatory theory of natural selection (Sober and Wilson 1998, 17-9). Because traits or genes that increase a biological individual’s fitness are naturally selected to evolve, altruistic behavior appears to elude a Darwinian explanation. Wilson (2006) asserts, “[t]his is the paradox that makes altruism such a fascinating subject for evolutionary biologists…as biologists we see animal behaviors that appear altruistic in nature, yet almost by definition it appears that natural selection will act against them” (65). Instead of omitting such violations from their studies, evolutionary biologists intrigued by biological altruism have taken on the challenge posed by this puzzling behavior, engaging in research aimed at explaining the evolution of altruism *with the tenets of natural selection* (see Dugatkin 1997, ch. 1 and ch. 2, and Sachs et al. 2004 for reviews of such studies). Therefore, evolutionary biology’s treatment and consideration of biological
altruism – a behavior engaged in by optimizers that suggests a situational disregard for self-interest – provides various concepts and organizing principles this project can use to develop its new research framework.

**Social Behavior in Evolutionary Biology**

Driving the theory of natural selection is the understanding that organisms are always fighting for survival, with Darwin calling this notion “the struggle for existence” (Darwin [1859] 1991, ch. 3). This struggle for existence pits an individual against other individuals of the same species, individuals of other species, or “the physical conditions of life” (Darwin [1859] 1991, 48). Therefore, there is a sense of competition for survival or fitness underlying evolutionary biologists’ research on individuals interacting with each other. Moreover, this ever-present competition provides the foundation for the conceptualization of and delineations between different forms of biological social behavior.

In evolutionary biology, behavior is social when it impacts the fitness of both the individual engaging in the behavior (the actor) and at least one other individual (the recipient) (Wilson and Wilson 2007, 329). Hamilton gave evolutionary biology one of its most formative conceptualizations of social behavior when he defined various forms according to the gains and losses to fitness experienced by the actor and recipient (1964a and 1964b). Hamilton labeled behavior that increases the fitness of the recipient while reducing the fitness of the actor as “altruistic” and the opposite behavior – that which increases the actor’s fitness while decreasing the recipient’s fitness – as “selfish” (Hamilton 1964a, 15). Most evolutionary biologists have adopted this method for defining social behavior, frequently discussing behavior in terms of
“costs and benefits to individual’s fitness,” using the following typology (West, Griffin, and Gardner 2007, 418):

**Figure 1: Evolutionary Biology Social Behavior Typology**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Effect on Actor's Fitness</th>
<th>Effect on Recipient's Fitness</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Beneficial</strong></td>
<td><strong>Beneficial</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Costly</strong></td>
<td><strong>Costly</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Altruism</strong></td>
<td><strong>Spite</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Costly to Actor</td>
<td>Costly to Actor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beneficial to Recipient</td>
<td>Costly to Recipient</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Mutual Benefit</strong></td>
<td><strong>Selfishness</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beneficial to Actor</td>
<td>Beneficial to Actor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beneficial to Recipient</td>
<td>Costly to Recipient</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As seen here, evolutionary biology divides social behavior into the four categories of: 1) Selfishness, behavior which benefits the actor but is costly to the recipient; 2) Mutual Benefit, behavior which benefits both the actor and the recipient; 3) Altruism, behavior that is costly to the actor but benefits the recipient; and 4) Spite, behavior that is costly to both the recipient and the actor. Thus, researchers within evolutionary biology understand selfishness, mutual benefit, altruism, and spite as behaviors and categorize these social behaviors based on the consequences or effects the behaviors have on the actor’s and recipient’s respective fitnesses.

Biologists investigating social behavior typically pay no attention to an actor’s motivation for behavior. They make no claims about the psychological state of the individuals they study, with some subjects even lacking the ability to have a psychological state (e.g. viruses; Ernst 2007, 305). Yet, evolutionary biologists provide a formal justification for using intentional language when describing biological behavior, demonstrating mathematically that organisms are
always working to increase their respective lifetime reproductive successes (West, El Mouden, and Gardner 2011, 234-5). This, coupled with their perception of a ubiquitous struggle for existence, leads most researchers to treat individuals as if they are universally striving to increase their fitness.

Disagreements on Social Behavior

Beyond conceptualizing social behavior in terms of biological fitness, there is very little consensus within the field of evolutionary biology regarding either the correct identification of or the most accurate explanation for the evolution of different types of social behavior. This is at least partially due to the fact that not all researchers agree on how to measure fitness which, in turn, makes difficult the process of demarcating specific behavior according to evolutionary biology’s typology (West, Griffin, and Gardner 2007). Additional debates over social behavior arise due to researchers’ divergent conceptual schemas for aligning interests, which often deepen the rift caused by conflicting beliefs regarding the best way to measure fitness (Forber and Smead 2015). While there are other disagreements within evolutionary biology – most notably, the arguments over unit of selection and level of selection (see Okasha 2006; Lloyd 2007) – the disputes over the best way to measure fitness and how to appropriately align interests expose and accentuate the field’s concepts, explanatory schemes, and resulting implications that are most useful for this project.

Although there are undoubtedly disagreements over which indicators most accurately capture fitness in specific empirical studies, the field-wide divisions over how to best measure fitness revolve around operationalizing fitness. Most evolutionary biologists agree that fitness, conceptually, is reproductive success (Mills and Beatty 2006, 4-5). They tend to hypothesize
fitness based on expected reproductive success given the particular circumstances of the individual under immediate investigation or analysis (Sober 2006). Sober (2006) explains that expected reproductive success is the likelihood that the individual will survive combined with its expected number of offspring (25). Fristup (2001) justifies the definition of fitness as reproductive success, as opposed to mere extinction avoidance, with evolutionary biology’s chosen research focus: changes in frequency or varying degrees of dominance of the genetic material, trait or behavior from generation to generation. Fitness as mere extinction avoidance is, thus, inappropriate, unless the researcher is studying a trait, lineage, or “evolver” that existed for only a single generation (Fristrup 2001, 14). This is where the field’s consensus on operationally measuring fitness ends.

One of the first disputes within evolutionary biology over the operationalization of fitness revolves around the question, “How long of a time frame should researchers consider when measuring fitness? This question is typically answered one of three ways: 1) immediate or a short-term, determined by a life or environmental event, 2) one lifetime, 3) a long term, counted by number of subsequent generations. Citing Thoday, Sober (2006) explains that researchers who contend fitness must be measured in the long term see long-term fitness as the only way to grasp evolutionary progress (28). He continues on, however, to demonstrate that the answer to the time frame question should be contingent on the entity and/or behavior under immediate investigation, because some effects to fitness do not materialize until two or more generations after the action is taken (29-30).

Because the effects to fitness may change as more time passes, the appropriate classification of behavior may also change in step with changes to fitness. For example, an actor
may engage in behavior that initially decreases his/her fitness and increases the recipient’s fitness, which would thereby be classified as altruism. However, what if the recipient responds directly to the actor’s behavior by increasing the fitness of the actor in some way? What if the return of increased fitness to the actor is larger than the initial decrease? Now the actor’s initial decrease in fitness has been reversed by a subsequent increase in fitness, and, consequently, the initial behavior can no longer be classified as altruism. West and Gardner (2010) similarly demonstrate how changes in an analysis’ time frame can determine whether behavior is classified as selfishness or spite (1343). Clearly, the answer to the time frame question can significantly impact measured fitness as well as the classification of social behavior.

Other evolutionary biologists clash over whether fitness should be operationalized and measured in absolute or relative terms. Absolute fitness typically refers to the individual’s total fitness, or expected reproductive success, which is a “complex mix” of the individual’s likelihood of survival, success in mating, fertility, etc. (Orr 2009, 532). Many evolutionary biologists – most notably evolutionary geneticists – argue for the use of relative fitness in lieu of absolute fitness when measuring fitness (Millstein and Skipper 2007, 38; Orr 2009, 532; Frank 2011, 2300). Relative fitness is an individual’s fitness as compared to other individuals in the population, the population from which nature selects according to highest fitness levels (Orr 2009, 532). Relative fitness is typically measured by first measuring the respective absolute fitnesses of all individuals in the population and then mathematically normalizing the absolute fitness values into relative fitness values for each individual (Orr 2009, 532). Those who push for the use of relative fitness assert that nature selects according to the fittest individual(s) present in the population, and, thus, it is relative fitness that truly matters for evolution (Wilson 2004, 245;
Millstein and Skipper 2007, 38; Orr 2009, 532; Frank 2011, 2300). Put differently, in order for changes to fitness to impact the likelihood of selection, an individual’s fitness must change in relation to the fitness of others. Accordingly, using relative fitness allows researchers to better identify when changes to fitness are expected to have a meaningful effect on evolutionary dynamics.

For the purposes of understanding and classifying social behavior, the choice between absolute and relative fitness measures has a more nuanced consequence than answers to the time frame question. Increases and decreases in absolute fitness occur, regardless of whether or not they impact the process of natural selection. Therefore, using absolute fitness for categorizing social behavior may seem unproblematic. This being said, if an actor engages in behavior that increases the actor’s fitness – but less than it increases the fitness of the recipient – should that behavior be considered altruism? While the actor has increased everyone’s fitness, s/he has also reduced the difference between his/her fitness and the recipient’s fitness, thereby reducing his/her fitness in relation to the fitness of the recipient. If such behavior should be called altruism, then should it be treated the same as altruistic behavior whereby the actor experiences decreases in absolute and relative measures of fitness?

Recognizing the need to distinguish between these types of behavior, Wilson coined the terms “strong altruism” and “weak altruism” as a practical matter (1979, 607-9). Although Wilson calls altruism that reduces the actor’s absolute fitness “strong altruism” and altruism that increases the actor’s absolute fitness, but decreases his/her fitness relative to the recipient’s fitness “weak altruism,” he makes clear his reticence to label the weak version “altruism.” Wilson explains, “I have been reluctant to term them [weak altruism behaviors] altruistic
because, in the intuitive sense of the word, traits that fall into this category do not appear altruistic and sometimes appear very selfish” (1979, 608). Nunney (1985) also struggles to call such behavior “altruism” because there is no self-sacrifice involved, instead calling this behavior “benevolence.” Thus, using relative fitness to classify social behavior may lead the researcher to identify behavior that appears selfish – the actor increasing his/her own absolute fitness – as weak altruism.

The meaningful difference between strong and weak altruism goes beyond intuition: strong and weak altruism can affect the evolution of social behavior differently (Wilson 1990; Fletcher and Zwick 2007; West, Griffin, and Gardner 2007, 420-1). Accordingly, Wilson’s reluctance to use the word “altruism” to describe weak altruism does not mean relative fitness should not be used to explain the evolution of various types of social behavior (Fletcher and Zwick 2007, 31-2; Wilson and Wilson 2007, 338). In fact, Wilson himself argues for using relative measures of fitness when investigating the evolution of social behavior because, as discussed above, natural selection operates according to relative fitness (Wilson 2008, 370). Consequently, the choice between using absolute or relative fitness may impact a study’s identification of the changes to fitness important for evolution as well as how the study defines and treats various social behaviors.

A third dispute over operationalizing and measuring fitness centers around situations in which researchers conceive individuals’ respective fitnesses as being intrinsically contingent on each other. Hamilton introduced this dimension of fitness in his 1964 analysis of biological social behavior when proposing that an individual’s fitness be comprised of the two components evolutionary biology now calls “direct” and “indirect fitness” (West, Griffin, and Gardner 2007,
Direct fitness is the portion of an individual’s fitness affected by the individual’s own behavior, while indirect fitness is the portion of an individual’s fitness affected automatically by changes in the fitness of other individuals (West, El Mouden, and Gardner 2011, 232-3). Indirect fitness is understood as “automatic” because it occurs in situations where the behavior’s immediate indirect effects on the actor’s fitness are inseparable from the recipient’s fitness. Therefore, increases or decreases in the recipient’s fitness automatically affect the actor’s fitness indirectly. Evolutionary biologists refer to the sum of direct and indirect fitness as “inclusive fitness” (West, Griffin, and Gardner 2007, 415).

Originally, inclusive fitness was used in studies whose unit of selection was genetic material, and indirect fitness effects were assumed between individuals who carry the same genetic material (Fletcher and Zwick 2006, 253-4; see Hamilton 1964a, 1964b, 1970 and Maynard Smith 1964). According to the traditional usage of inclusive fitness, if actors decrease their personal reproductive success but increase the reproductive success of their siblings (or children, or non-kin who have the genetic material of interest in common, etc.), actors experience a decrease in their direct fitness but an increase in their indirect fitness because the reproductive success of their genetic material has been increased automatically by the increase to their siblings’ etc. respective fitnesses (Hamilton 1964a). Hamilton recognized that direct and indirect fitness impact an individual’s inclusive (total) fitness differently, asserting that changes in indirect fitness should be weighted according to the degree of genetic association (Hamilton 1964a, 2-8). While demonstrating how natural selection acts on genes (Marshall 2011, 325), Hamilton’s inclusive fitness concept also illustrates how the fitnesses of those who share genetic materials can be inherently codependent.
One challenge to inclusive fitness arises from scholars who believe multilevel selection theory is a better explanation for social behavior than inclusive fitness. Multilevel selection asserts that biological individuals exist in a hierarchy of nested groups – e.g., genes in organisms in families in populations, etc. (Okasha 2005, 1014; Wilson and Wilson 2007, 338) – and that natural selection may operate at more than one level of the hierarchy simultaneously (Okasha 2005, 1013). At each level, selection is based on the differential fitnesses of the units conceived to make up the level: genes are selected according to their differential fitnesses while organisms comprised of those genes are simultaneously selected according to their differential fitness and so on (Frank 2012, 234). Researchers using multilevel selection treat individual fitness as being comprised of both personal fitness at the individual level and fitness components associated with each group to which the individual belongs (Okasha 2006, 62-6). This is because multilevel selection scholars understand individual fitness as being group dependent (see Sober and Wilson 1998). Similar to those using Hamilton’s inclusive fitness concept, researchers using multilevel selection measure individual fitness by summing the individual’s personal fitness with the individual’s group fitness components, which are typically an average or some proportion of total group fitness (Okasha 2006, 62-6). Although many scholars contend that multilevel selection and inclusive fitness provide the same explanatory framework and are just operating with different parameters or from different viewpoints (Fletcher and Zwick 2007, 28; Wilson and Wilson 2007; Lion, Jansen, and Day 2011; Marshall, 2011, West, El Mouden, and Gardner 2011, 246-7; Frank 2012, 238), others argue that multilevel selection theory is both different from and stronger than inclusive fitness theory (see Marshall 2011 for a review of the challenges to inclusive fitness).
Regardless of the victor in the inclusive fitness versus multilevel selection bout, both multilevel selection and inclusive fitness organize a population according to shared fitness interests (Lion, Jansen, and Day 2011). Thus, the concept of intrinsically-related fitnesses can be more broadly understood as the alignment of fitness interests. Multilevel selection aligns individual fitness interests according to group, while inclusive fitness traditionally uses genetic association to align individual fitness interests. Given these alignments, researchers analyzing social behavior measure changes to the actor’s fitness by summing the effect of behavior on personal fitness and the effect of behavior on the aligned interest fitness component. Therefore, a study’s conception of aligned or non-aligned interests clearly impacts the classification of behavior. If projects do not identify aligned interests, they may classify mutual benefit as altruism or spite as selfishness. Likewise, identifying aligned interests when they are, in fact, not aligned may cause researchers to incorrectly classify or misunderstand behavior. Griffin and West (2002) demonstrate that indirect fitness should never be assumed – even among kin – as competition can reduce the actual increases to indirect fitness. Similarly, multilevel selection explanations cannot simply assume aligned interests at lower levels when investigating higher level selection dynamics (Okasha 2005).

Even when evolutionary biologists are in agreement about how interests are aligned, they may still conflict over the degree to which certain aligned interests actually affect behavior. Some scholars dismiss the idea of selection pressure from higher levels impacting individual behavior because they believe fitness concerns at the individual level will almost always overpower similar concerns at higher levels (Wilson and Wilson 2007; 330-1; Wilson 2008, 372; perhaps most famously argued by Maynard Smith 1964 and Williams 1966). Others have argued
that selection pressures at each level have the potential to affect behavior, with environmental realities of resource scarcity, stochastic events, variance in types of group and individuals, etc. determining the level which most powerfully influences behavior (see Fletcher and Zwick 2007; Frank 2012, 235-8). It is important to note that the debate over aligned interests is not typically about if interests are aligned – most evolutionary biologists recognize the nested nature of biological life (Okasha 2006, 40). Rather, disagreements arise regarding which alignments are significant enough to impact behavior. Alignments deemed insignificant are typically dismissed from studies, and, consequentially, are not taken into account when researchers investigate and classify social behaviors. As discussed above, misidentification of alignment of interests can potentially lead studies to misidentify social behavior as well.

Illuminating Implications

In addition to the concepts and approaches evolutionary biology explicitly uses and debates when exploring biological social behavior, both the consonant and conflicting views within evolutionary biology intimate insights that can contribute considerably to the development of a framework to study the intentional behavior of members of Congress.

First, evolutionary biology’s treatment of social behavior points to an aspect crucial to understanding all optimizing individuals operating in a social world: individuals choose their instrumental behavior based on the behavior’s consequences to themselves and to others. This implication arises when combining a few aspects of evolutionary biology’s agreed-upon approach with some of the field’s points of contention. Implicit in the social behavior classification scheme and explicit in the definition of social behavior is the understanding that social behavior that changes an actor’s fitness must somehow also change the fitness of the
recipient. Connected to this notion is the agreement that fitness interests of multiple individuals are typically aligned to some degree. Besides conceptualizing aligned fitness interests with inclusive fitness or multilevel fitness approaches, some researchers conceptualize aligned fitness interests based on the effects to the recipient’s direct/individual fitness somehow feeding back to the actor’s direct/individual fitness, e.g. reciprocity (see Sachs et al. 2004; Fletcher and Doebeli 2009). By treating individuals as if they are motivated universally to increase their respective fitnesses, by making this motivation the primary explanation for social behavior, and by conceptualizing the social world as one where actors’ fitness interests are typically aligned with the fitness interests of others, evolutionary biology seems to contend that optimizing individuals do not disregard the effects their behavior will have on others when choosing how to behave. Rather, they will consider the consequences for themselves and others when choosing their instrumental social behavior.

Second, but not separate, is the insight that most behavior involves a tradeoff. When explaining altruism and spite, evolutionary biology typically asserts that a decrease in the actor’s personal fitness is somehow offset by an increase in his/her indirect fitness or as driven by a need to increase group fitness. Wilson and Wilson (2007) also explain altruism as a tradeoff between individual and group fitness and then assert, “there is usually a tradeoff between all adaptations. Antipredator adaptations usually interfere with harvesting food, adaptations for moving through one medium (such as the air) usually interfere with moving through another medium (such as the water), and so on” (329, original parenthetical expression). Wilson and Wilson’s explication of all adaptations involving a tradeoff illustrates how even selfish behavior can have a tradeoff: the opportunity costs of not engaging in a different, potentially still selfish, behavior.
Although the ideas of tradeoffs and opportunity costs are certainly not unique to evolutionary biology, the field provides a method to help identify potentially real – as opposed to purely hypothetical – tradeoffs and opportunity costs with its organization of behavior and aligned interests around the single utility of fitness. This points directly at the next implication evolutionary biology’s exploration of social behavior contributes to this project: how one defines, operationalizes, and measures fitness matters. Though perhaps obvious, the significance of these research decisions cannot be overstated. Moreover, the field’s consensus and conflict over defining, operationalizing, and measuring fitness highlight why and in what manner decisions over fitness affect studies of social behavior.

As stated earlier, most evolutionary biologists agree fitness should be defined as reproductive success because evolution occurs over the course of multiple generations. Additionally, most agree that fitness should be hypothesized as expected reproductive success given the specific realities the subject of inquiry faces or is likely to face. The disagreements over fitness, similarly, revolve around issues of appropriateness given the subject and process under immediate investigation. Thus, evolutionary biology’s collective approach – even when individual researchers diverge – is to define, operationalize, and measure their focal utility for instrumental social behavior so it is both fitting and useful given the subject of inquiry and theoretical framework structuring the study.

Furthermore, at least some evolutionary biologists appear to be aware that research decisions regarding fitness impact the broader understanding, not just the biological classification, of social behavior. The internal conflict over using the term “altruism” to describe weak altruism exemplifies this awareness. Those who struggle with calling weak altruism
“altruism” recognize that relative fitness should be used when studying the evolution of traits or behavior, and they also see the value in treating weak and strong altruism differently. In fact, their reticence or refusal to use the word “altruism” seems to arise from a commonsense understanding that there is a meaningful difference between behavior that increases the actor’s absolute fitness and behavior that decreases his/her absolute fitness. Other scholars are similarly resistant to using the word “altruism” to describe the mutually beneficial exchange Trivers (1971) named “reciprocal altruism.” (West, Griffin, and Gardner 2007, 420; West, El Mouden, and Gardner 2011, 238). Therefore, while the field works to define and measure fitness so the concept is useful for its projects and appropriate for its central theory, many within the field also recognize that research must conceptualize behavior in a way that makes intuitive sense.

Finally, evolutionary biology’s exploration of aligned fitness interests demonstrates that configuring fitness interests as aligned does not automatically conflate individuals’ respective fitnesses. Both inclusive fitness and multilevel selection describe how individual fitnesses may be aligned and provide a schema for investigating shared fitness and individual fitness as distinct components of an actor’s personal fitness. This is critical for properly identifying and classifying social behavior. Most important for this project, keeping fitnesses separate allows altruism to exist even when fitness interests are aligned.

To be clear, proponents of both inclusive fitness and multilevel selection contend that it is when increases to an actor’s indirect or group fitness component are somehow larger than decreases to the actor’s direct or individual fitness that individuals will most likely engage in other-serving behavior (West, El Mouden, and Gardner 2011). However, neither theory denies that actors can engage in behavior in which increases to indirect or group fitness are smaller than
decreases to direct or individual fitness. Rather, both assert that such behavior will likely not evolve because such behavior decreases personal fitness. Thus, both theories allow altruism to exist— even when fitness interests are highly aligned, and even when altruism is classified according to the strictest of standards— because both theories keep individuals’ personal fitnesses discrete from aligned fitnesses.

*Appropriate Applicability and Annexation*

Some may challenge the use of evolutionary biology’s approaches, insights, and implications to study human behavior, and some have already powerfully done so. An intense movement against applying evolutionary biology’s methods and findings to study or explain human behavior rose in the 1970s as a heated and vigorous backlash against sociobiology (Albury 1980; see Segerstrale 2000 for a full review of the sociobiology controversy). Many of the objections to sociobiology, “the study of social behavior from a biological perspective” (Wilson and Wilson 2007, 329), revolved around the claim that humans were fundamentally different and more complex than other biological creatures and, consequentially, human behavior could not be explained in purely biological terms (Wilson 2001). Similarly, others opposed investigating and explaining human behavior according to evolutionary biology methods and findings because they believed human behavior was more powerfully influenced by society, culture, or how individuals were raised than by their genetic material (Richerson and Boyd 2005, 9-11).

Although the controversy over sociobiology seems to have dissipated to near extinction (Losco 1996, 152-6), this research recognizes that using evolutionary biology indiscriminately to explore and analyze human behavior may not be appropriate in all circumstances. This project
neither explains the evolution of human behavior, nor does it use genetic or biological explanations for human behavior. Rather, this project will use evolutionary biology’s approach to and treatment of instrumental social behavior to guide the construction of a research framework that allows members of Congress to be driven by other-serving motivations. The framework will merge evolutionary biology’s approach, concepts, and insights with those currently used by rational choice researchers and congressional scholars as well as with new findings and insights gathered through original field research. Insights from evolutionary biology will be applied to studying members of Congress based on the realities members face. These realities will not be “adjusted” to fit with evolutionary biology’s concepts and insights. Because evolutionary biology, congressional studies, rational choice scholars, this project all treat their subjects of inquiry as optimizing instrumentalists, this integration of concepts and insights is possible, sound, and likely fruitful, as long as it befits analyzing members of Congress and their respective behaviors.

While political scientists, for the most part, stayed out of the sociobiology debate (Dryzek and Schlosberg 1995, 138), some political scientists have raised objections to studying human behavior as one studies animal behavior: without taking seriously motivation for behavior. Many of the leaders of the “behavioralism” movement pushed researchers to investigate and even center their projects on discovering the beliefs, attitudes, and inclinations of political actors (Farr 1995, 202; see Dahl 1961 for a review of the rise of behavioralism). This came from the movement’s deeply held conviction that research must examine and explain political phenomena, political systems, and political actors as they exist empirically (Easton 1985, 137-41), and researchers typically operated under the belief that they must know the actors’ respective
reasoning and motivations in order to understand their behavior (Wahlke 1979, 21). When explaining behavioralism, Simon carefully distinguishes between political science behavioralists – those who studied political behavior with attention to actor’s beliefs and preferences – and psychology’s behaviorists – those who studied pure behavior, with no attention to motivation (1985, 295). In fact, in his 1979 review of political science behavioralism research, Wahlke somewhat laments the degree with which behavioralists focus on political actor’s “attitudinal” or “mentalistic” factors while failing to connecting these elements to actual behavior (20-1).

Interestingly, behavioralism was later accused of treating human behavior as determined by unofficial political arrangements, social systems, and other informal social factors, thereby ignoring the intentions and motivations necessary for understanding and explaining political behavior (Easton 1985, 142; Searing 1991, 1240; See Easton 1969 for a review of other criticisms of behavioralism). Thus, political scientists from multiple intellectual perspectives argue that motivation must be studied in order to truly understand behavior.

This research will use insights, concepts, and approaches from evolutionary biology, but it will not study behavior without studying motivation. In fact, the entire purpose of this project is to construct a framework for investigating members of Congress and their respective behaviors according to human motivation. This is perhaps one of the most significant differences between evolutionary biology’s approach and the framework constructed in this project. Yet, the difference does not negate the usefulness of evolutionary biology’s approach, concepts, or insights here.

Overall, evolutionary biology can contribute powerfully to this project’s framework construction because evolutionary biology allows individuals to engage in other-serving behavior
while functioning *simultaneously* in the universal struggle for existence. Although the field’s *explanations for the evolution of* altruism and cooperation typically hinge on other-serving behavior increasing the fitness of actors at some point in some way (Kerr, Godfrey-Smith, and Feldman 2004; Sachs *et al.* 2004; Fletcher and Doebeli 2009), evolutionary biology does not deny the existence of other-serving behavior that does not increase an actor’s individual fitness. Rather, evolutionary biology systematically studies altruism and other social behavior, seeking to explain the behavior and the individual in terms of the universal struggle for existence. Therefore, evolutionary biology’s exploration of instrumental social behavior provides insights into how to approach systematically the intentional behavior of members of Congress, allowing their respective behaviors to be driven primarily by a member’s motivation to serve others or by a motivation to serve one’s self-interest *while engaging in the ongoing struggle for political survival*. This project will use evolutionary biology’s approach, concepts, and insights regarding instrumental social behavior in the following ways.

First, this project will choose a single utility for behavior – fitness – and will define fitness according to what is appropriate and useful for studying members of Congress as optimizers struggling to exist in the congressional environment. Rational choice scholars have been approaching members of Congress in this general manner for decades (somewhat empowered by Mayhew 1974; see Shepsle and Weingast 1994, Polsby and Schickler 2002 for brief reviews), and, thus, evolutionary biology and rational choice’s skeletal frameworks easily align.

Second, this project will classify social behavior by investigating its intended effects on a member’s fitness. This is where evolutionary biology and rational choice begin to diverge.
When classifying behavior, this project will follow evolutionary biology’s lead, starting with the idea that actors intend their behavior to impact fitness. Then this project will ask the questions, “Is the behavior intended to increase or decrease the actor’s personal fitness. In what way? Is the behavior intended to increase or decrease the recipient’s or group’s fitness? In what way?” This approach to classifying social behavior is different from the common rational choice approach, which assumes the relationship between the actor’s behavior and fitness. When one assumes the relationship between behavior and fitness, the analysis’ starting point is that behavior is intended to increase (or decrease) fitness. The subsequent questions are then, “What is the intended increase in the actor’s personal fitness? Is the behavior intended to increase or decrease the recipient’s or group’s fitness? In what way?”

This difference may seem minor, but its impact on the classification of social behavior is significant. By starting with an assumed relationship between the actor’s behavior and fitness, research automatically limits the classification of behavior to one half of the social behavior typology. If the assumed relationship is actors intending to increase their personal fitness, their behavior can only be identified as mutual benefit or selfishness. The same is true if the assumed relationship is actors intending to decrease their personal fitness: behavior can only be classified as altruism or spite. By investigating the intended effect on personal fitness – as opposed to assuming it – research can classify social behavior as altruism, spite, mutual benefit, or selfishness. Oddly enough, evolutionary biology guides rational choice scholars to take one proverbial step back in approaching behavior, requiring they identify the intended relationship between behavior and fitness, instead of assuming it.
Third, this project will approach members of Congress as individuals who consider the impact of their intentional social behavior on themselves and others when deciding how to act. This does not mean that all members always consider how their behavior will affect themselves and others. They most likely do not. Rather, approaching members in this way will guide this project to explore the actor’s intentions regarding effects of behavior on the actor and others, improving researchers’ ability to classify types of member behavior and, ultimately, members themselves.

This project will also investigate members’ understandings of their aligned fitness interests. Ascertaining a member’s perception of those with whom his/her fitness interest align or do not align is critical for the correct classification of the member’s intentional social behavior. Moreover, this research will identify and analyze aligned and non-aligned fitness interests according to a member’s perception of the impact behavior will most likely have on his/her personal fitness. Doing so will allow this project to keep a member’s individual fitness interest distinct from others’ fitness interests.

Finally, this project will understand that all social behavior may be a tradeoff or have opportunity costs. The tradeoff between different social behaviors will be conceptualized and then investigated according to the members’ perceptions of the various effects different options for behavior will have on their own fitnesses as well as on others. Opportunity costs will be treated similarly. Understanding that all social behavior may be a tradeoff or has opportunity costs will be especially useful when trying to analyze behavior that members recognize may increase his/her fitness, but that a member chooses because s/he is motivated primarily to serve others.
Defining and Detecting Altruism in Congress

Ramsey and Brandon astutely identify one of the key obstacles evolutionary biology faces when trying to investigate empirically altruism in nature: the field struggles to identify altruism in nature because the field struggles with a “proper theoretical understanding of the concept” (2011, 385). They continue that “we need to know exactly what it is we are looking for” (385). Similarly, in order to study systematically members of Congress according to their respective motivations for behavior, this project must develop clear conceptual definitions of members’ intentional behavior as well as empirical indicators for such behavior. While blending insights, concepts, and approaches from evolutionary biology, rational choice research, and congressional studies to develop these conceptualizations and indicators is both useful and appropriate, this research also sought insight into members’ intentions and perceptions from congressional staffers and members themselves. Accordingly, this project now moves out of existing scholarship and into the field, reporting and discussing its original field research in the next four chapters.
Chapter 4

Overview of Interviews: Unearthing Rational and Extra-rational Behavior in Congress

This research next seeks insight into the motivation of members of Congress by going to those most capable of speaking accurately about such a personal and elusive concept: members of Congress and current and former congressional staff members. The interview process used in this project’s field research is explained in this chapter, including a description of both the “sample” of individuals interviewed and the survey instruments used to guide the interviews. Due to the exploratory nature of this project and its field research limitations, the information provided by these interviews will be used cautiously in subsequent chapters when making general statements about members of Congress and the congressional environment. Nonetheless, the interviews are invaluable to this project because they produced rich and complex insights that reveal the multi-faceted nature of deciphering a member’s motivation for behavior, which are reported in Chapters 5 and 6. When pieced together in Chapter 7, these insights provide an equally rich mosaic reflecting beliefs, understandings, and empirical indicators commonly held across interviewees.

The Expedition

The overall goal of this project’s interviews was to gain insight into members’ of Congress respective motivations from those who have first-hand, daily experiences with members, their behavior, and their justifications or explanations of behavior. Thus, this research collected information through one-on-one, open-ended, semi-structured interviews performed in person or via telephone with eight members of the 114th US Congress (2015-2016) and six
current or former congressional staff members over a six week period during the fall of 2015. Interviews were sought with both members and congressional staffers because both groups have an unmatched position to observe members. Perhaps more importantly, both groups also are unsurpassed in their experience with and professional necessity of interpreting and understanding accurately the behavior and motivation of members of Congress.

Subjects were prompted throughout an open-ended interview to describe their experiences as they actually took place. After posing broad initial questions, I asked clarifying questions or requested further explanation to both confirm my understanding of subjects’ answers and to encourage subjects to reflect on member motivation and their personal interpretation of motivation in a new way. Additionally, I asked follow-up questions aimed at capturing and exploring ideas, behaviors, or meaning that both groups of subjects may take for granted. Finally, I recorded and report observations of unspoken responses and reactions in order to ensure information was gathered, reported, and interpreted as holistically and accurately as possible.

During the development of this project, the point was raised that members of Congress may intentionally provide false or misleading answers during interviews because members may want to project a certain personal image. In an effort to minimize this tendency, the interview questions were crafted to ask about members’ experiences in general, at no point asking members to speak to their own, individual motivation (see “The Tools” section below for more information on the survey instrument). Although members did, at times, respond with information regarding themselves and their personal motivations, such direct and explicit statements comprise the minority of member statements and are woven with other types of
responses as well as with insights from other research projects to form this project’s overall findings and conclusions.

The ability of congressional staffers to speak accurately to member behavior and motivation might be challenged on the grounds that staff members do not know what drives their members or the behavior in which their members really engage. Admittedly, it is currently scientifically impossible to know with complete certainty what occurs in the conscious mind of another or every action another takes. Yet, the congressional work environment provides staff both the opportunity and the professional demand to observe and pay close attention to members, their behaviors, and their goals. In their exploration of degree of “professionalism” held by congressional staff, Romzek and Utter (1997) find “[t]he work culture of Congress is fairly intimate; it is a relatively small scale work setting where individuals are able to develop networks, working relationships, and opinions about staff and members based on first-hand experience” (1257) and “[s]taff typically work in close consultation with their member of Congress and take direction from their members regarding goals” (1259). In fact, one staff member interviewed here described staffers knowing member goals, principles, and motivations as “a job necessity.” Therefore, congressional staffers have both the opportunity and impetus to watch and note members’ behaviors and priorities with a high level of attention.

Additionally, in a different piece, Romzek and Utter designate senior staffers as being in “the inner circle,” describing their relationship with their member as: “The expectation is that these senior staffers will develop keen senses of the member’s personality, policy positions, and political style and can occasionally speak for the member… The hectic pace, the frequent demands to quick responses from the media, and the heavy travel schedules of members make
this “sixth sense” an essential talent for senior staffers” (1996, 420). Moreover, congressional staffers interviewed for the immediate project reported members communicate to their staff their priorities, their perceived interests, and what matters to them. Finally, one of the members interviewed during this project suggested I interview members’ senior staff, stating, “They know what’s going on, what their member does, what matters to their member.” Accordingly, the staff members interviewed for this project are current or former senior staffers or those otherwise residing in their member’s “inner circle” (see reporting of staff member sample in “The Mine” section) and the interviews established the staffer’s relationship with his/her member and their respective certainty they can speak accurately to member motivation and behavior (see description of the survey instrument used to interview staffers in “The Tools” section below).

The Mine

Access to members and staffers was initially sought through my personal and professional networks. Additionally, at the end of each interview, I asked each interview subject if s/he knew of other individuals who may be willing to be interviewed, the follow up on which secured additional interview subjects for the project (a.k.a. snowball sampling). Due to both the exploratory nature of the project and the difficulty involved in securing interviews with elites whose schedules are typically full, this project scheduled interviews with any and all members and staffers willing to meet, regardless of their personal or districts’ respective demographics.

The demographic information on members reported below was located after the interviews were completed. Information on members’ party, chamber, district location, terms in Congress, age, and prior government service was obtained first through Congress’ biographical
directory (http://bioguide.congress.gov) and then verified and supplemented with biographical information provided by members on their individual official member websites. Additional information on members’ military service was gathered and verified from lists of military veterans serving in Congress provided by the Office of the Clerk of the US House of Representatives (Military Veterans 2015) and Veterans Campaign (Lynn and Neihoff 2014). Finally, additional information regarding the race and ethnicity of members was obtained from the US House of Representatives Office of the Historian and Office of the Clerk (“Black Americans in Congress” and “Hispanic American in Congress” database search pages located at http://history.house.gov/People/Search) and the Congressional Research Service (Manning 2013; Tong 2013).

The member of Congress sample contains members from both chambers, the Democratic and the Republican Party, and all four US Census regions, although not in proportion to each trait’s respective presence in the 114th Congress (for the US Census Bureau’s list of regions and divisions, see http://www2.census.gov/geo/docs/maps-data/maps/reg_div.txt; see Manning 2015 for demographic statistics on members of the 114th Congress). Interviewed members varied in their length of time serving in Congress, ranging from serving in their first Congress to serving in their thirteenth Congress. All members who had served in more than one Congress at the time of the interview had served in consecutive Congresses. Prior to being elected to Congress, two of the eight interviewed members served in the military and six held state and/or local government positions, with four serving in their respective state legislatures. The median age of interviewed members was sixty-one. No interviewed members identified as African American, Hispanic
American, Asian Pacific American, or Native American. Finally, I could only secure interviews with male members.

The staff member sample includes staffers who work(ed) for individual members as well as those who work(ed) for legislative committees. Except for one, all staff members interviewed served or currently serve in senior staff positions (see p61 in Congressional Management Foundation 1995 for the differentiation between “senior” and “junior” staff positions). The staffer who did not serve in a senior position spent as much, if not more, time with his member than a senior staffer typically would due to somewhat unique physical and temporal requirements of his member and his member’s office. Some staff members began working on the Hill as interns, some moved between offices while serving, and some changed positions within the same office. The staff members interviewed varied in their length of time working in a congressional office, ranging from approximately two years to a little over ten years. Of the six staff members interviewed, five were male and one was female.

Because this research asked congressional staffers about their experiences with members, and because most staff members spoke most certainly about the members for whom they worked, this research cautiously understands its interviews as lending insight into both the members interviewed and the members for whom staff members primarily worked (excluding short internships or other short lines of employment). When combining the chamber, party, geographical, gender, and racial/ethnic demographics of interviewed members and the members for whom staffers primarily worked, the sample demographics change slightly. The blended member sample is comprised of roughly 69% members of the House of Representatives and 31% Senators, 62.5% Democratic members and 37.5% Republicans, and 6.25% females and 93.75%
males. The blended member sample does not contain members identified as African American, Hispanic American, Asian Pacific American, or Native American. Finally, the blended member sample contains members representing geographical areas in all four of the US Census Bureau’s geographical regions and six of the nine US Census Bureau’s geographical divisions. Approximately 31.25% of members represent(ed) the Northeast Region, 25% represent(ed) the Midwest Region, 25% represent(ed) the South Region, and 18.75% represent(ed) the West region. The breakdown of members according to their respective districts’ geographical subdivisions is as follows: 31.25% serve(d) in districts within New England, 6.25% within East North Central, 18.75% within West North Central, 6.25% within South Atlantic, 18.75% within West South Central, and 18.75% within Pacific.

Congressional staff members were assured confidentiality, while members of Congress were assured partial confidentiality. Both degrees of confidentiality entail not disclosing the name of any interview subject or identifying by name any member of Congress discussed during interviews. I sent a written description of the project and the subject’s involvement in the project to each subject prior to the scheduled interview. Additionally, I reviewed the project and the subject’s involvement, including attaining verbal consent to the interview, at the beginning of each interview.

Interview-lengths ranged from approximately fifteen minutes to over two hours, contingent on the subject’s scheduling needs. Dependent on the subject’s availability and level of comfort, in-person interviews were held in professional offices, public venues (e.g., a coffee shop), or a combination of professional offices and “walking and talking” as members went to and from committee hearings and the US Capitol Building to cast floor votes. Some interviews
were audio recorded while others were not, based on the logistics of the interview and the subject agreeing to being recorded. I spent a minimum of one hour immediately following each interview reviewing and expanding on interview notes to retain as much information as possible. Additionally, I obtained consent and instructions for following up with each subject with clarifying questions, which I did when necessary. Finally, five of the eight members and five of the six staffers interviewed requested I send them my reporting of their respective interviews, reserving the right to review our discussions and retract statements or portions of their interview if they objected to anything I reported. I readily obliged, and, thus, a sizable majority – ten of fourteen – of the reported interviews underwent a round of review and acceptance by the subjects and/or their offices.

*The Tools*

Interview questions were open-ended and crafted to guide subjects to reflect on their experiences while serving or working on the Hill. I created two such survey instruments, one to use while interviewing members and the other to use for staff interviews. Both were structured into four “modules” to help make extemporaneous interview decisions based on the subject’s scheduling needs and interview responses. The two instruments varied primarily in their first module, with all subsequent modules paralleling each other as they sought information regarding the same general areas. Thus, the interviews were semi-structured by the survey instrument, with the subject’s responses and time needs guiding the questions and areas of inquiry explored.

The overall goal of the interviews was to gain information regarding how to empirically decipher the motivation driving members in their instrumental behavior. Thus, the survey
instruments needed to probe into how interviewees detect member goals and corresponding motivations. Accordingly, I designed the survey instruments to lead interviewees to share how they identify members’ priorities regarding their work and how they decipher a member’s motivation in a specific behavior or activity.

The first module in the staff survey instrument asked current or former staffers what positions they hold/held while working for members of Congress, what sorts of official tasks and duties they perform(ed) while in each position, how frequently they interact(ed) with their member, and if they typically comprehend(ed) or sense(d) which issues and areas are/were important to their member. I asked these questions at the beginning of all interviews with staff to establish whether the staffer felt confident in his/her ability to speak to member motivation based on his/her experiences working for members of Congress.

In the survey instrument for member interviews, Module 1 asked members to describe a typical day in their D.C. office, a typical day in their district office(s), and the various factors they consider when deciding how to spend their time. The general purpose of Module 1 for members was twofold. First, it sought to discover if individual members engage in certain activities or behaviors on a daily basis, what those activities/behaviors are, and if multiple members engage in the same activities/behaviors on a daily basis. Such information may provide an initial and rough understanding of the typical or normal daily behavior of members that could allow for comparison of how members spend their time across members interviewed. Second, in inquiring into the factors members consider when deciding how to spend their time, Module 1 used a less direct and slightly different approach for gaining insight into identifying members’ priorities that is used in the third module. I did not ask these questions at the beginning of all
member interviews because I prioritized the remaining three modules during member interviews. However, I did ask Module 1 questions to members if time allowed.

Questions from the second module asked subjects to discuss experiences they had with members working hard to serve others, members working hard to serve their own reelection, and members willingly sacrificing reelection in order to serve others. To avoid jargon, misunderstanding, and “loaded terms,” I never used the words “altruism,” “altruistic,” “selfish” or “self-interested” in my questioning, unless asking a subject for clarification or building on a response in which they used such words. After prompting subjects to “describe” or “talk about these experiences,” I posed follow-up questions, inquiring into how the subject knew members were motivated in these respective ways. Examples of such follow-up questions include, “What was it about the member’s behavior that made it so clear to you s/he was working to serve others?”, “What criteria are you using in your mind right now to recall these examples as being clearly about reelection?”, and “How did you know the member was willing to lose reelection over this issue?” Depending on how much time was secured for the interview, I also asked if there are specific types of behaviors, tasks, or activities each subject believes to be indicative of an other-serving or reelection-serving motivation and what it is about these sorts of behaviors/activities that made clear to the subject the motivation of members engaging in such behavior/activities. Module 2 aimed at, first, determining if interviewees believe members driven primarily by either motivation serve in Congress. The second module also sought to gain information regarding how interviewees decipher member motivation based on member behavior. I prioritized Module 2 over the other three survey modules, asking questions from Module 2 in all fourteen interviews.
The third module focused on gaining information regarding how interviewees identify members’ priorities. Accordingly, questions from Module 3 asked subjects how they know – empirically – what is or was important to individual members, and often included a secondary question of, “When you are/were trying to build a coalition around a specific issue or area, how do/did you identify which members to approach?” Frequently questions probing at Module 3’s general topic flowed naturally from Module 2 questions or were answered or hinted at by a subject’s answers to Module 2 questions. If a subject’s answer to a Module 2 question seemed to be answering a Module 3 question, I would ask a couple of quick clarifying or follow-up questions to gain insights into Module 3’s general subject area, even if I did not have the time to devote to Module 3’s questions specifically. Hence, all subjects spoke to the general area of empirical indications for what members find to be important, although the degree with which subjects discussed the topic varied.

Finally, the survey instruments’ fourth module asked subjects what they believed makes a decision an especially “tough” or “easy” decision for members. The diction of these questions encouraged subjects to describe the characteristics of or circumstances surrounding each type of decision as well as what it is about these decisions that makes them particularly tough or easy for members. If responses came in the form of specific examples, I asked subjects what it is about each example that makes the decision especially difficult or easy. Module 4 attempted to gain insight into the various factors or actors/groups members, in general, consider important and will typically try to support or promote with their behavior. In crafting the fourth module, I was operating on the assumption that decisions are difficult when these components are in conflict and easy when they align. Interview responses to Module 4 questions confirmed the veracity of
the assumption. Additionally, by asking for an explanation regarding why these decisions are particularly difficult or easy, Module 4 questions tried to decipher why members generally consider the factors or actor/groups to be significant and why members will work to promote or support them. Due to time constraints and the way in which each interview progressed, I asked twelve of the fourteen interviewees to describe tough and easy decisions for members.

*Insights in the Rough*

Those interviewed do not form a sample statistically representative of the 535 individuals currently serving in Congress, and generalizations about all members with information gathered from the interviews should be made carefully. Although not representative in a statistical sense, the interviews provide insights into how a somewhat diverse set of members of Congress prioritize their time, behave, and understand their own and other members’ respective motivations for behavior. Accordingly, information and insights rising from the interviews can be used as spots of light, illuminating and bringing attention to certain aspects of Congress that may be useful for this project’s framework construction.

When chronicling the interviews for this project, the information gathered seemed to naturally sort interviews into two categories: 1) those providing insights into types of members based on personality qualities and 2) those providing similar insights based on a member’s time allocation, behavior, and activities. Thus, the following two chapters will report interviews according to these categories. The interviews are reported as narratives, wherein I recount each interview session as separate occurrence. I relay each interview as holistically as possible, although I do not report the entire conversation for any interview, and I do not present
information according to the order in which it was gathered. Additionally, I consciously keep my interpretation of each interview to a minimum when reporting, but did provide brief, clearly demarcated statements of interpretation to connect the information rising from each interview to the overall research project. Thus, interview findings are not provided in the chapters that report the interviews, but rather are presented in Chapter 7.
Chapter 5  
Insights into Member Types: Legislators’ Personality Qualities

Of the fourteen interviews, the eight reported in this chapter include discussions of the personality qualities interviewees associate with either members driven primarily to serve others or members motivated primarily to serve their narrowly-understood political self-interest. Some interviews presented in this chapter also provide insights into deciphering a member’s predominant motivation outside of these personality qualities, although not all. Overall, these interviews provide the sense that members driven primarily to serve others understand themselves to be less important, as individuals, than the governmental system, their role, or the people they were elected to serve, while members motivated primarily by reelection or political self-interest understand themselves to be more important than these other political factors and actors.

Member 1

The interview with Member 1 was comprised of over two hours of “walking and talking” with the member as he went back and forth between his office, committee hearings, and to the Capitol building to cast floor votes. There were three points during the interview during which the member and I sat in meeting rooms or the member’s office for between ten and twenty minutes, while the rest of the interview took place in-route to the member’s legislative tasks.

My first question for Member 1 inquired into his experiences with members working hard to serve others, to which he quickly and confidently replied most members of Congress work hard to serve others. I followed up with a question asking what it is about their behavior
that makes the member so confident they are working hard to serve others and not their own
reelection. The member then started talking about what motivates him by relaying why he ran for
Congress. He stated, very matter-of-factly, he ran for Congress because his district continuously
elected members who, once in Washington, did not do what they promised they would or what
he wanted them to do. The tone and nature of his explanation conveyed his disappointment and
disgust with the quality of his previous representation as well as his belief members simply need
to both behave as promised and “vote their district.” Moreover, the member did not end his story
with him actually becoming a member of Congress. Rather, his running for Congress was the
logical result of his district’s need for good and honest representation. Member 1’s decision to
run for Congress was about the district, and it was such an obvious and natural consequence of
his district’s needs he did not have to conclude the story with his decision to run.

Later during our discussion, Member 1 returned to this idea of members having a
responsibility to serve their districts, stating most members work primarily to serve their
districts. I, again, asked what it is about members’ actions that makes their motivation to serve
their districts so clear to him. The member, again, started speaking about how he approaches
things, always looking for ways to serve the district. There were additional times during the
interview when the member answered questions about the motivations of others by relaying his
motivation, approach, or the ideas he stood for, until I finally asked him directly how he goes
about figuring out if other members are driven to serve others or driven to serve their own
reelection-interest. Member 1 paused – this was perhaps his only noticeable pause during our
conversation – and then said he does not spend his time trying to figure out what motivates other
members. He explained further he does not “waste his time judging others” because spending
time focusing on the motivation of other members means he is not spending time doing his job. He finished his thought with, “You cannot focus on what other people are doing or you will miss out on the chance to do what you need to do.” I noted here, again, the immense and seemingly sole responsibility Member 1 believes members have to serve their district.

When asked if he ever experienced members working primarily to serve their own reelection interests, Member 1 responded – in a disinterested, detached, and almost dismissive tone – he was sure there were some members who cared more about reelection than serving others, “but,” now in a purposive and focused tone, “for every one of them, there is a handful of others who come here to serve.” He continued some members do focus almost entirely on reelection, as “[t]his is the best job they’ve ever had.” But other members work really hard to serve others, and “[t]here are a whole bunch of them.” Thus, even when asked about members working predominantly to serve their reelection needs, Member 1 maintains that most members work hard to serve others.

Using the member’s intense emphasis on serving his district as a segue, I asked, “How can members most powerfully serve their constituents?” His immediate response was by working on important issues and serving the needs of the district. In an effort to parse out what exactly he meant, I raised the ideas of more traditional constituency services, and his answer changed direction. “Oh, sure,” he agreed members provide constituency services through their district offices. Yet, the noticeable change in the momentum of his answer as well as his mentioning of offices as the actors seemed to indicated he believes working on issues is the most effective way members can personally and directly serve their districts. Here I made a note to myself that
members’ work on issues is likely an important area to investigate when looking for indicators for what members prioritize or find important.

Not that Member 1 does not go home. In fact, he stated multiple times during our conversation he returns to his district every weekend. When discussing what he does in his home district, the member relayed he meets with people, gives speeches, and “inspires and motivates.” Instead of telling his constituents about his work in Washington or how he helps them, Member 1 inspires those in his district to live well and work hard to make things better for themselves. While this fit with the member’s self-described ideology, it also bolstered the member’s statements regarding his role as a servant for his district and his country. Earlier in the interview, Member 1 referred to serving in government as “the noblest of all professions” and expressed his favor for term limits because “being in Congress should not be a career.” The member seemed acutely aware of both the significance of his role and his personal insignificance.

When asked what makes a decision an especially “tough decision” for him, the Member 1 replied tough decisions are those in which his constituents’ opinions are at odds with his conscience. The member had described his district earlier as being strongly aligned with his personal ideology, so it came as no surprise when he stated he rarely has to face such decisions. But when he has, Member 1 voted his conscience, and his “office is still getting calls about those votes.” The member explained further he also has never really had to deal with a situation wherein his constituents’ opinions were at odds with what was in their best interest. When such circumstances have arisen initially, the member took the time to explain the issues to his district, “and then they got it.”
Towards the end of the interview, I asked the member if he had any final thoughts or things that had come to mind during our conversation that he wanted to share. The member said, “Remember, it is all about serving the district.” He pressed on he knows there are some people who have never served anywhere before, and they get to Washington and begin to feel really powerful, overestimating their personal importance to the point that their “heads get so big their ears don’t fit.” But serving in Congress is not about the member, Member 1 reiterated. “It’s about the district and America.”

Member 2

The interview with Member 2 lasted roughly eighteen minutes and was done over the telephone. My first question launched the discussion broadly into the area of members of Congress working to serve others by asking the member about his experience with members of Congress – either himself or other members – working to serve others. He replied, “Most members are responsive to constituents and work hard to represent them. I have never seen members who don’t work hard for constituents.” The member continued, although working for constituents does help a member get reelected, he still sees such members as working for constituents. Thus, while Member 2 recognizes that serving the district likely also serves a member’s reelection-interest, he also notes that working to serve the district is not a clear indication that members are driven primarily by reelection-interest.

Accordingly, I took this as an opportunity to try to get Member 2 to talk about empirical indicators for members working hard to serve others. Laying the groundwork for my question, I first relayed to the member I believe academics and Washington outsiders struggle to
differentiate between behavior motivated to serve others and behavior motivated to serve a member’s reelection because we cannot always see a clear difference. Yet, before I could ask him for insights or advice regarding how to tell the difference, the member stated he understands how those on the outside may assume members are solely “out for reelection.” He sees those on the outside as often having an idea of how things ought to work or the types of policies which should be passed. “They think it is obvious the way things are supposed to work or happen, and when things do not go that way, they assume everyone is out for reelection.” Member 2 believes their assumption is primarily due to those on the outside not having a good understanding of the issues or how things actually work on the Hill. The member then provided the example of gun control to illustrate. He realizes many people simply cannot understand why the United States cannot get gun control legislation passed at the national level, and they often assume members who are not in favor of gun control are “in the pockets of the NRA.” But Member 2 knows many members who vote against gun control because they truly believe gun control does not work. The member continued he thinks it is actually the members who know gun control does not work, but proceed to vote for it anyway, whose behavior is driven primarily by reelection in this issue area. Therefore, it seems for Member 2, members are likely motivated predominantly by reelection interests when they vote or work against what they believe to be the “correct policy decision.”

I then asked Member 2 how he knows what members believe, more specifically where he looks to identify members’ stances on certain issues and “what they believe in.” The member said because he has been in Congress for a while, he does not really have to “go out of his way” to figure out other members’ positions and the issues and principles for which they stand. Member 2 simply watches how people behave and vote. If he does not know certain members
personally, after working with them and spending a bit of time with them, he can figure out their beliefs and where they stand on issues. I asked him where outsiders – those of us who do not know members personally or who do not get the same access to members as members do to each other – should look to get a sense of where members stand and what is important to them. The member replied with disinterest in a half sigh, “Oh, look at how people vote and how they behave,” and he then transitioned into passionately talking about ideologues.

“Some people are ideologues – And we have them on our side, and they have them on their side,” Member 2 explained. “It doesn’t make any difference what you say to them…. You cannot convince them of anything.” He finds other members more reasonable. “They have their ideology too,” but these non-ideologue members “will listen to fact” and will “consider the big picture.” The member identifies ideologues as coming out of solidly partisan districts, those districts which will “elect a member of a party, regardless of who it is.” Such ideologues are the members he sees as being most concerned with reelection “because they know they will get voted out of office if they are not radical or ideological enough.” According to Member 2, they will face a real “political threat” in their next election if they are not “radical or ideological enough”: a threat from within their own party in an intensely partisan district.

Member 2 spoke about ideologues in Congress with what felt like both frustration and disappointment. The frustration seemed to stem from their refusal to work outside of the strict boundaries sets by their respective ideologies, with the member stating he “will not even take the time to deal with ideologues” in either party. The disappointment, however, appeared to come from their prioritization of reelection. The member ended his discussion of ideologues by saying, “You cannot worry about reelection. You do what is right for your district [pauses], and this
typically gets you reelected. [pauses again] But, because it’s right for your district.” Thus, it appears Member 2 believes members are supposed to prioritize serving their district over their reelection, regardless of the effects doing so may have on their reelection chances.

Member 2’s description of particularly “tough decisions” for members aligns with his belief members need to make decisions based on what is “right” or “best” for the district. He identified two situations which present him with especially “tough decisions.” The first is when he does not have enough information or expertise to know the “right policy answer,” and he sees “valid arguments” on both sides of the issue. The second is when he is very knowledgeable about an issue, and he has to vote against an important or overall good bill because he knows one provision or a small portion of the bill will be devastating in some way. When the negative impact of the provision or portion of the bill is “not the end of the world,” he will vote in favor of the otherwise good bill because “it is best for the country.” However, when the effects are “so over the top he cannot support it,” he will vote against the bill. In both of these voting situations, it seems Member 2 is trying to create the policy which best serves the people, given the realities potentially necessitating policy and constraining his policy options.

The interview ended with the member saying he had to go, but he wanted to say one last thing, although he thought it should be “obvious.” He shared, “As a member, it is not you job to represent your ideology. You are sent here to represent your district. For many of those people, you are the only voice they have.” He continued that members’ biggest job is figuring out what it is the people want – because “they don’t always express it clearly” – and what is in the best interest of the district. But some members do not care what the district wants or about what is
best for the district. “They vote their ideology, and then go home and try to explain it to their people.”

*Member 3*

The interview with Member 3 lasted approximately twenty-three minutes and was held over the phone as well. Because the member was only scheduled fifteen minutes to speak with me, I immediately directed our discussion to the member’s general experiences, if he had any, with members he has come to associate with working hard to serve others. The member answered, “Obviously I think there is really no one here who is not here for the quote unquote right reasons. Everybody is here because they have a passion. They believe in an idea or a set of ideas or a set of values they want the federal government to reflect. So they run for Congress.” He then said he does not see some members as being really committed to doing a good job and other members as working for selfish reasons.

Throughout our conversation, Member 3 discussed serving in Congress similarly to how employment is often discussed across all occupations, frequently using words such as “job,” “job description,” and “models” to describe and explain how members choose to behave. He stated all members approach their job in a different way – according to different “models” – with some members following models in which they work very hard on national issues while others focus more on their districts or states. The member also described members’ willingness to compromise on issues and personal values as existing on a spectrum according to their respective understandings of their “job description.” Some members “see it as part of their job description to compromise” while others do not. Thus, it appears Member 4 believes members may approach
serving others differently, and different approaches do not necessarily indicate different types of primary motivation.

Additionally, Member 3 frequently answered questions with both more generic employment language and the idea of reelection “rewards,” indicating he sees no meaningful inconsistency between a member doing his job and getting reelected. After explaining members’ willingness to compromise as based on their respective views of their job description, the member continued that it is easier to get senators to compromise than members of the House, “and one of the primary reasons is the House just doesn’t have a lot of districts today that involve political rewards for compromise, whereas the Senate is built in a way that rewards compromise because you represent a more diverse array of voters back home.” Interestingly, Member 3 did not provide a sense that the larger difficulty House members have compromising is necessarily or always bad. Rather, he seems to view this as a natural consequence of the way the congressional representative system is designed.

The member’s conceptual fusion of reelection benefits and members doing their job became more apparent when he answered my question about what makes a decision especially “tough” for members. Member 3 started by saying there are a couple of factors that make a decision tough. First, he noted there are decisions that “involve short term cost and long term gain.” I asked him to clarify here, and he responded with the example of voting to increase the gas tax. According to the member, a bill to increase the gas tax has the “short term pain” of increases in gas prices, but the “long term gain” of a fully funded transportation system in five or ten years. At this point in his answer, Member 3 seemed to be describing the initial sting of farsighted decisions in all arenas, concluding his gas tax illustration with, “So there are things
that you vote for that don’t pay off immediately and you have to see the long term payoff.” Yet, he then made the connection between these types of decisions and reelection by explaining it is easier to make these decisions in the Senate than it is in the House because “you have longer periods of time to explain how you voted and to let the facts on the ground play out” due to senators serving six-year terms and House members serving two-year terms. The member then used the 2008 US automobile industry bailout legislation to illustrate. He described this legislation as both very controversial and as having very theoretical returns, so two years is not a long enough time period to know if the bailout worked. The member explained further, “If you really believed it would work, it is easier to vote for it in the Senate from a political perspective than it is in the House because, if you are confident in the outcome, you know it will have arrived by the time you run for reelection.”

The second factor the member named as making a decision tough was its political unpopularity. He described politically unpopular decisions as having “a political cost back home” and further explained “political costs come in different ways.” Some decisions “make a broad swath of your constituents angry, there are policies that could make people who dislike you dislike you even more, there are policies that could anger your base.” Member 3 then pressed on, unprompted, with, “But of course the Founding Fathers intended upon that to happen: They set up the House of Representatives so that members were paying very close attention to what their voters believed.”

Sensing the member saw an important difference between how members of the House and Senate could behave, I asked him if he thought a decision that is tough in the House may not be as tough in the Senate and vice versa. Member 3 replied that, in general, senators can do
things that have a longer return on investment because senators do not have to run for reelection every two years. He then stated this “makes the Senate an easier place to work on controversial things.” However, the member sees the House as “much more plagued” by intensely partisan districts than by the two-year election cycle. According to Member 3, the plague of safe Republican or safe Democratic districts is the unrepresentative nature of the constituencies found in such districts. A member serving one of these districts has a key constituency of “a very small number of primary voters, which is not representative of [said member’s] district at large or of the state or nation. So that is the bigger problem.” Member 3’s named types of difficult decisions coupled with the “plague” of intensely partisan districts provide the sense that Member 3 sees members’ jobs as enacting policy that is both representative of their districts’ views and serves the “best interest” of the people. What seems to be especially tough in the difficult decisions identified by Member 3 is that the best interest of the people is at odds with their own views and opinions. Moreover, I noted here that this may be why Member 3 does not see a difference between members doing their jobs and getting reelected: Reelection confirms a member is representing the views of the constituency.

The significance Member 3 places on representing the people – not just primary voters – and his view of genuine representation as the crucial component of members “doing their jobs” rose in full force during his final comment. It was evident here that the member had no more time to spend on the interview, but he risked being late to his next appointment because he wanted to “proactively make a quick point” to me about conceptually separating reelection from serving others. Member 3 then shared:
I always sort of hear...“Congress is always so consumed about themselves,” right? “They’re so consumed about getting reelected and politics that they never focus on what’s right for the country.” And I get very frustrated by that separation because the Founding Fathers thought a lot about this, and they did want for Congress to exercise some of their own judgment, but the entire point of this experiment was to have a government that is very much rooted in what people think.... But we’re actually supposed to pay very close attention to what voters want. It’s actually really dangerous from a democratic standpoint to make a conscious decision to do something that your voters don’t want. It’s not just risky politically for you, but it’s dangerous from a perspective of democratic theory. So, it’s always a tricky question for us. We clearly make decisions sometimes that we know that our constituents don’t agree with, but we do it very rarely because we’re not sure that that’s actually the reason we’re here.

And so people say, “Oh, they are just doing this because they are running for reelection.” Well, yeah, that’s true: We do want to be reelected. But we also know that the reason we’re here is to be the voice of the people we represent. Certainly in post-Jacksonian Democracy, that’s kind of how this is all supposed to work out. So anyway, I just point that out because I sort of hear people talk about the difference between doing the right thing and doing the politically smart thing, and I think they are the same thing more often than not.

**Member 4**

The interview with Member 4 lasted just under two hours, beginning in the member’s office and continuing on the walk to and from the Capitol building and then to a committee meeting, with two intermediate sessions of sitting and speaking in a Capitol building side room and the member’s office. My first question for Member 4 inquired into his experiences with members working hard to serve others versus working to serve their reelection needs. The member responded calmly and confidently, “Most people would not be doing this if they were not here to serve.” I then asked how he knew this, and he said being a member of Congress is “demanding on multiple fronts.” He then explicitly named the demand serving places on a member’s time, including how this demand leads to members not being able to spend time with their family or having freedom over how they spend their time due to onerous ethics
requirements. The tone of the member’s response felt heavy, relaying the taxing nature of serving in Congress.

Member 4’s voice then warmed, as he smiled and stated with an optimistic certainty, “People are here because they are overwhelmingly drawn for service.” He continued to explain, if one were to look at members’ resumes, s/he would see the strong resumes of “achievers… People are not here because they cannot do something else.” Thus, it appears Member 4 contends most members are driven to serve others because there does not appear to be any other reasonable explanation for their choice to sacrifice their time and dedicate themselves to such an overwhelming and arduous life.

During the walk to the Capitol building, the member asked if I was going to incorporate geography into my project. Wanting to capitalize on this insight, I kept my response brief and ambiguous – stating simply, “Hmm, that’s interesting” – and then asked if he believed geography impacted members’ behavior. Member 4 answered geography affects dramatically how members can spend their time, both in Washington and in their home districts. I asked the member for further clarification, and he explained the influence of geography on a member’s time is not just about the hours spent traveling to and from their home district. The geographical distance between the district and D.C. does affect the ease, and therefore frequency, of returning home. But this, in turn, also impacts how members spend their time in Washington. If members cannot make it home very frequently, they are likely to spend more of their time in Washington meeting with or otherwise focusing on constituents than members who return home every weekend. This does not mean geography necessarily impacts how much total time a member spends focusing on constituents, when combining the time a member spends in D.C. and his/her district. Rather,
according to Member 4, geography affects whether members are able to focus on constituents in their home district and focus on legislative activities while in Washington (for those who go home frequently) or whether more of the member’s time in D.C. is spent meeting with constituents (for those who do not go home frequently).

Furthermore, members who have geographically expansive or elongated districts often have to schedule their time in-district based on the geographical proximity of district meetings and events. Accordingly, such members typically try to schedule or group engagements in the same part of the district on the same day. Although the member’s question to me used the word “geography,” his explanation for the impact of geography more so illustrated the preciousness of members’ time.

Using his message that a member’s time is extremely valuable, I then asked Member 4 if one could get a good sense of what is important to members based on how they spend their time. He immediately answered, “Yes,” but then paused and said he looks to other factors as well. He also identifies what matters to members according to their committee work, and he “notices their votes.” Later in the interview, the member stated most members are driven to serve others, and they tend to develop areas to concentrate this service in their committee work or in their consistent promotion of their values and/or district across all issue areas. Member 4 explained further he factors in members’ respective ideologies and views when trying to decipher what is important to members based on their behavior or actions.

Somewhat reiterating his position that people come to Congress to serve others, Member 4 said he respects other members’ ideologies and beliefs – even when he disagrees with them – because they believe in what they are doing, and they “are sent here based on their views.”
Earlier in the interview, the member made a similar statement about respecting members who hold different beliefs than he does. Here he asserted, although he disagrees with the views of some members, those members were elected by constituents who hold their same beliefs, and those members were “sent to Washington to represent their constituency,” just as he was. Overall, Member 4 seemed to see a strong connection between a member’s personal beliefs and his/her respective constituencies’ beliefs.

Changing direction, I inquired if he had ever experienced members or had come to associate specific members with working primarily for reelection. He hesitated – pronouncedly – exhaled, and said, “That’s a hard indictment to say.” Member 4 continued that he expects members who come from “tight districts,” where they perceive fierce reelection competition, to spend more time fundraising than other members. Yet, he does not see such behavior as demonstrating those members are driven primarily by reelection. Member 4 explained there is an “overlap” in the motivations of trying to get reelected and working to serve others, and the two “are not mutually exclusive.” Members “[put] up with reelection activities just to have the opportunity to serve…. If members could eliminate any activity, it would be raising money.”

My penultimate question for Member 4 inquired into his experiences with members sacrificing reelection in order to serve others. He responded, because the parties are so deeply divided, he has not really seen many situations wherein members had to sacrifice reelection to serve others.

Finally, I asked Member 4 what he thinks makes a decision especially “tough” or “easy” for members of Congress. Without hesitation, he said, “Going to war… Because we are asking people to risk their lives.” I then asked the member what he thought characterized a tough
decision, more generally. He replied decisions wherein a member doesn’t know the right answer or decisions that pit against each other two issues and the member cares about both issues. He pressed on, explaining it is really difficult “when you stand up for something and no one stands by you,” giving an example of Republican members representing areas damaged by Hurricane Sandy who could not get other members of their party to support their relief funding requests. The member described such situations as “upsetting” and then explained, “It is upsetting when you cannot do what you want to do, when you cannot do more, when you cannot help or provide a solution.” He finds this difficult because it is “impacting people’s lives… Absence of action hurts, and it’s upsetting and tough.” Easy decisions for Member 4, conversely, are procedural votes or votes that have “no real significance on people.” At no point in his description of tough or easy decisions did the member reference reelection, constituents, moneyed interests, or campaign contributors. Rather, for Member 4 “tough decisions” – and difficult situations more broadly – appear to be those wherein the member struggles with how to effectively serve others.

Staffer 1

The interview with Staffer 1 lasted approximately one hour and was held midmorning in a public location. Although I only had contact with the staffer through e-mail prior to our meeting, the discussion with Staffer 1 felt more comfortable and informal than all other interviews conducted during this project, as if the staffer and I were familiar with each other. Perhaps this was due to his tenure on the Hill – this staffer had been working for Congress longer than any other staff member I interviewed – or perhaps it resulted from our shared battle with an excruciating noise blasting from a garbage truck that engulfed and isolated us during the first
five minutes or so of our conversation. Whatever the reason, I capitalized on the high comfort level to engage in a more causal discussion with Staffer 1, hoping to gain the “everyday” type insights this project’s more formal interviews may not produce.

This staffer’s “everyday” while on the Hill has been working for members he knows are in Congress to serve others. In fact, Staffer 1 stated multiple times during our conversation how “lucky” and “fortunate” he is to work for such “ethical” people who “were there to do the nation’s and the people’s work.” While he believes most members are in Congress to serve others, the staff member also described Congress and the Hill as being a bit like “lunch tables in high school.” Like the stereotypical cliques in high school, similar members of Congress find and associate with each other, grouping themselves according to their shared understanding of their purpose as members or common goals. Some members are driven by a particular issue, others to force a change, and others are “here for the power.” Thus, while Staffer 1 maintains most members are driven by the purpose to serve others, he also understands members as grouping themselves based on their goals, which may sometimes be the realization of personal political power.

While Staffer 1 is confident in his bosses’ shared general motivation, he also described his bosses’ styles as quite different. The staffer named the first style “the classic public servant type.” This type understands his/her work as “the people’s work” and feels a responsibility to serve the people, the nation, and the institution. Additionally, Staffer 1 portrayed this member and his associated type as one who lives in a more “black and white” world, where one must always do what is “right for the country and right for the constituency,” and where things are either “good or bad” for the people. Furthermore, for such a legislator member behavior is or is
not “what a member or the institution should be about.” Simply put, this legislator “ha[s] a righteousness about him” and a reverence for the position.

Staffer 1 referred to the second style as “the Mr. Smith Goes to Washington type.” The staffer described this type of legislator as understanding him/herself and carrying him/herself more as a “normal person” than the classic public servant type. This legislator goes to D.C. because s/he is so “angry about the system and what is happening” in the country that s/he feels compelled to run for Congress. Staffer 1 said of his member in particular, “He had to make a change.” Moreover, this type of legislator makes him/herself extremely accessible to allow and foster this change. Here I asked the staff member how he knows this member is sincere in his behavior and is not just acting like “a normal guy” and trying to appear accessible in order to get reelected. Staffer 1 responded, “You can see that the guy is genuine when he walks into the room.” He continued that the member’s actions and how he consistently treats and interacts with people reveals the member’s drive to support and help others. “He always asks how people are, he asks people questions about themselves,” and he remembers what people say and details about their lives. He genuinely cares about others.

Members of both styles, Staffer 1 reiterated, approach legislation with serving the needs of the nation as their primary objective, placing the good of the country as a whole above all other concerns. I asked the staff member how he knows the members are prioritizing the nation as a whole. Staffer 1 explained both would consistently refuse to support legislation – even legislation driven or advocated by powerful interest or constituent groups – if they believed the legislation crept into an area or issue that “was not the federal government’s job” or required federal dollars to be spent on what they felt were non-federal projects. Additionally, I noticed
and then inquired about a second trait both types appeared to me to have in common: humbleness. The staff member did not agree entirely with my assessment, however, especially with characterizing the classic public servant as “humble.” Rather, both understand themselves, as individual people, to be much less important than their work and their official position.

Staffer 1 also frequently described his members’ goals as being about “change” and “doing something,” although he noted a difference between their styles here as well. Both members’ goals are to change areas the member believes need improvement, and both members actively work to achieve their goals. Yet, the member he identifies as being the classic public servant type makes decisions on bill authorship or other significant legislative action by first identifying “an area that needs to change” and then determining the likelihood of the bill passing. This member only spends time on bills that have a chance of passing and are “right for the people.” The staffer’s Mr. Smith Goes to Washington member, conversely, tries to participate in all areas and issues he feels need to change. He spends his time working on numerous issues and signing onto countless projects and letters, to the extent that some members of his staff try to focus him on fewer projects or issues at a single time. Therefore, while these different types of primarily other-serving members choose different means to serve others, both are rather active and spend their time based on how they believe they can best do so.

As the staff member was relaying the members’ two varying approaches, I saw two more marked commonalities. First, Staffer 1 described both members as being firm in their convictions, making strong, direct statements that “this has to happen,” and then following up by spearheading action to make it happen. Thus, I asked him if members taking the lead on issues or legislation is a sign they find the legislation/issue to be important. The staff member replied
immediately yes, that taking the lead is a clear sign the issue matters to the member. He then continued, stating signing a letter or cosponsoring a bill is not the same as leading on an issue. According to Staffer 1, a member may cosponsor legislation or join a movement already in progress because the issue is important to the member, but s/he may also or rather be motivated by reelection or other strategic factors. Later in our discussion he said members who are leading on legislation will often “mill around on the floor” of the chamber, distributing pamphlets or otherwise trying to persuade other members to support their issue or bill.

The second commonality I noted was just how active Staffer 1 depicted both members as being in the realization of their respective goals. This was a powerful juxtaposition to the members he dubbed the “country clubbers” during his discussion of congressional cliques. When he first used the label “country clubbers,” I asked the staff member to describe this category of member. He paused, leisurely leaned back in his chair, spread his shoulders as if he were lounging, and smiled. Country clubbers are the members who like the job, who enjoy being in D.C., and who love the game and the power they hold as members of Congress. These members “aren’t going to push the envelope too much because they want to stay” in Congress.

While Staffer 1 appeared to have a strong grasp on the various types of members and their corresponding behaviors, he struggled throughout our discussion to provide clear indicators for the different types of motivations he associated with such behaviors. We spoke explicitly about this struggle during our conversation, and he remarked that identifying distinct, objective, and more universal signals of motivation is really difficult. For him, people’s motivations and priorities become clear after interacting with and observing them in a variety of settings. It is through these “normal conversations,” watching them speak to constituents and officials, and
seeing them operate on a regular basis that the staff member begins to “just sense or pick up on” members’ motivations.

Thus, it seems Staffer 1 understands members and the various factors that drive them based on members’ consistency in their respective actions, decisions, and behaviors. Do members speak and treat constituents, staffers, other members, and leadership with the same degree of respect? To whom do members listen and when? How does a member’s behavior vary based on whether s/he is in D.C., in his/her home district, or in a private setting? Answers to these sorts of questions appear to be the basis for the staff member’s assessment of members’ respective motivations. At one point during our discussion, Staffer 1 used the phrase “likeminded members,” after which I asked how he knows which members are “likeminded.” The staff member replied, “By their actions, vote records, and speeches.” Moreover, he identifies members’ issue priorities and positions based on their prior work on issues or bills and how members have previously engaged with issues.

Overall, it is his daily observance of members’ unswerving dedication to key issues or broader principles that serves as the foundation for Staffer 1’s conviction that most members of Congress are driven to serve others. He stated multiple times throughout the interview a “large majority” of members go to D.C. to serve others. Yet, he is not naïve about how hard it is to build the coalitions and find the majorities required to pass legislation. The staff member explained that, while most members have “aspirations of doing something,” they must also “raise money and play the game up here in order to get stuff done.” In fact, it is watching members continued struggle with this “game” and their unwillingness to get completely sucked into “the machine” that seems especially telling of members’ motivation for Staffer 1. Members’ fervent
and steadfast work in spite of the constant frustration caused by the process – how long it takes or “how difficult it is getting people to sign onto something that is so obviously right” – is a large part of why the staff member knows “most members came here for a cause, not a job.”

Staffer 2

Staffer 2 and I met mid-afternoon in a small, professional conference room for our interview, which lasted just under one hour. The staff member’s striking confidence in his ability to decipher members’ motivations, priorities, and goals emerged early in our discussion, and it seemed to increase and intensify as our conversation progressed, even when he admitted his criteria for determining motivation, in particular, could be somewhat tenuous at times. He described knowing member and committee priorities as “a job necessity… Even if there aren’t explicit goals for the office, there’s always implicit ones. You know that your member [cares] about, and you know what they disdain.” I then asked how he identifies these goals and opinions, given they are not typically explicated. The staff member indicated it really just comes down to being an “observant person,” stating, “I mean, if we spent three days together, I’d have a decent idea what motivates you and what you care about.” He continued:

And I think organizationally, and from a member level, those things just kind of reveal themselves. You see it in the press releases you put out. You see it in how the member spends their time. You see it in how they interact with people. It’s culture. Culture, culture, culture… Culture reveals itself, and as those revelations come out, so reveal your priorities. Even, again, if they’re not as explicit as you wish they were.

Although Staffer 2 provided the sense throughout the interview that members’ motivations and priorities just “reveal themselves,” he also described the process of members’ forming a more official identity or carving out their respective niches on the Hill as both
somewhat unintentional and piecemeal. As opposed to focused strategy sessions in which members and their staff construct a personal brand and implementation plan, “[Y]ou’re reacting on kind of a day-to-day basis, and then enough days go by, and then all of a sudden you’re like, ‘That’s our brand. That’s our strategy.’ Looking backwards, instead of projecting forward.”

Thus, somewhat similar to Staffer 1, Staffer 2 sees members’ distinct and isolated, yet consistent, behaviors over time as demonstrative of members’ goals and priorities.

To clarify, I reviewed Staffer 2’s responses to my questions and then asked directly if he gains his understanding of member motivation and what matters to members based on their “press releases, messages, how they spend their time, and how they interact with people.” He agreed and relayed that press releases and news clips will provide a fair amount, but not all, information one would need to get a good sense as to what drives members. The staff member then continued, “If you looked at their personal calendars, that would probably tell you a lot too, but that’s not something I have access to or necessarily look at.”

This notion of how members spend their time as being especially telling of member motivation and priorities came up again a little later in the conversation. When discussing members’ reelection-seeking activities, Staffer 2 explained with hints of unapologetic sadness and mild disgust, “Your life as a lawmaker is really sh--ty sometimes” because “the nature of the lives they lead, I think, is such that you’re forced to do a lot of things for electoral purposes that you find really disdainful literally on a daily basis.” His overall manner then changed, exhibiting a newly intrigued and pensive quality, as he continued unprompted, “God, what would be such an interesting thing to study is members that announce retirements, and then looking at their office schedules… Look at how they spend their time because that gap, what changes, they are
probably the ones that, once you really completely remove the electoral thing, what you’re left with is probably really who they are on a fundamental level.” I noted two factors here: 1) For Staffer 2, how members spend their time is especially indicative of members’ priorities, and 2) Staffer 2 views a member’s reelection needs as powerfully limiting a member from doing what s/her wants to do.

Consistent with this line of thought, Staffer 2’s conviction that reelection concerns are devastatingly restrictive on member behavior permeated almost our entire discussion. When I asked him to relay his experiences with members acting against their own reelection needs, his immediate response was, “I mean, they’re out there.” He then paused, began noticeably mentally searching for an example, and said, “God, it would help if I worked for members who weren’t in cycles. For three Congresses in a row, I’ve worked for somebody who’s running for reelection. It’s a lot easier to be a little less cognizant of that s--t if you…have a couple of years ahead of you.” Later in the interview, I asked the staff member a related question, regarding members being genuinely driven primarily to serve or help other people, to which he replied, “The hardest thing, the thing that makes me not want to do this anymore, is how infrequently ground level empathy and humanity enter into the action equation…as decision making occurs.” He then qualified his statement by describing the electoral realities his various offices have faced as “battleground [one of the two main US political parties]” in “really tough electoral circumstances.” “If you go interview the at-large member from Vermont,” the staff member continued, “I bet it’s really different. So I want to contextualize what I am saying within a pretty small universe because I don’t want to apply it to politics at large.”
However, Staffer 2 made clear, when it comes to the reelection impact of member behavior, “rare is the thing that wholly helps you or wholly hurts you.” Additionally, the degree with which reelection needs restrict member behavior vary according to the perceived balance of help and harm each decision or action will most likely have on the member’s reelection. The staff member explained:

You could have an issue that harms your reelection changes in kind of meaningful ways, but alienates a [political party] constituency. So you could have an issue where like, “I’m going to vote [a certain way] because I think it’s an electoral liability.” But, at the same time, you take that position, and you alienate people that you need to get along with. I mean, it’s a series of tradeoffs… I guess my point is, once you’re close enough to the fulcrum, if it’s going to hurt you fifty-one percent, but help you forty-nine percent, it’s a lot easier to be like, “F--k it, I’m going to do what I want to do. I’m going to do what I feel. I’m going to do the right thing.” than it is if it’s like a g--d----d electoral disaster.

Thus, it seems Staffer 2 believes the amount of perceived harm a member identifies with a particular decision affects how difficult it is for a member to do what s/he believe to be “right.” According to Staffer 2, it is much more difficult for members to do what they feel is right when they see such behavior as likely having a large negative affect on their reelection chances than when the perceived harm is much smaller. Later in the interview, Staffer 2’s responses indicated he believes a large part of what a member believes is “right” is what the member believes helps or serves the needs or interests of “ground level people.”

The staff member also used the idea of opportunity costs while describing how members perceive the effects of their various behaviors and activities on their reelection prospects. When discussing members who spend time serving non-election-related types of political self-interest – such as personal political power or power within their political party – Staffer 2 used the example of members going on political television shows “eight times a week” to further their
personal political self-interest. He then said, “[I]f you ask them in real time, ‘Do you know that going on [political television shows] a billion times, when actually, you could be in call time, you could be doing an event in your home state that would make it easier for you to get reelected?’” most them would see appearing on television “as not harmful to their reelection chances, but, again…” As he trailed off here, I clarified with the quick, “It’s opportunity costs?” to which he responded emphatically, “Exactly. Right.”

Yet, more informing than Staffer 2’s explicit statements about members’ behavior restrained by reelection needs was his repeated and frequent use of the word “liberating” when he spoke about members who vote or act according to what they believe is “good” or “right.” This provides both a sense that members can feel trapped or caged by such reelection constraints as well as Staffer 2’s understanding that members’ views on what is “good” or “right” are members’ beliefs regarding what is “good policy” that serves the people. He first used the word “liberating” after recalling a couple of members who voted for the Affordable Care Act (ACA) even though they believed such votes would cause them to lose their next respective elections. Although the staff member stated multiple times he very rarely sees members motivated by anything besides some form of political self-interest, he used these difficult votes surrounding the ACA to show that reelection does not render members “incapable of doing good things.” He continued with, “That’s good s--t. I remember being like, ‘Oh, good job buddy.’ So, it happens…. And, again, I bet when you’re allowed to vote your heart all of the time, it’s probably pretty liberating. And they probably do it more than…or act on that kind of thing [more than we realize].”
Staffer 2 spoke more directly to how “liberating” it is for members who either face easy reelectios or who ignore reelection needs when deciding how to act as he began to discuss members motivated primarily to serve others. After providing the example of a fellow staffer’s member, Staffer 2 said of this particular member of Congress, “Knowing the member, I can see him actually kind of being pretty invested in what he thought was ground level altruistic advocacy.” I then inquired into what about this specific member makes Staffer 2 willing to believe he is driven mostly to serve others. The staff member replied, “He doesn’t have a lot of electoral pressure, that’s always the first thing I think of. Not having to worry about your reelectoral chances is definitely liberating.”

Nonetheless, for the majority of the discussion, Staffer 2 seemed to believe that disregarding reelection or other politically self-serving interests is both difficult and happens very infrequently. When I asked him where he looks or which factors he considers when deciphering members’ respective motivations, the staff member responded, “I think, just most of the time, it’s simple.” He then described members’ decision-making process as “not very Machiavellian. I think there’s also not very much thought that goes into a lot of it.” The staff member was not saying members of Congress do not think or make conscious choices. Rather, he explained that the circumstances surrounding most member decisions entail the significant players and factors being aligned such that members’ choices are easy and their thought processes need not be complex. The staff member illustrated his point with the example of what a Democratic member from a very liberal district considers when making most decisions:

You’re just like, “This is what Democratic leadership wants. This is what the president wants. I am kind of a team player, and there’s not much benefit for me not being on the team. So, duh-duh.”... Not only is there probably a lot of personal alignment in terms of
what he actually feels and who he thinks it’ll help, but it is the prescribed position of his party, and it’s kind of what’s demanded of him on a coalition front… Yeah, all those things align.

I followed his line of thought regarding member’s decision-making calculus and environment by asking the staff member about the “tough decisions” members face. After stating “tough decisions don’t come along that frequently,” Staffer 2 explained what makes a decision especially tough for a member is “when interests don’t necessarily align. It’s when the exact factors I was just talking about aren’t present anymore.” He then continued, providing a thorough depiction of a “tough decision” with:

So, what you need is issues in which there’s not a massive level of polarization, political polarization – which are more issues than you think. You’ve got that on the one hand. You’ve got the wedge between financial backers and public opinion. That’s one of the easiest ways to make a hard situation. Moneyed interests being on the opposing side of public opinion. Alright? So, if I take this vote, it’s going to piss off a lot people who fund my political existence, whereas if I take this vote, it’s going to piss a lot of people off. I think that’s a big issue. And then some of the same caucus and loyalty dynamics I was talking about. When the interests of the president of the United States are deeply different than the interests of the residents of [a state]. There is some political utility in not breaking with the president all the time or not breaking with your party all the time, especially in a state…that’s pretty conservative [where] the interests of your constituents cannot match very well with the interests of a party coalition that you need to be in good graces with. So, I mean, those are a couple, I think, of the factors that go into hard decisions.

Perhaps the most interesting part of the discussion with Staffer 2 was the noticeable transformation in his tone, demeanor, and responses as the interview progressed. Of all the individuals I interviewed, Staffer 2 was the most resistant to the idea that some members of Congress are regularly, although not necessarily always, driven primarily to serve others. He stated early in our conversation he could come up with specific examples of members acting against their political self-interest, “but they are really few and far between.” Furthermore, this
appeared to really sadden and exhaust him. At one point the staff member explained he presents ideas to members based on the political benefits to the actors involved, and he would “never pitch somebody on ‘X number of people in your state are going to be helped.’… God, it just like, it sucks. It really sucks.” Although Staffer 2 made the above stipulation about not applying his experiences working for members constantly facing extremely tough elections to all members or all situations, he also described members acting entirely for electoral gain as “part and parcel of the game.” When I asked him if staff members don’t pay attention to the nature of their members’ motivation because “it doesn’t really matter,” he replied, “I think you don’t pay attention to it precisely because it does matter.”

Conversely, as we moved through the interview, and I started inquiring explicitly about other staffers’ experiences with other members, Staffer 2 slowly began to speak about members driven predominantly to serve the interests of others. As he began talking about these members and their traits, his answers livened and his voice took on a half-excited tenor as he proceeded to seemingly almost surprised himself with his own responses. After describing the particular member he sees as “pretty invested in what he thought was ground level altruistic advocacy” as “liberated” by a lack of electoral pressure (see above), the staff member continued to explain why he believes this member of Congress is motivated to serve others with:

His demeanor and intellect. It’s the technocratic ones that-- [Name of a different member of Congress] is a good example. Just an absolute as-h-l-. Always the f---ing smartest guy in the room. Totally uncompromising. Totally unwilling to see anyone else’s perspective. But like, again, that’s liberating. It’s liberating to be like, “I have the right answer. You have the wrong answer. My answer’s going to help people more. And what the f---’s wrong with you?” Right? So, I think [he]’s probably a pretty good example of like-- Yeah, I bet he acts pretty altruistically. I bet he acts – votes and whatever – with people’s best interest, like, ground level people’s best interest in mind. I actually, I really buy that. It’s part of his political brand, his appeal. H--l, I’m half-appealed by it. Again, having
been in the room with him on many occasions, I think he’s piss poor coalition builder, and there are a lot of other reasons I wouldn’t support him politically, but, but, yeah, he’s this uncompromising guy who knows the right answer and knows what’s going to help people and fights for that thing. So yeah, I would say that those folks are out there. But again, [he’s] from [a very safe electoral district]…. I think that’s the big crux. Electoral pressure just, either it’s kind of there or it’s not. For most folks, it’s some level of there, but for a meaningful minority, it’s not.

In an effort to clarify, I asked Staffer 2 if it is these people – “who are unyielding and don’t give two cares” – he identifies as being motivated primary to serve others. He agreed before further categorizing members he labeled “altruistic” according political party. After stating the only remaining technocrats are members of the Democratic Party, the staff member identified altruistic members of Congress “on the Democratic side, it’s probably [the ones] with no electoral pressure that have a technocratic bend. I think on the Republican side, it’s probably more fundamentalists.”

Again to clarify, I asked him if it is their unwillingness to yield that has the staff member convinced they are driven to serve others. He replied, “I think a certain unbendingness and a certain inability to compromise are always going to be hallmarks of purity of heart…Yeah, that makes me think their motivations are more principled.” Staffer 2 then listed five members of Congress – residing on both sides of the aisle – and said of them, “They get politics. And they’re good at it and all that s--t. But, they’re like, ‘Yeah, we’re going to get elected. But, maybe we don’t even care that much if we don’t.’” Thus, for Staffer 2, members driven primarily to serve others tend to be unyielding in their principled efforts to serve others, typically disregarding the negative effects such unwavering stances may have on their reelection chances.
My interview with Staffer 3 was held in the morning in a professional but private office space and lasted about one hour and forty-five minutes. Early in the interview, while we were discussing the staff member’s various roles and responsibilities in his member’s office, Staffer 3 described his member as a “very ethical guy.” Although the staff member continued depicting his member as both “ethical” and “principled” throughout the course of our conversation, he did not believe all members of Congress to be as such. In fact, at one point during the interview, Staffer 3 noted he has a “really jaded view” of members of Congress currently. Accordingly, I focused a fair amount of our discussion on the types of behaviors or other indicators Staffer 3 uses to assess and understand members of Congress and their various motivations.

First, Staffer 3 knew his member’s priorities because his member “knew what he was about and had a long history with people and issues.” Although his member articulated these priorities well to his staff, it seemed the staff member more so knew what was important to his member because of his member’s actions. Staffer 3’s most in-depth examples of his member revolve around situations in which the member took an unpopular stance in order to support and promote what the member believed was “right.” In the first situation, the member went against one of the most powerful national interest group and members of his own party serving in Congress because he believed their proposed legislation both violated constitutionally-protected states’ rights and opposed the interests and opinions of the citizens of his home state. Both his fellow party members and the formidable interest group “came down on him really hard,” including the interest group threatening to fund a campaign to challenge the member. Yet, the member “held his ground really, for months and months and months,” refusing to yield his
position. Staffer 3 concluded his recounting of this example with, “My boss was a really principled guy in that way. But there’s lots of ‘em. There’s lots of them on the Hill like that.”

Conversely, in the second example, the member went against both what a powerful voting constituency wanted and his own personal opinion on the immediate issue. Here, the member took a difficult stance to ensure equal application of law. In this instance, the member’s behavior “hurt him politically” because it upset a particular county comprised of “a large margin that would show up to vote and vote for him. And so, he was doing something, which was the number one issue in that county, where he was going against it… And it did hurt him in the polls, politically. But he still– He was a very principled person in that way.”

What really shined through in Staffer 3’s recounting of both situations was his member’s belief in the governmental system and his purpose in the system. The member understood his role as that of a local representative – whose sole purpose is to protect and promote the interests and opinions of constituents – in a system designed to protect and promote the interests and opinions of all US citizens. The member seemed to recognize that his role, his purpose, and the system itself were more important than he was, as an individual. This was evidenced by his willingness to suffer the personal political damage sometimes required to defend these three factors.

Similarly, Staffer 3 used examples of behavior when describing or discussing other members working hard to serve others. One of his especially illuminating cases was about a member who belonged to the political party opposing his member’s party, always won each election with a huge margin of victory, and had no aspirations to climb the political or party power ladder. “Everything she made herself about was to serve…the people.” The staff member
knew she made serving her constituents the top priority – even over her own reelection – because she would partner with any and all members of Congress on any issues that served her district. He explained:

If it was a local issue, we always had an open door [through] which we could interact on and work on [these issues] in a non-partisan way…. And she would work with us, even knowing that [it was] helping us [by] making us look bi-partisan, because we were in a very competitive nation race, cycle after cycle… [S]he was somebody we could work with and she didn’t really care too much if working together made it look beneficial to us.

After the staff member finished sharing this example and a couple of similar, briefer examples, I asked him what it is about these particular members and their behavior that convinces him they were primarily motivated to serve the interests of others. He replied, “You didn’t feel that they had a reservation about– a partisan thought about it. That, ‘If I do this, well, this might affect this senatorial race in my state, and, therefore, might make the other person look bad.’ … It’s those kind of things.” Therefore, for Staffer 3, disregarding the interests of one’s political party when deciding how to behave is indicative of members predominantly driven to serve others with the immediate behavior. Staffer 3 then continued, “There’s certain issues that a lot – a lot of members – have on their pecking order, their top three, and they’re willing to break away and promote these issues…even in the face of strong party opposition– their own party opposition to it.” When compared to his prior comment, here Staffer 3 seems to identify members willing to go against the views of their party as demonstrating an issue is especially important to a member, although perhaps not motivated primarily by an other-serving motivation.

Yet, later in the interview he returned to the situation of party interests sometimes being squarely at odds with members driven predominantly to serve others, with:
I think maybe the split is maybe 70/30…or maybe 60/40. There’s a lot of people who are out there who really want to help and are willing to be non-partisan and work with you and come up with a programmatic goal. That’s like the 40… The 60 is really people I think who are, they fit more into the partisan picture, and are working either to promote their own image or reelection self-interest.

I asked the staff member here if he considers a member’s reelection interests separately from his/her party’s interests. He answered, “Yes,” and I followed up by asking him how he differentiates the two. After first stating “[t]here are district specific issues which, depending on what the member’s concerns are, often times trump what the party wants,” Staffer 3 provided a couple of examples and finished with, “So there’s a difference between, I think, between district-specific self-interest for reelection and party self-interest.” Again I followed up with a clarifying question, asking him to further explain “party self-interest.” The staff member rephrased his answer here with, “I should say, their own concerns regarding their party,” before listing self-promoting, gaining access to “the best fundraising circles,” and rising in power within the party as common types of self-interest members have regarding their party. Yet, Staffer 3 maintains that most members will vote their district regardless of how the members’ political party feels about the immediate issue. “It would be a dime a dozen if you actually found somebody like that. So, all politics are local. They primarily serve the interests of their local jurisdictions.”

We returned to the idea of member-orientation – whether that be to serve their constituents, to further a specific issue, or to rise in ranks within their party – later in our discussion, when I inquired if he had ever worked with or known of members he felt he could “depend on to serve others” across all issues, regardless of the degree with which the issue or policy directly impacted their district. Staffer 3 responded assuredly:
I think you can find people who…if you approach them and you say, “Hey, I have a good idea. I like you, maybe because I’ve seen you around the halls, and you sound like a reasonable guy.” I mean, there are people like that, but I don’t think they’re extremely prominent. I think there’s motivators behind the majority of people. Whether it’s for a passion for a specific issue, whether it’s constituents, whether it’s party, whether it’s campaign money. Things like that. Those, I think, are like, much, much more prominent. But, as far as finding those people who are just there to– reasonable people willing to do the right thing, no matter where you came from, who you are as the posing member. Yeah, they do exist.

Before I could the staff member how he identifies or recognizes these members as such, he pressed on with:

I think they’re really hard to find, and I think maybe the reason why they don’t get as much PR is because…[t]hey probably get marginalized in a way because if you’re not– if you’re constantly doing things maybe which will realign you against the party… You don’t get a lot of PR from– I think those people really aren’t promoted as people who are generally great people. I think, what happens more often is they get promoted as betrayers.

Staffer 3 also explained these sorts of members often have a difficult time finding policy or issue partners within their own party because, after being “railed over the coals” for a non-party position on an issue, others do not want to be associated with these members because “it runs a chance of hurting you in the primary.” He ended his thought with, “And maybe that’s just because of the time I was up there: Things became just hyper-partisan.”

Noting, again, the prominent role political parties and party polarization played in his response, I asked if the intense polarized partisanship of the current Congress makes it difficult for members or serve others “whole-heartedly in the name of serving others.” The staff member replied immediately, “Oh yeah.” I then asked him why he thought that was, and he answered:

If you just act as an independent crusader, about doing the right thing, you don’t endear yourself to anybody else. And so, when it comes to actually doing something, which Congress is a cons– even within your own party, it’s a consensus organization…. You become kind of worthless because you can’t get anything done. “You did not come out
and back me on something else? I cannot come out and finally back you.”... That’s the sort of dilemma you run into is that, if you’re constantly just doing what you think is the right thing and won’t bend and support something else for somebody else, you don’t have any allies. And so, with the intense partisanship you have today...you essentially marginalize yourself. I mean, if you constantly go against the party in a hyper-partisanship atmosphere like this, which is constantly about who’s going to retain control of the House or who can take the next election to get president. When you see that actually the public is responding to this by the massive fluctuation in votes like this, they’re saying there isn’t much value in just being completely independent because all those moderates do end up losing. All the Blue Dogs lost. And then, guess what? You might have had great ideals, but those four years you’re able to get into office because you championed being independent, you now are out. And you don’t matter.... You can’t do anything.... So there’s a practical point to it too.... And so, if you have larger ambitions, even if you are an altruistic person, it’s so partisan right now and so destructive, you’ll be done.

Therefore, while Staffer 3 does believe members driven primarily to serve others have and do exist in Congress, he also believes such members may struggle to build coalitions large enough to get their policies through the legislative process. Moreover, Staffer 3 contends the current hyper-partisanship in the US political system makes it especially difficult for these members to win reelection. Furthermore, although Staffer 3 stated he had “a really jaded view of these people,” overall, the staff member seems to place blame more on the reality of the congressional environment and system than on the members themselves. This was also apparent by his response to my initial inquiry into his experiences with members motivated primarily to serve others, which was:

Well, I think there’s a lot of people who get elected and do truly care. They got elected because they are a local person.... So they genuinely want to improve their district or do things for their state or their community.... Especially when they’re first elected, people are really infused with the idea that, you know, “I am here to serve a purpose. People believe in me, they have chosen me to go and serve this purpose, and I am going to go and do that.” But then they kind of figure out the ins and outs of that system and how exactly, you know, sometimes you can’t really pull away. Things like not doing pork barrel appropriations spending to, you know, saying, “Well, this isn’t really appropriate for federal funding. Maybe this isn’t something I should be funding at the federal level.”
Along the same lines, the staff member asserted that some members of Congress secure federal dollars for local projects as a means to improve their district. “So, in their own minds sometimes, building a bridge to nowhere is absolutely doing that, even though if it’s helping—serving a town of sixty people.” After noting that most members also recognize such spending as aiding in their reelection, Staffer 3 continued with, “I don’t know, I think the longer you are in politics that kind of gets conflated. You cannot see the difference, maybe.”

While Staffer 3 seemed to attribute the disappointing behavior of many members of Congress to the current congressional environment and system, his moderate cynicism also extends to the members themselves regarding their collective ability to “do their jobs” or to honestly relay their motivations in public messages. During our discussion regarding how he knows what drives a member’s behavior during bill drafting or policy negotiations, the staff member said, “[Y]ou really discover those things by very confidential discussions over weeks or months with people. Because publicly, every member of Congress is there to do ‘the good.’ And you can come up with any message which could go to sort of ‘the lay and general public’ which might articulate that.”

Taking this cue, I asked him here, and then throughout the interview, what truth he believes we can or cannot take from public messages. I inquired into this area in an effort to identify potential indicators for members’ motivations in their public messages. Staffer 3 stated, time and time again, members intentionally use vague or hollow statements, sometimes “to just bury it and move on,” and other times for policy-related strategic purposes. “But, generally…if a member is working on an issue…and they’re putting out messaging which isn’t about the
substance of why they don’t think something’s a good idea, there’s ulterior motives behind [the non-substantive public message]. It could be because of negotiation strategy; it could just be that they’re trying to find a way out of it.” To clarify here, I asked him, “So the ambiguity is purposive, we’re just not sure what purpose it serves?” He responded, “Right.”

Building on this clarification, I then inquired, if not to public messages, where should those of us not privy to private, internal conversations look to better understand a member’s motivation for a particular action. In my question, I proposed with a tone of random suggestion that perhaps we could consider if and how the member is spending his/her time in relation to the issue. Staffer 3 paused, and his facial expression became very pensive. Then he exhaled and said, “Yeah. I think so.” He paused again, maintaining the pensive expression, and said in a newly warmed and bright tone:

That would be a nice indicator…. If a member gives a very sort of vague, noncommittal public statement regarding, you know, potential legislation or an upcoming issue, but you can see that they’re also meeting with a number of groups, they haven’t pushed this off their calendar, or maybe they’re actually attending committee meetings about the subject…. Yeah. I think that matters a lot more.

Shortly thereafter, we spoke about how the more general observer of Congress could decipher which issues members genuinely believe to be important. Staffer 3 suggested juxtaposing campaign platforms and messaging over time, looking for consistency and changes. Again trying to sort out when and in what capacity one can glean information from a member’s public messages, I asked, “So we should or should not throw out public messaging?” The staff member initially responded, “Yeah,” using the “blanket ‘say nothing’ cover letters or form letters” members send as responses to constituency or other public communication as an example of practically meaningless public communication. However, Staffer 3 then said, “When a
member wants to say something, they’ll go out and they’ll say it. And you can tell by the strength of the language how committed they are to actually that position…” Our dialogue continued as follows:

ME. If the messages are strong, then you think we can pull something out of it?
STAFFER 3. If the verbiage, yeah.
ME. But if the message is just their weird sort of nebulous statement about something?
STAFFER 3. It’s hard to find the intent behind it. You’d have to really do a deep dive on [a] member, their district, their electoral platform to figure out why they’re not actually giving you a commitment.

Less explicit than this ongoing discussion regarding members’ public messages, Staffer 3 indicated that a member’s consistent work or position on an issue over time is a sign the member cares about the particular issue. Throughout our conversation, the staff member repeatedly referred to consistency as a sign of a member’s sincere position or passion. At one point Staffer 3 explained that he often identified potential policy partners or coalition members by simply speaking to members who had been in Congress for a long time, as they knew where he “might find a friend.”

Furthermore, the staff member seems to identify which issues are truly important to members by somewhat combining the areas in which members choose to develop an expertise with the policy areas in which they have previously work. “People only know maybe a finite number of issues really well that they’re really passionate about,” Staffer 3 explained. “The other ones, they might just be like,… ‘I’ve never spent any time in public health, but here’s somebody I trust, something which is maybe good for the party, and you’re saying this is something we’re going to be promoting? So yeah, I’ll give you my support. Sure.’ But really, I mean, that member of Congress has no expertise actually in that subject matter.”
Finally, when the staff member spoke about members engaging with a specific policy “on behalf of their self-interest, getting reelected,” he depicted such members as late-joining, non-experts who could not speak to the substance of the particular policy they are pushing with their following internal dialogue:

So maybe it doesn’t have to do with your safety or security, or maybe I don’t know a damned thing about [the policy]. I have no position to actually say what’s good or what isn’t because I have no clue. But I will, because I know this wagon is going. I’m going to hitch onto it, I’m going to work on it, and I’m going to portray it as I’m doing— I have to articulate it in some way that it’s beneficial to you back in the district or I am doing it for the common good because, if not, then I have to articulate it as something else: I have to purely describe my self-interest.

Therefore, Staffer 3 identifies an issue as being important to members based on members’ consistent engagement with issues, their development of an expertise in the issue area, and their active leading in the issue area.

It is important to note here that members may have consistent issue priorities or have developed policy expertise due primarily to reelection needs. In fact, Staffer 3 relayed that is was often while working with other members and their staff on policy proposals or the drafting of legislation when he figured out the specific members where not, in fact, driven to serve others with their work on the particular policy. He could tell by their particular objections regarding the policy proposal or the draft’s diction that their work on the bill was much more about promoting themselves, as individuals, or about supporting or strengthening their party than it was about the issue itself or serving others. The staff member described this scenario with:

[I]f their concerns aren’t genuine to necessarily that issue, like the bill in discussion. If instead, it was about the author or the ownership of the initiative because they weren’t necessarily caring too much about the issue, they were more caring about them being somebody who passed a major piece of legislation…. And also it might be about self-ownership: “Hey, I’m the person who’s in this particular position which controls
legislation that would authorize something like this. I should be the guy who is primarily promoting this, not you.”

Conversely, towards the end of the interview, I asked Staffer 3 if there are specific issue areas or activities in which members will almost always only engage if they are motivated predominantly to serve others. After agreeing to my suggestion of human rights, he also named foreign policy as such an issue area, unless the specific policy is related to a US intervention or an ethnic diaspora in the member’s district. The staff member explained both his answer to my question and his following qualification with, “People don’t care about foreign policy” otherwise. Both human rights and foreign policy, as his named “other-serving” issue areas, fit with his earlier response to my inquiry into which factors or information he uses when trying to determine if a member’s behavior is driven primarily by a self-serving or other-serving motivation. Here, he initially enumerated: 1) party registration of voters within the district; 2) ethnic make-up of district, looking specifically for diasporas that may affect foreign policy decisions; 3) the member’s party’s platform on the particular issue; and 4) campaign donations, although those are “probably somehow tied to the district, more likely than not.” After pausing and seeming to review the list in his mind, the staff member then continued with:

[I]f you’re looking at the party, if you’re looking at the district make-up, if you’re looking at money, you can probably get a really good indicator if something is self-interested or not because you can tie the motivations back. And if it doesn’t line up with those three things, I mean really, you can look at, “Well, okay, is there a personal motivation? Are they just really passionate about this subject matter?”

I pushed to clarify here, asking Staffer 3, if a member’s behavior somehow does not align with these three factors, would he assume the member’s behavior is not motivated by reeelection? He replied, “Right. If it’s going against previous donations or a powerful lobby, if it’s going against what is polling well within their district, for sure. Yeah, there has to be some other
reason. And it definitely could be simply what they believe is the greater good. They could be doing a favor for somebody else.” I followed with, “You’re not sure why they are behaving this way, but it’s not about reelection in this particular instance?” He answered with, “That’s a good way of saying it.”

Staffer 4

I interviewed Staff 4 over the phone on a weekend afternoon, and our conversation lasted just short of two hours. After a brief review of the staff member’s responsibilities and degree of interaction with the members he served, I inquired into his experiences with members working to serve others or “to do what’s in the best interest of others.” The staff member asked, “You mean where I thought he did something that was very, very public interest regarding?” I answered yes. He then said, “Well, in that regard, I think the member I worked for was awesome,” and proceeded to share a couple of examples demonstrating and supporting his assessment.

The staff member’s first illustration told of his member refusing to support a unanimous vote in his chamber to go into secret session – this particular vote being procedural and one to which members almost always consent out of courtesy and understood necessity – until he negotiated with his chamber his right to make public any political or partisan bullying that may take place during the secret session. Staffer 4 was in the member’s office when the member objected to the unanimous agreement on the chamber floor, and “all of a sudden, all of the phones start ringing, and you realize that there is some…population who is watching CSPAN, and this was a decently big deal…. We got at least 100 calls. And, eventually, he got their agreement.”
The staffer’s second example was of his member standing up to his party, refusing to drop out of a primary election at their request. The member’s state legislature had redistricted in such a way that the member faced a fellow party member incumbent in the next primary election, and his party wanted him to step aside to increase the chances the other incumbent would win the upcoming primary election. Although I would most likely interpret this behavior as being driven predominantly by reelection interests, the staff member did not. Rather, he saw his member as motivated to provide the district with the most effective representation possible, mostly due to his member’s response to his party. The member told his party he was the more senior representative, his beliefs and issue priorities were more in-line with the opinions and needs of the district’s constituents, he had “charted a reputation” for himself, and, thus, he was in a better position to represent the district. “And the people agreed, and they elected him.”

Throughout our discussion Staffer 4 provided additional examples of his member standing up to popular or party positions, including leading a whip effort against a popular foreign policy decision and refusing to support the legislation embodying two of the president’s key economic policies, a president with whom the member shared a party affiliation. The staff member concluded his recounting of one of these examples with, “And he did things like that quite often. He was somebody who cultivated a reputation of being a principled guy. He used to joke with people that we worked in the Alamo.” It seems his member’s principled stands against powerful political actors and groups – regardless of the costs to his political future – is one key factor Staffer 4 uses as an indication that his member was “very, very public interest regarding.”

Yet, the potential for electoral rewards for being “a principled guy” were not lost on Staffer 4. He explained his member represented “a very liberal place” and, thus, the assumption
is that his constituents would want him to take such principled stands. However, this member was redistricted multiple times, and, by the end of his career, had a district that was roughly half liberal and half conservative. “And he did the same things as he did before…. It threatened his career on a number of occasions, and he just wasn’t going to compromise.” Thus, it was not just his member’s principled stands that made clear to Staffer 4 that his member was primarily motivated to serve others. Rather, it was his member’s consistent dedication to his principles for serving others, even when such dedication became an electoral liability.

Moreover, the member did not overtly capitalize or overly publicize his stringent dedication to his principles. “He wasn’t a radical about it…. He’s a normal… He’s a quiet guy. He’s not going to generate a lot of publicity for himself. He just took stands for what he thought was right.” Yet, Staffer 4 suggested later in the interview that members publicizing their behavior does not necessarily mean their behavior is taken primarily for reelection benefits. First, the staff member stated when members inform constituents of their work and behavior, “you’re both doing your job – because you represent them, they should know what you’re doing – and help[ing] you get reelected.” Second, the staffer provided an example of a member using the press and public forums to bring attention to a particularly dire situation in his district, a situation that needed to be addressed by the federal government and would otherwise be ignored. The member’s work to publicize the issue/situation inadvertently led him into a public fight with a political pundit in which the member had to defend his constituents and himself against the pundit’s verbal attacks and accusations. Here, too, Staffer 4 acknowledged both the member’s publicizing the issue and his valiant defense of his constituents most likely helped him get reelected, “[b]ut that’s not why he did it. He did it because he was personally offended on behalf
of his constituents… He was in it from the beginning because he thought that the district was not getting the attention it deserved.”

I immediately asked Staffer 4 what about this situation make it clear to him the member’s behavior was not driven by reelection. The staff member responded with:

Because he was so. Clearly. Personally. Furious…. It was like a level of emotion that it’s just hard to imagine somebody losing it over their election chances. Right? It was the kind of anger that people get when you, you know, threaten their child. Not the kind of anger people get when… [I]f somebody threatened my job, I would be upset, but it’s not the same kind of anger. It’s not the same…intensity of anger either, I think. And it was backed up by his spending a lot of time trying to raise attention for something that was, I think was very clearly, you know, very important to his constituents, and it should have been.

Therefore, Staffer 4 appears to distinguish between members publicizing themselves in order to get reelected and members publicizing their districts’ needs in order to serve their constituents.

The nuanced significance of publicizing member behavior reappeared later in our conversation. Staffer 4 shared most of the work members and their staff perform “is never in the public eye.” It’s not that members are intentionally hiding their activities and behavior, but rather, most of what they do just “never get[s] a press release…. We spend weeks of our time doing things that people don’t even know about…. [It’s] boring.” The staff member thus believes, “if we just focus on the visible parts – made visible for you – you’re missing most of what they do.” To ensure I understood the point he was trying to make, I asked Staffer 4 if we should look to members’ other behaviors, those not “pushed into the public eye” – the majority of what they do – to see what really matters to members. He answered yes. To transition into a
related area, I asked the staff member if he thought how members spend and direct their staff to spend their time is a good indication of what members feel is important. Again, he answered yes.

In addition to the last affirmative answer, Staffer 4’s method of answering other questions also supports the notion that time spent is a meaningful indicator of what members find important. Staffer 4 shared his member spent a lot of time at committee meetings, preparing for committee meetings, and drafting his floor remarks. Then, later in the interview, the staff member said his member’s number one priority was his committee work and, for his member, “committees were his thing.” “The other thing we, as an office, spent a lot of time on is constituency correspondence…. We spent an inordinate amount of time on letters.” The member, himself, would read all first drafts of letters, and either the member or his chief of staff would respond to all correspondence sent by someone the member knew personally. Thus, it was not surprising when the staff member named constituency service and correspondence as the member’s second priority.

Somewhat differently, when Staffer 4 spoke about which legislative issues mattered the most to his member, he named specific examples wherein his member took difficult stands against legislation that had a fair amount of support in Congress and momentum pushing it to passage. To ensure I had accurately interpreted his responses, I inquired into how the staff member identifies which issues were especially important to members, more generally. He said to first look at their committee assignments because members generally request the committees that cover the issues they find important. Furthermore, with the exception of Ways and Means and other committees with unique jurisdictions, most votes on bills that do not come out of a member’s committee are probably on issues about which members “don’t really care.” The staff
member said to next look at a member’s district, because issues or areas that matter to a district – such as agriculture in Texas – probably matter to a member. While this is “not perfect” because some members really care about issues, separate from their district, he “think[s] those would be two good indications. You can also see what legislation they sponsor because, if they’re sponsoring legislation, they obviously care about it. Right? And also, sort of less directly, if they’re sponsoring that kind of legislation, they care about it.”

The staff member also believes deciphering what matters to a member and their positions on issues is relatively easy. When I asked how members know what is important to other members – especially given so much of their efforts and work are not overtly publicized – Staffer 4 responded, “The bills they sponsor, number one…. And then there are a lot of things you can just do because you know the person. Right? Like, you know their ideology pretty well, and you know their district.” I followed up by asking if one knows members and their offices by working with them in the past. The staff member answered yes, but also members’ districts and how members present themselves – appearance and otherwise – are telling cues. Again to ensure I understood, I asked the staff member, “I think maybe what I’m hearing from you is, and, again, correct me if I’m wrong, that people don’t try to hide who they are here…. Members put out, very clearly, what they stand for and what they believe in…. Maybe they’re not as clear to their constituents, but the members know who each other are and what they stand for. There’s not a lot of hiding going on. Is that correct?” He immediately replied, “I think that’s exactly right.”

Pressing on, I inquired into how he would attempt to understand a member who voted against or stopped the progression of an issue on which s/he had consistently worked for years. He answered, “I can’t figure that ever happening.” I then asked, “So you don’t see a dramatic
change in preferences?” and he answered, “No.” Thus, consistency in both behavior and priorities provides Staffer 4 with insight into what truly matters to members as well as the position they will likely hold on these prioritized issues in the future.

When I inquired if the staff member had experiences with members he believed were primarily drive by reelection needs in a specific situation, he answered yes. Before I could ask how he knew or recognized their reelection-driven motivation, Staffer 4 continued with:

I think the way I would describe it is that there were things that the member didn’t care about. So there are issues you don’t care about or there are issues that you just care less about. And I think that those issues would be easier to sway.... I think it’s a lot harder to get somebody to be swayed on their core issues.... Those are the cases where you’re going to sway somebody: Where either it’s not going anywhere, but it’s a symbolic thing, or things where it’s just outside of their niche, you know, the core of what they care about.

Although I did not get a direct response to how the staff member identifies behavior motivated primarily by reelection interests, Staffer 4 seems to believe reelection concerns are more likely to influence a member’s behavior surrounding decisions on issues about which the member cares relatively little or in situations where the member’s behavior is more symbolic than impactful.

The staff member provided additional insight into reelection-driven members when speaking about how a member configures and operates his/her office.

You have almost, almost total control, as a congressman, to staff.... If you have no legislative staff, or one, and have five press people. You could do that. Right? And just spend all your time getting attention from the press. Right? Which people just don’t do. Like, that would be very rational. If you want to get reelected, I would– You’d have case workers in the district, because that at least avoids angry people. I’d cut a lot back on case work, though, and I’d cut a lot back on legislative staff, and I’d have all of my people on social media and Twitter, and I would have the public eye on me every which way from Sunday....
I think there’s a theory probably that constituency services gets you elected, and, uh, I don’t think it hurts…. At the same time, though, I think that the actual hard work of case work is extremely time consuming… And it’s not, it’s a very inefficient way to get elected… You’re getting votes one at a time.

I guess this is my take away: If the case were that the way you got elected… Your job once you got in Congress was to run things as though it were all about your re-election, then you would see the organization chart of a congressional office look very similar to the organization chart of a political campaign. And so, I’ve worked on a lot of political campaigns. Political campaigns have in order of priority, field workers, tons of field workers… Knocking on doors. Right? Making phone calls… Followed by communications staff, lots of communication staff…. You probably don’t even have– Unless you’re a gubernatorial or presidential campaign, you do not have policy staff of any sort. None. You have nobody thinking of policy. And then you have fundraising staff, which is probably third behind, communications staff…. Most people in a congressional office are policy staff, followed by case workers, followed by communications or maybe even– There’re definitely more schedulers than communications people…. The offices are not geared to getting people elected, nearly as directly as a political campaign… There’s no reason why you couldn’t have field people of some sort in a congressional office. I mean, you could have more outreach people who were going to events. I mean, you do have some, but you don’t have nearly as much…. As I think about it, it’s a decent point.

Here, I noted Staffer 4 was using the organization of a member’s office as indicative of a member’s general priorities. Yet, it seemed the organization of a member’s office was a proxy for total staff man-hours and staff effort for Staffer 4. I interpreted such a proxy partially due to Staffer 4’s discussion of members employing staff specifically for providing traditionally understood constituency services and partially due to the way with which he treated staff members as interchangeable based on their specific posts.

During the latter half of our discussion, I asked Staffer 4 what he believes makes a decision especially “tough” for a member. He responded, “Well, I would say a couple of things. So, on a policy level, somethings are just hard to figure out. Like, there’s no clear correct policy. Education policy, for example: I spent a lot of time studying it… And I couldn’t tell you, to be
honest, whether a given reform is good or bad…. Lord knows, things like the Iraq War, that was a hard call.” He continued, “When your caucus thinks one thing and you disagree. And that’s another really hard thing.” The staffer’s third and fourth type of difficult decisions relate to a member’s constituency, but in slightly different ways. First, there are “issues where you may think one thing, but your constituents think another. And the tough thing is…your average constituent isn’t, I mean they are not well versed on the issues like your average congressman. So, like, they may have an uninformed opinion that you disagree with. Right? And so you’re like, ‘Look, I know you think this. But, actually, I think this is better for you.’” Second, “by contrast, situations where the thing that’s good for your constituents is bad for the country…. So like, maybe your constituents are gung-ho that we need to invade Iraq or you’ve got a big defense contract in your district that’s going to be awesome for your district because it means jobs…. So like, what do you do? And I think those are tough.” Staffer 4 then further characterized decisions made difficult by party or constituency interest with, “Obviously, the latter two – where it implicates your relationship with party and your relationship with your constituents – is where it starts to oppress your election chances, and I think those are tough decisions.”

Although the staff member could describe the factors that make decisions “tough” for members, he also stated members rarely face such difficult situations. “I didn’t see a lot of those. I mean, people live in pretty gerrymandered districts. Like, faithfully, they do a pretty good job of representing the people. The people might be wacked out to the right or wacked out to the left, and they’re like crazily unrepresentative of the country, but their members represent their crazy unrepresentative district faithfully. I saw that a lot.”
Overall, Staffer 4 seemed shrewdly aware of the relationship between the member and his/her district as being somewhat unique to each member, which, consequently affects whether a specific action or behavior should be understood as primarily driven to serve others or serve a member’s reelection. He articulated this cognizance when answering one of my questions about members motivated almost entirely by reelection needs, with:

[T]he definition of just doing it to get elected differs depending on who you represent, and your party, and what they stand for. Right? So like, I worked for a member for whom taking principled stands was really helpful… [Others] didn’t have that luxury. So, a lot more of their stuff was transactional…

I think a lot of times, in the Democratic Party, what would seem to be sort of, “Well, they’re just doing it to get reelected. They’re just helping their people…” Well I mean, that’s how the party is constituted. It’s a coalition of people who are similarly disenfranchised and who are electing people to go to Washington and enfranchise them. The Republicans, I think, it’s different because I think that their view of government is a much smaller one, so– and a less exalted one. So they, I feel like they, that there’re a lot of Republicans who go and just don’t do a lot…. And like, they just don’t have the same view of government that Democrats do…. There’re a lot more Tea Party…Republicans who are taking big stands, and so you might say, “Oh my god, these Republicans are great!” But then you’re like, “Well actually, they don’t care as much about the mechanics of dealing with big government, A, and B, they’re getting elected by people who want that.”… Those are really popular people…. So they’re doing quote unquote the good thing even though it’s unpopular, but, like, they’re elected to be unpopular.

And so I think that, anyway, part of this is a definitional issue, and it actually is made complicated by the fact that the parties have different definitions of what is public-interest-regarding versus what is for the election.

Similarly, Staffer 4 recognizes the difficulty one faces when attempting to sort or order members according to their overall other-serving versus reelection-serving motivation. One of my final questions asked if the staffer thinks he could begin to place members on such a motivation continuum based on the frequency with which they engaged in specific behavior or how they spent their time. He answered, “I think that you could certainly do it. I don’t know how
useful it would be.” I then asked him why he thought it would not be useful. The staff member explained, “Because you have to have some way to measure how hard these varying decisions were. And so, there’s a frequency but also a difficulty measure. Like, how hard was it? How much it impaired their reelection chances… It’s not that I don’t think it would be useful if you could figure it out… I just think it would be very difficult to actually measure.”

Now wondering what utility he saw in such an exercise, I ask the staff member if this was “something that even makes sense to be thinking about.” Staffer 4 replied:

I do think it’s very useful. I think people have an overly negative view of politicians. I think it’s a tough job that, uh, it’s doesn’t pay that well. I mean it pays a lot of money except, unless you compare that to, these people are all lawyers in their sixties…and the hours certainly suck. So like, you work a lot of hours for a lot less than you make on the private side. And everyone thinks you’re a crook….

I have a high opinion of politicians – not high – a decently high opinion. I think these are people who do it because they care about it, they really do. And, they usually start out on like a school board or like a state RAC district because they care about their people. That’s generally why people do it. Now, everybody has selfishness mixed in – whatever they do – everybody in the world. But, I actually have a decently high opinion…

As you think about the actors in the game. Politicians get a rough, sort of rough take on it, and I think there are other folks who should come in for criticism first.

_Shifting from Personal Qualities to Behaviors and Issues_

Although some of the interviews reported in this chapter include discussions of which behaviors or issue areas interviewees associate with different primary motivation types, they did not all consider these factors. This project’s remaining six interviews, reported in the next chapter, focus more closely on members’ behaviors and issue/activity priorities. In doing so, they provide further insights for empirically detecting member motivation in a given behavior as well
as identifying members’ primary motivation type based on their decisions, specific types of behavior, and issue prioritization.
Chapter 6

Insight into Member Types: Legislators’ Time and Behavior

The six interviews reported in this chapter shift from focusing on a member’s personality qualities to exploring specific types of member behavior or chosen issue areas/activities. The following discussions concentrate on how interviewees use member behavior to identify which issues matter most to members as well as the activities or issue areas interviewees understand as being driven primarily by an other-serving motivation or driven primarily by a member’s reelection needs or political self-interest. Overall, the interviews provide two key insights. First, members’ decisions regarding how to spend their time and their consistent behavior demonstrate members’ priorities. Second, the motivation type interviewees associate with an issue area or activity is based on their perceptions of how and the degree to which the issues/activities likely affect a member’s reelection chances.

Member 5

The interview with Member 5 lasted a little over fifteen minutes and was comprised of roughly five minutes in the member’s office and then ten “walking and talking” minutes as the member headed to a committee hearing. I began the interview by asking the member about his experiences with reelection-serving versus other-serving motivations in Congress. His immediate response was “there is definitely a divide” between members who are working primarily for reelection and members who are “working to do the job.” I posed a follow-up question, inquiring into how he can tell the difference. Member 5 said he knows through the conversations he has with members when he approaches them to partner on an issue or piece of legislation. Some
members have told him explicitly they need to think about how partnering with him will affect their reelection.

I then asked Member 5 if he had a similar sense about member motivation for those members he has not approached regarding working with him, more specifically if he can see distinctions based on a member’s behavior. He replied members who are producing and leading legislation are those he sees as being driven to serve others. “All members are working a bit for reelection,” he stated very matter-of-factly. “Everyone faces reelection,” but the members who are “stepping out in front… coming out early on issues as opposed to letting the politics play out on issues” are those Member 5 associates with “working hard to do their job.” I asked the member if he believes the members he does not see working hard on issues are driven primarily by reelection needs. He did not answer the question directly, but rather stated members who are not working hard on issues are more likely focused on reelection than members who are working hard on issues. I clarified with, “Because these members are not working hard on issues, they have more time to work on reelection?” Member 5 agreed, with a “Well, yeah,” as if the answer was obvious.

He continued every member works on his or her own issues, but there is a distinction between issues which are clearly about serving others and issues about which member motivation is more ambiguous. Member 5 then used both entitlements and the gas tax as examples, identifying both as “politically risky.” “Take Social Security and Medicare,” the member began, “No one will touch them although everyone knows we must do something…. It’s just too politically risky to take on seniors.” Similarly, according to Member 5, the gas tax would be an effective way to create badly needed revenue, but it is tough to work on gas tax legislation.
“because no one wants to raise taxes.” The member then said the best issues to look at when trying to distinguish between other-serving and reelection-serving behavior are non-partisan issues. He then suggested I look at the New Democrat Coalition – of which he is not a member – because those members are “taking political risks…putting themselves out there and pushing things that would be difficult.”

The final interview question asked Member 5 how he differentiates between issues which really matter to members versus issues which may be more connected to a member’s reelection interests. He responded that, when a member has an “open door” regarding an issue – is always willing to work with anyone on the issue, regardless of their party affiliation – he knows the member is working hard on the issue because the issue itself is important to the member.

**Member 6**

The interview with Member 6 was held in the early evening, lasted approximately ninety minutes, and took place in a meeting room in the member’s office. As I briefly described my project at the beginning of our discussion, the member commented he agrees not all members of Congress are driven primarily by reelection. Thus, I used the point of agreement as a launching pad and asked Member 6 how he knows what is important to other members based on their behavior and decisions. His immediate response was that it is a difficult factor to determine and he does not envy me in my research. He continued, however, to explain one’s ability to decipher what is important to individual members is affected powerfully by the environment members face.

Comparing members’ current institutional and situational reality to that of the 1970s and 1980s, Member 6 asserted members of Congress used to understand themselves as working on
“the same team.” He attributes this partially to the fact that many members in the 1970s and 1980s had served in the military together, but members back then also used to operate in a “bipartisan social world.” Simply put, members and their families in the 1970s and 1980s used to spend time together, regardless of their party affiliation. Now, conversely, members are in Washington, D.C. Monday through Thursday, typically have three lunches scheduled with their political party in some capacity, and are “absolutely running the whole time.” Thus, members can gain an understanding of what is important to members of their party by looking to what they present at their lunches and other party meetings, what they write in their intraparty decision memos, and what they discuss during the informal conversations that arise during and surrounding their party engagements. The motivation of or issues of importance for members of the other party, however, are much more difficult to determine because there is “much less contact” with members of the other party. According to Member 6, a member “must seek out contact with members of the other party during the chaos” that is Monday through Thursday on the Hill. Here I noted Member 6’s contention that the current congressional environment is one in which engaging with members of the opposing party takes more time and energy than engaging with members of one’s own party.

Overall, Member 6’s approach to understanding members’ respective motivations and deciphering what really matters to individual members felt more analytical than all other members I interviewed. This fits impeccably with his self-identification as a “policy wonk” and his multiple comments throughout our discussion regarding the difficulty he believes I face in my efforts to construct an empirically based research framework and process for studying member motivation systematically. Yet, neither his demeanor nor his tone was cold or
dismissive; He was just the opposite. When he spoke about his work – both as an elected official and in the private sector – his voice warmed with compassion, not pride, when he described the tangible positive effects he has had on the lives of others. When he inquired into my research and noted the challenges I face, he seemed genuinely interested, encouraging, and respectful of my project goals. And when he described his experiences in Congress, he spoke with a constant seriousness – a reverence for his official duties and the capacity of his office – and a bounded weariness for the hectic lifestyle members must now endure.

This bounded weariness for the life of a modern member of Congress soon rose as a theme, persisting in some form in most of Member 6’s answers. As noted above, he described members’ D.C. environment as “chaos” and members as “absolutely running the whole time.” The member spoke more directly to the lifestyle common to most members when stating, “It’s a hard life up here,” explaining members have no real personal time. According to Member 6, when people get elected to Congress, they lose control over their time: There is not enough time for members to exercise regularly, read books, or engage in other personal activities. The member shared that while in the final stage of his first reelection campaign for Congress, he turned to his wife calmly and said, in a very straightforward manner, he will either “win reelection, or win my freedom.” In fact, the demanding life of members of Congress is part of why Member 6 is confident many members are not primarily motivated by reelection.

To be clear, I contain his weariness to “bounded” because Member 6 gave no signs of exhaustion or disillusionment. He seemed both determined and galvanized to tolerate the lifestyle he now thoroughly understood in order to serve. Yet, he appreciates the frustration he sees in members whom he described as “used to getting stuff done,” but who are now forced to
“flail away” in the especially obstinate congressional environment of today. The member depicted this sentiment on a very human level, explaining especially frustrated members have the momentary thought of, “This is not how I want to spend my life’s energy.”

Recognizing the notion of a member’s time and energy as scarce consistently appearing in Member 6’s answers, I asked the member expressly if he believes how a member spends his/her time is indicative of the member’s motivation or what the member deems important. He responded that we should think of a member’s willingness to exert energy and time on a specific issue as “existing on a spectrum,” with members spending their time “based on what they think is worth doing.” Earlier in the discussion, the member said he knows issues are important to members when they are active in writing and passing bills, and members will approach other members to get support for issues that really matter to them.

The idea of members choosing to spend their time on activities that are “worth it” was also implicitly present in Member 6’s discussion of reelection activities. He shared there are parts of every week which will always be about reelection, regardless of whether the member is principally driven to serve others in other activities or behaviors. These are primarily fundraising sessions, and members call or speak with people who have the money to make larger donations because “we don’t have a lot of time.” In the same vein, Member 6 explained members who do not have to fight hard for reelection can “focus on making things better” for others, and candidates who do not believe they have a chance to win the election “can run on issues [they] really care about.” Therefore, it appears Member 6 sees a member’s reelection needs as somewhat restricting how a member spends their time and which issues a member can more readily champion.
When the member made the statement about members running on issues they really care about, I immediately followed up by inquiring into how one can tell the difference between an issue chosen for reelection purposes or an issue chosen because the candidate feels strongly about it. He replied people will talk about the issue with an “earnestness” or “authenticity” when they really care about an issue. He continued, “[S]ometimes authenticity helps get you reelected,” but, “if you know the person,” you will know if they are sincere in their work on a specific issue. I then ask if, for those of us who do not have personal conversations with our candidates, there are certain issues or activities he believes are clearly not about reelection. Member 6 paused to think, and then he answered that it is “hard to say whether an issue will hurt or help them” get elected. I next inquired about situations in which candidates or members change their position on an issue to which they had always seemed very dedicated, specifically if these situations clarify if the issue truly matters to the member or candidate. He responded that, if the change is in-line with constituency preference, then he would question whether the member originally cared that much about the issue. Thus, Member 6 seems to believe both that members are consistent in their positions on the issues they truly find important and that members will speak about these issues with an honest sincerity.

The interview’s final area of discussion revolved around what Member 6 considers to be especially “tough decisions” for a member of Congress. He first shared that situations in which a member’s “personal beliefs are in deep conflict” with their district make decisions extremely hard for members. He then reiterated how difficult these decisions truly are, and finished by telling the story of one of his colleagues crying quietly on the chamber floor as s/he had to cast a vote under such circumstances.
I followed up by asking if there are additional types of “tough decisions” for members. He responded rather quickly, saying it is always difficult to decide how to vote when a bad amendment is attached to a good policy or when there is an overall good bill, but there are disagreements over a single clause. The member then paused, before continuing that decisions regarding “enormously complicated policies, such as patent reform” are difficult because it is very hard to figure out “what really is best.” Moreover, these decisions are not hard solely due to the complexity of the policy area. Rather, compounding the difficulty is the fact that typically both sides debating the policy have valid or reasonable arguments. Therefore members must consider both arguments while attempting to sort through the complexity of the policy in order to achieve a “reasonably balanced policy.”

Member 7

The interview with Member 7 took place entirely in his office in the late afternoon, and our discussion lasted a little over forty uninterrupted minutes. I began the interview by inquiring into the member’s “typical day” in Washington, D.C. and in his district. Yet, before I could finish my question, I noticed the member’s expression change to one of slightly amused disagreement when I used the phrase “typical day.” Thus, I stopped my question mid-sentence and asked, “Do you have a typical day in Washington? Is that even a thing here?” He replied immediately, “No. I mean, every day is different,” and then he shared with me what he did that particular day, prior to our interview. Member 7 continued with, “A typical day down here begins around eight o’clock in the morning, and, if I’m lucky, I could be home by eight at night… And then I go home to [my home state], and then I have a schedule all weekend. The thing about this job is that it’s all encompassing, and there is very little down time, and it can be
exhausting. But, there is really no typical day.” I followed up with, “Other than just busy? Busy is typical?” While nodding yes he said, “Busy is typical, but busy with what changes.”

I then asked if Member 7 has a typical day when in his home district. He replied his days in his home district are usually spent meeting with constituents or traveling to his meetings with constituents, “[b]ut it rarely includes a day of nothing. If I want to go to a movie, I’ve got to schedule it… My anniversary is coming up. I have to make sure I schedule it, because if I don’t, it gets filled up with something.”

Recognizing the member understood the value of his time, I later inquired into the criteria or process he uses to make scheduling decisions. He answered rather quickly with, “So my thing is, I try to say yes to as much as I can…. And obviously priority goes to [my home state] stuff, as much as possible.” But then, when he reviews his daily schedule each morning with his staff, Member 7 regularly asks them with an exhausted bewilderment, “‘How did we agree to all of this?’ and they say, ‘Well, you said yes to this, and you said yes to this, and you said yes to this.’” I then asked if there are certain things he will always find time for, and he responded, “I try to find time to see anybody who wants to see me. Especially my constituents.” He relayed he also tries to find time every day to prepare for his committee duties by reading and reviewing materials on the bills coming before his committee. “I’ve got to ask questions. I’ve got to get up to speed on it. And so I need time to digest everything because I don’t know everything, and so I need time to read and reflect and get briefed by my staff.” He then paused, half-smiled, and said with a calm and somewhat pleased tone, “And I try to make time for causes that are near and dear to my heart.” I noted here how Member 7 seems to be dedicated to fulfilling his committee
duties and being available to meet with constituents and groups while simultaneously pleased by and passionate about working on the issues he finds especially important.

When I asked Member 7 about his experiences with members working hard to serve others, regardless of how it affects their reelection, he first responded with a point of clarification. “Well, first of all, I think you wouldn’t be human if you were in Congress and didn’t worry about reelection… If you think you’re doing good work, you obviously want to get reelected so you can continue to do good work.” He then shared a story about a conversation he had with one of his mentors in Congress.

When I first got elected…he sat with me on the House floor when I got sworn in, and I asked him, “What does it take to be a good member of Congress?” and his response was, “I’ll give you the same advice that was given to me, which is: If you want to be a good member of Congress, you have to get over the fear of losing an election all the time because if that’s all you’re consumed with, all you’re going to do is respond to public opinion polls, and you’ll be voting against your conscience in some cases. So, the job’s not worth it.”

And I think of that a lot. As I’ve said, you wouldn’t be human if… But I think [my mentor’s] point is well taken, and that is, it really is a privilege to be here, and you’ve been given a gift by your constituents to serve your country, and if you’re not giving them your best judgment, then what are you doing here? I have to sit here and read everything and go to all of these hearing and sit with countless – not only constituents but people who come in here on various issues – and constantly mull over issues with my staff…. Basically I am hired to do all the research and then give you my best judgment as to what to do. If I’m not doing that, then it’s not worth being here.

Thus, Member 7 recognizes the reelection concern as both natural and somewhat universal. It is not the concern with reelection that indicates for Member 7 if a member is motivated primarily by reelection, however. Rather, it is members who act against what they believe to be the “best” policy decisions who Member 7 understands as driven predominantly by reelection. Additionally, Member 7 made clear here he believes members’ shared purpose is to “do all the research” and then provide their “best judgement” when making policy decisions.
Yet, Member 7 also acknowledged he knows some members’ decisions and actions can be driven primarily by reelection. Moreover, he appeared to differentiate between two types of such members.

You get elected to Congress, and for some... They like the status, they like the trappings, they like the attention, they like the prestige.... They just like it. They like the feel of being here. They like being called “Congressman.”... So, they want to keep it. And there are some people who come from very marginal districts where every couple of years is a big struggle. That “survivability” becomes an issue they think about a lot more.

Member 7 seems to understand those who make single or sporadic decisions based on reelection needs, especially if members perceive real threats to their reelection prospects. He recalled discussions with some of his colleagues immediately following them voting to go war in Iraq in 2002, during which they admitted to him “they really didn’t want to vote for the war, but they’d get killed at home if they had [not] voted for it.... [T]hey voted for it because they were afraid of the political repercussions. I’d have a tough time looking at myself in the mirror.” The member also named gun control as an area where members “vote against their own conscience” because “they made a calculation...and they couldn’t compete with the money that the NRA had to distort the issue anyway they wanted to.” Yet, Member 7 did not portray these members as cold and callous in their calculus. Rather, his tone requested a practical mercy for these members faced with an unfortunate and impossible decision. “I remember during the shootings at Sandy Hook, people voting against, like, universal background checks because the NRA was breathing down their throat, but they were heartbroken because they had met with parents of little children who had been blown to pieces.”

Furthermore, Member 7 articulated the reasoning he believes many of these members use to justify such decisions, asserting, “[S]ome of those people make judgements, ‘Well, you know
what? Even if I vote with the NRA, I know it’s the wrong vote, but it’s not the most important issue to me. There are other issues that are more important.’ So these people justify it by making these, ‘I’ll be bad on this, but I’ll be extra good on this.’” Thus, while it is clear Member 7 recognizes and seems to understand both the difficulty and logic in members making specific decisions based principally on reelection needs, he also sees such choices as driven by a members’ respective reelection needs because members are choosing reelection over supporting what they believe to be “good,” “right,” or “correct” policy.

Moreover, Member 7 contends most people run for Congress with the intention of making “good” or “right” policy decisions, but can end up putting reelection first. “Let me put it this way,” he explained, “I think most people that come here come here because they want to make a difference. I think too often, a lot of times when people get here, they realize how hard it is to stay here, and so they make compromises… [T]he only reason why they do that is because they want to win reelection. And I think that’s not the way our Founding Fathers envisioned this place to be.” I followed his statement immediately by asking what he thinks “makes it hard to stay here,” to which he replied knowingly and unaffectedly, “You’ve got to raise lots of money. So, if you vote against corporate special interests, and oil companies, and banks…” before trailing off. I nodded and began to write down his response, but before I could ask him for clarification, he continued, “The poor people’s association doesn’t have a lot of money, and it’s expensive to run [ads on] TV… Sometimes people will think, ‘I need to raise money, so therefore I’ll vote for some of these special interests even if I know it’s the wrong vote.””

Time and time again throughout the interview, Member 7 returned to the idea of money poisoning policy, at one point stating “money is the most corrupting and potentially destructive
influence [in D.C.].” So, I finally asked him directly if identifying a member’s large campaign donors or fundraisers would help lend insight into whether a member’s behavior or decision was motivated primarily by reelection-interest in a particular situation. I was a little surprised when he hesitated to agree with my suggestion. According to Member 7, where a member finds campaign dollars is a less significant motivating factor than the threat of money being spent to defeat a member in the next campaign.

Instead of exploring a member’s campaign contributors and fundraisers, the member looks to other members’ respective explanations for their decisions and behavior to gain a better understanding of members’ motivations. More specifically, he stated multiple times that one telltale sign of a member driven by reelection is a member who cannot articulate clearly the reason for his/her vote or decision. Toward the end of our discussion, he reiterated this idea with, “But I think, as I said, if somebody’s just voting for political expediency’s sake and that’s it, you usually can tell when they can’t defend their vote. When they’re basically saying, ‘Oh, I think it was the right vote,’ but they can’t explain why it’s the right vote. And that’s usually a giveaway.”

When I asked Member 7 if there are certain activities or behaviors he believes most members of Congress understand as being “clearly not about reelection,” but rather as being driven by a different motivation, he replied, “I think issues of human rights. I think issues of poverty. Poor people don’t vote, by and large.” I then inquired about members who represent especially poor districts. Using the example of SNAP food assistance, I asked about the votes of members representing constituents who rely on SNAP, if their vote in favor of SNAP benefits could be considered as motivated by the members’ reelection needs. He seemed to disagree,
stating members who represent such districts should support SNAP programs, thereby tacitly differentiating between serving one’s district and serving solely one’s reelection. Member 7 shared he knows members on the Agriculture Committee who represent very poor, rural areas who vote against supporting the SNAP program “because the prevailing viewpoint amongst those who participate in the election – who actually vote – is that people are taking advantage of the system.” Thus, members who are trying to find savings in the Farm Bill will not “rob it from the corn subsidy or from the cotton subsidy. You’re going to say, ‘You know what? These people don’t vote. I’ll cut food stamps.’” Member 7 then made explicit the distinction I sensed earlier with, “So, sometimes you get members of Congress who are voting in a way that is popular for them personally in their districts, but it is really against the self-interest of the people who live in their district.” Member 7 understands these members as motivated predominantly by reelection.

He continued to discuss his frustration with this reality, stating he encourages advocates to organize protests or other activities in members’ districts to make members suffer at the polls when they vote against advocates’ hunger or poverty issues. He finished his thought with, “There are issues, the NRA, whether it’s guns or trade bills… Stuff that people sometimes vote for because they feel, if they don’t, they have a lot of explaining to do, and it’s politically difficult. But they don’t feel it’s politically difficult to vote against poor people.” Using this final statement as a method for finishing and clarifying this portion of the interview, I asked the member if these sorts of issues are broadly understood by members as not having much to do with reelection. He replied, “Yeah: human rights, poverty. I think it’s probably easier to be against the environment than it is to be for the environment in this city. Civil rights, voting rights
is, again, one of those issues.” All of these issues – notably – serve the interests of individuals or groups Member 7 identifies as not likely to provide electoral rewards to members.

Fitting with his other interview answers and insights, the member’s description of “tough decisions” included moneyed interests as a key factor. However, money is not the main element that can make a decision difficult for members, according to Member 7. Rather, spotlighting the other theme central to our discussion, he made clear a member’s conscience or what s/he knows is the right policy decision is the constant in all tough decisions. After agreeing decisions can be difficult for members when campaign contributors are at odds with how the member wants to vote, Member 7 said public opinion can also make choices hard for members. “If seventy-five percent of your constituents say, ‘Go to war,’ but you think it’s wrong, that’s not an easy vote. And you have to decide to go with what’s popular or with what your gut tells you. You name the issue, and depending on where you represent, where public opinion is, or where the money is, it can be difficult to make a decision.” Thus, for Member 7, difficult decisions are those that pit serving others through what a member deems to be “good policy” against a member’s reelection-interest.

Finally, the member spoke briefly about his perception of what motivates most people to run for Congress. Although he – of all members interviewed – was the most willing to discuss how reelection concerns can be the primary force driving a member’s actions at times, Member 7 still believes members come to D.C. to serve in some capacity:

Yeah, sometimes people make calculated votes solely on reelection. Sometimes they don’t. But I don’t think people come here solely to win a seat and then figure that they’re going to do nothing, that their whole purpose here is just to win reelection. It may turn out to be that way, but I don’t think anyone enters this place with that as their desire: “Elect me to Congress so I can spend the rest of my time just trying to get reelected.”
think most people like to come here and say, “When I leave here, I would like to be able to say I helped do some things, and here they are.” More than just, “I survived.”

**Member 8**

I spoke with Member 8 for a little over forty-five minutes, and our interview took place in the main conference room in his district office. I began our discussion as I did all interviews, with a review of the project and how our interview would be used in the research. While explaining that the project challenges the assumption that all members of Congress are primarily driven by reelection and seeks to provide an alternate framework that allows members to be motivated to serve others, Member 8 interrupted me for the first, yet certainly not the last, time. Here he interjected, “I don’t think they’re mutually exclusive at all.” I encouraged him to articulate his thought further, and he did with:

First of all, I think it’s a misunderstanding to think that getting reelected is somehow a bad thing…[b]ecause reelection is reaffirmation that people think I’m doing a good job. Number one. And if I’m not doing a good job, they shouldn’t reelect me. And number two, it’s also reality. I don’t know anyone who has ever had a job that they wanted to get fired from. I don’t want to get fired. I want to keep my job. And for me, it’s reelection…. So, I don’t find that a problem. Now, don’t get me wrong: I also think that my voters, in general, are good people who understand what I do, and that means that they want me to help people. And, again, I don’t make any bones about it. I don’t think anyone should or does. Very few people do. I don’t see the things as necessarily mutually exclusive at all; I actually think they overlap pretty directly.

Thus, Member 8 both views seeking reelection as a reality for all or most members – regardless of their primary motivation orientation – and understands reelection as the means by which voters hold members accountable for their work. Accordingly, I took this opportunity to ask Member 8 if he has ever experienced a situation or seen other members willingly sacrifice reelection in order to serve others. He explained this does not happen very often because
members know their districts’ opinions about “most of those fault lines,” and they would not get elected in the first place if they did not vote or act in accordance with the district’s wishes on these “hot button issues.” Yet, “[i]t will happen, and it will happen particularly on unseen situations. And there are always some, but not many. War and peace is a classic example… 9/11… Nobody saw that coming. And so, nobody saw the reactions to it coming.” I made two notes here. First, Member 8 associates reelection sacrifice with members acting against the wishes of their districts. Second, Member 8 contends members make such sacrifices rarely because they hardly ever have to choose between supporting their constituents’ opinions and supporting what they believe to be the “right” policy decision on issues with which constituents decide their votes.

The member’s upbeat, “no-nonsense,” pithy responses and relatively regular interrupting continued throughout the entire interview, first setting and then perpetuating a swift and brightly-cadenced conversation. We moved from discussing the rare circumstances wherein members may need to sacrifice reelection to Member 8’s experiences with members acting against their better judgement in order to please their constituents. Although I intended to ask about situations wherein members disregard serving others in order to secure reelection, he interrupted me before I could pose completely the actual question. I began, “On the flip side, do you have any experiences where—” but the member jumped in here with, “Oh. A lot.” I again encouraged him to continue his thought, and he stated:

Members are always struggling with it…. We are not blank slates with no ideas, especially when it comes to basic ideas. When it comes to the [2002] Iraq War, when it comes to gun control. Less so with abortion, abortion a little bit, but gun control and the Iraq War were two things that I saw a fair number of members vote against what they thought was the best thing to do because they see it as representative of their constituents.
And I don’t necessarily think it’s a bad thing…. That’s a fair position because everybody in elected office is always balancing their own personal opinion against what they perceive to be the opinion of the majority of their constituents. We are, after all, representatives, and that’s a fair thing to do.”

I noticed his response spoke to members representing their constituents as opposed to members working primarily for reelection, regardless of how it affected others. Thus, I redirected Member 8 by asking him if he could lend insight into how to differentiate between members who see reelection as a means to serving others and members whose reelection is an end because they like being in Congress. He replied:

There are 435 members of Congress. There’s been 10 thousand odd members of Congress in the history of the country. You’re not going to get all saints coming there. But, I will tell you that in my experience – I’ve been doing elected politics on state, local, and federal level now all my adult life – I think most elected officials are pretty good people. Even people I totally disagree with, I think their motivations are good.

Throughout the interview, I tried to unveil how he knows the motivations of other members are “good,” how he determines what drives other members, or how he identifies what members find important or significant. Although I approached these topics a couple of times, from different directions, and using various angles, Member 8 provided the same sort of answer each time. Simply put, he knows what is important to other members or what they stand for by spending time with them, talking to them, and just getting to know them. In fact, at one point he shared he believes one major problem with the current congressional environment is:

[T]oday’s Congress doesn’t give us near enough opportunity to spend time with each other off the battlefield…. How do you know how to compromise and who you can trust with compromise until you know the person?... Almost all the friends I made had something to do around travel because it’s the only time – the only time – that I get to spend more than five minutes with a member of the opposite party… that we’re not in a battle… And, to be perfectly honest, in today’s world, because of things like this [points at his smartphone] and all the other things we do – you know, personal life and TV and all of the other demands everybody has – there’s not much time left.
I identified two insights here. One, Member 8 understands members as having very little time. Two, the current congressional reality provides members with noticeably less time to meet and speak with members of the opposite party than to meet and speak with members of their own party.

Recognizing both that I needed to approach this topic from yet another angle and Member 8’s awareness of the scarcity of a member’s time, I then asked the member what he recommends we – those of us not privy to private meetings, party events, and other internal working of Congress – look to in our efforts to determine what members find especially important. His facial expression relayed confusion, and he looked to me for further explanation. Thus, I provided him the example of time spent in a committee, specifically the notion that the amount of a time a member spends in committee may indicate how important the committee or the committee’s bills are to the member. As I was providing this example, his expression changed from confused to dissenting, and he slowly began shaking his head no. Member 8 then said, “You won’t see me spend too much time in committee. I mean committee: There’s seventy guys, they pontificate like crap. I go in, do my thing, and I leave more often than not. Because you’re not changing anybody’s mind there. That’s not where minds are changed.”

I quickly followed up with the clarifying question, “Just to make sure I understand, your not spending a lot of your time in the committee, that’s indicative that you don’t think that the committee is really the best use of your time?” He responded, “It’s not… It’s really not. I go. We all go, but not for that reason. Especially the bigger committees… The smaller committees, like the budget committee, that’s a little bit different.” Member 8 then imparted his beliefs regarding effective methods for members to accomplish their policy goals. “[S]ome members…they love
to come up with bills. It’s like, ‘Guys, you’re the minority: your bills aren’t going to pass. Come up with ideas that can be incorporated someplace else.’ Me, I don’t file many bills. When I want something, I either work it into the bill, and you’ll never know it, or it doesn’t happen. I mean, ninety percent of what I do is stuff you’ll never know.” Both his differentiation between “bigger” and “smaller” committees and his approach to legislative activity seem to indicate Member 8 spends his time based on what he thinks will be the most effective means for realizing his policy goals.

Continuing this line of questioning, I asked Member 8 which activities he believes are the best uses of his time. He replied with the question, “For what purpose?” Not wanting to direct his answer in any way, I put on my pensive expression, hoping he would continue talking on his own. He did. “I draw a distinction between the district office and the D.C. office.” I responded that we should, therefore, discuss his offices separately, first asking which activities he finds to be the best uses of his time while he is in D.C. The member stated, “I spend most of my time probably networking with my colleagues. It’s not the only thing I do…. But if I ever kept a time card, that’d probably be the top item.” I then asked him why he spends so much time networking, and he said, “Relationships. All the reasons we just talked about.” I followed with, “Because that’s how you’re going to get your ninety percent of stuff done?” He nodded a single, swift, affirmative yes.

I then inquired into the best use of his time in his district office. “This is different,” Member 8 began. “I’d still say probably most of it’s networking to some extent, but it’s different.” He then continued, “If you listen to a group of constituents, you’re doing two things. Number one is you’re listen to them for their ideas, their comments, whatever it might be.
Number two, you’re also running for reelection. My staff knows anybody from the district who wants to meet with me, who insists on meeting with me, I’ll meet with them.” The member then explained that he believes it is important to his constituents that they feel like they are being heard, and he likes doing it, and it helps his get reelected. He finished his delineation of activities between his two offices with, “There is a lot of overlap, but the way I look at it: This office gets me elected. That office makes me effective in D.C. Now, it’s not that clear-cut, but a nice, general commentary.” Thus, Member 8 seems to not only decide how to spend his policy-focused time based on his beliefs regarding how to most effectively realize his policy goals, he also concentrates his time within his two offices based on the goals he has prescribed to each.

Changing direction a bit, I asked Member 8 to characterize decisions he feels are especially “tough” for members of Congress. He said he has not has too many “tough calls,” and he certainly hasn’t had one in a while. Here he reiterated his earlier statement regarding members infrequently having to face decisions on issues that will likely decide an election wherein they must choose between supporting their districts’ opinion and the policies they believe will best serve the people. Therefore, Member 8 appears to believe such decisions are particularly difficult for members, although he provided this sense indirectly.

After struggling a little to think of a decision that was especially difficult for him, the member then described a vote on a specific bill as being particularly tough. Although the member agreed with the philosophy and broad idea behind the bill, the proposed statute would have been disastrous for a major economic sector in the member’s district and it would not accomplish enough in its efforts to help Americans. In the end, Member 8 voted in favor of the bill. This was, however, after changes were made to prevent the devastating economic effects the
earlier version of the bill threatened to wreak on the member’s district. The member explained his vote with:

It ended up not being the toughest thing. They took care of almost all the problems I had, all the big economic ones. But, it was still— Even once they fixed that— So, first, I had the parochial interests – very clear, very obvious, and I think very legitimate. And then you add to that the fact that I knew that this bill was not going to be what I wanted. And I still voted for it. Cause, in the final analysis, one step forward is better than none. Yet, it was a tough vote for me. First parochial, but then it got fixed. And second, because if I settle for this, I’ll probably never see what I want. What I want is something much broader than this. And I probably never will see it.

Interestingly, Member 8’s example of an especially difficult decision was one he relayed “ended up not being the toughest thing.” It was still a difficult decision for Member 8 because he wanted a policy which better served others. Yet, because the final policy proposal aligned with his broader beliefs regarding how to serve others and did not hurt his district, it presented Member 8 with an easier “tough decision” than the earlier situation.

Member 8 had a much easier time characterizing what he considers to be a particularly “easy decision” for a member. He described such a decision as “[o]ne that combines my own philosophy with my clear opinion of what my constituents want…. They’re easy votes for me…because it fits with my philosophy, and I firmly believe it fits with the philosophy of my constituents.” The member continued the extreme and unyielding stances the most recent iterations of party leadership have taken in Congress have made many of his votes and decisions rather easy because the party leadership has not produced policy options that either the member could or his constituents would support. “They don’t care about compromising. They don’t even try to compromise. So, therefore, I’d say I can’t remember the last time – I really can’t remember the last time I had a difficult vote. They’ve made my votes easy, even when they could have been making them difficult.”
I ended the interview with Member 8 by posing a two part question regarding specific activities or behaviors and the motivations members typically associate with such activities/behaviors. First, I asked the member if he could think of any activities or behaviors that are so hard to connect to reelection he identifies them clearly as not being about reelection. He gave an example of his own hard work and time spent in a specific foreign country. “I just came back from [country name]. Do you think that I will get any votes? I’ve been playing with the [country name] issue now for 12, 13, 14 years. I can’t imagine I have gotten one single vote with that work.” The member had said earlier he thinks it is important for members to visit other countries, and, thus, I asked him if visiting other countries generally helps members’ re-elections. He stated confidently and emphatically, “No, generally, it hurts. People see it as junkets. ‘Oh, you must be going there to play golf.’” After sharing his views on the importance of such member visits, he ended with, “So, yeah, I think travel’s very important. But it’s also, politically, it’s a liability.”

The second part of my final question inquired into activities the member identifies as being basically entirely about reelection. Member 8’s response interrupted my final question, returning us – in both content and form – to his first interjection. I specifically asked, “Are there certain activities or behaviors that you feel are pretty much entirely about reelection and not about representing the district or about serving—” when he cut in with, “I don’t know the difference between the two. I mean, getting reelected is serving the district. I don’t see how you could possibly do reelection activity without serving the district.”
The interview with Staffer 5 took place during the afternoon in a quiet corner of a public venue. Our discussion lasted a little over an hour. To get a sense of the experience the staffer had with members and deciphering member motivation, I began the interview by asking Staffer 5 to describe the various positions he has had while employed on the Hill, including how frequently he interacts or interacted with his members. When both Staffer 5 and his member are in D.C., the two typically interact hourly during an in-session work day and roughly once a day when the chamber is in recess. Staffer 5’s job requires – among other things – that he be able to “speak in the voice” of his member.

I next inquired into how Staffer 5 knows what is important to members, specifically how he deciphers this in order to perform his job. He relayed one should first look at a member’s background, especially what jobs or positions s/he held prior to coming to Congress. For example, if a member has a background in small business management or ownership, the member can be expected to be business friendly and favor job creation. Staffer 5 also advised one look at the committees on which the member serves for insight into issues or areas members find important. Yet, the staff member continued, a member’s priorities and motivations are really something “you pick up over time by interacting with your member.” He then explained interacting with members and seeing members interact with others really helps one “understand” the member and what is important to him/her because, after so many interactions, one will be able to identify constants and “really just pick up on it.”

Similarly, I asked Staffer 5 how he knows what is important to members, more generally. His immediate response was two part. First, when members “get out in front of something” or
“take the lead on something,” he knows that issue or area really matters to the member. Staffer 5 admitted they are “sometimes caught off guard” when a member with neither background in an area nor a seat on a committee with jurisdiction over an area leads a policy in the area, but these situations make particularly clear that the area is especially significant to the member.

I gained further clarification of this first factor later in the interview, when we somewhat revisited this topic while discussing members’ respective legislative endeavors. I asked Staffer 5 if he thinks the amount of time a member spends writing a particular piece of legislation demonstrates the degree with which the member considers the bill or issue to be important. He paused before saying in an informing yet patient tone, “They’re rarely writing themselves.” After I clarified my question to be about the amount of time a member works to get a bill passed, Staffer 5 explained, “Look, every member wants to pass legislation, but there are a lot of hurdles, and it’s very hard.” Moreover, members sometimes really care about an issue, but they know it is “politically toxic” to work on a bill regarding the issue. Understanding his point to be that members often care about issues but cannot or will not tackle all issues legislatively, I asked the staffer, “So, if a member actually sponsors a bill, you know the issue matters to the member?” He replied no, because it is easy for members to cosponsor bills, and they may be doing so for a variety of reasons. I then asked about “authoring” a bill, and he agreed bill authorship is a pretty clear indication that the member cares about the issue in the bill.

The second factor Staffer 5 named as demonstrating issue or area importance for a member is members providing “clear messages” or “clear messaging” about their support for or opposition to an issue. If members are in favor of a bill or support an issue, “they will go to the floor and give an argument for it.” I asked him what he thinks about members who provide
public messages solely for the purpose of reelection, and he seemed unswayed by my suggestion, reiterating “clear messages” are signs of members’ genuine stances on issues. Trying to better understand his definition of a “clear message,” I compared ambiguous arguments with well-defined arguments, asking Staffer 5 if we can doubt the sincerity of an ambiguous argument but believe the sincerity of a well-defined argument. He responded by taking a deep breath and exhaling into a somewhat shrewd smile. The staffer then said, while he knows not all members are sincere, he believes most of them are most of the time, whether it be in their floor speeches, bill authorships, or other issue advocacy behaviors. Furthermore, he claimed one can typically detect insincerity in clear messages by simply listening or reading a fair amount of messages and paying attention while doing so.

Staffer 5 was consistent in this conviction – that one can usually begin to understand a member and what drives members by just observing them over time – throughout the course of the interview. When I inquired into how he knows which members to approach to build a coalition for his member, the staffer quickly breezed through preexisting networks and members with “similar interests” before stating to simply look at what members have done over time. Thus, Staffer 5 seems to see a member’s consistent engagement with a policy or issue as demonstrating that policy/issue is important to the member.

He then followed with, “and you can just ask them.” Although this staffer emitted a “no-nonsense” air himself, his above-mentioned conviction conveyed more than a similar no-nonsense amongst members. Rather, it depicted members as relatively uncomplicated and straightforward in both their messaging and their behavior. At one point Staffer 5 told me,
“Don’t read too deeply into things here,” continuing that members and their staff do not try to hide who they are or what they want because there is really no point in putting up a façade.

Shifting direction a bit, I asked the staff member what he believes makes decisions especially “tough” or “easy” for members. He responded a “tough decision” for members is “obviously” when what a member believes is “right” will alienate one of his/her constituencies. He clarified what he meant by “constituencies,” explaining a member’s constituencies can include both residents of the member’s district but also organizations or groups of people impacted by the policy. According to Staffer 5, it can be very difficult if a member’s view regarding policy that is “right for the district” or “best serves” the interests of others does not align with the view of either type of constituency.

The staffer then continued – unprompted – to explain why he thinks behavior that aids in reelection should not be conflated with self-serving behavior. “If you are doing a good job, you are getting reelected… Members get thrown out for going against their district.” Earlier, Staffer 5 stated unequivocally he believes “their job in [Congress] is to represent their district,” and if they are not doing a good job representing their district, “That’s why we have elections.” Thus, he understands members who serve their district with strong representation as those who rightfully get reelected, and those who do a poor job as those who duly lose reelection. District-serving behavior, therefore, is what earns a member reelection, not self-serving behavior.

In an attempt to separate the consequences of behavior from the motivation for behavior, I asked Staffer 5 how he knows members are driven to serve others and not driven entirely or primarily by reelection. He said he can tell members’ actions are motivated by reelection needs when the members value their jobs more than their service. The staffer continued that most
members are driven to serve others, with very few motivated almost entirely by reelection needs. I again asked him how he knows or how he would separate the two types of members. He replied he would look at their resumes and personal finances, with some members’ professional backgrounds and financial realities pushing him to really wonder what they would do if they were not members of Congress. Thus, Staffer 5 senses members are driven predominantly by reelection when a member’s work in Congress is more about a member’s personal needs and interests and less about his/her role and responsibilities as a public servant.

However, Staffer 5 is confident most members are “not here just to get reelected,” partially because he knows most members actually do not need their job in Congress. Yet, according to the staffer, there is more to it than just that. For most members, serving in Congress is “not the highlight of their life;” and it is “clear that it’s not just about a career” for these members. It is about serving others.

Staffer 6

The interview with Staffer 6 was held mid-morning over the telephone and lasted about fifty minutes. After reviewing briefly her job history on the Hill, we moved to discussing members of Congress primarily motivated to serve others. I initially asked if she had experiences with such members, to which she responded confidently, “Yes.” Staffer 6 then shared two distinct examples of the member for whom she worked doing just that. I followed her examples by asking what it was about these examples that make clear the member’s behavior was truly about serving others. She explained the member’s work in these situations was “very impactful” and “directly impactful” on people’s lives, whereas the effects of other actions are much more difficult to connect to the daily realities people face.
Interestingly, when I asked Staffer 6 about her experiences with members who are driven principally by reelection, she first stated how difficult it is to separate other-serving from reelection-serving motivation, and then used the same two examples to demonstrate reelection needs affecting member behavior. She clarified the impact reelection realities may have had on her member’s behavior by first posing the question, “Did his reelection needs motivate his time and effort on the project?” before answering with an emphatic, “No.” Rather than driving his actions, Staffer 6 explained, his reelection needs “informed his time and effort.” I pointed out here she used the same examples to illustrate both members motivated primarily to serve others and how difficult it is to separate reelection-serving and other-serving motivations. I then inquired into the criteria she used to select these particular examples as demonstrative of both. Staffer 6 answered she cannot separate the two motivations entirely in these examples because both examples are of member behavior that helped people in their daily lives and likely helped the member win his next election. Therefore she was not willing to place these situations into completely “separate columns” of motivation.

I responded by asking her, if not these specific situations, are there other behaviors or types of behaviors she believes she could split or place nicely into distinct, motivation-defined columns. Staffer 6 hesitated for a moment, so I asked if she could think of any actions or behaviors she identifies as motivated almost entirely by reelection needs. She responded, “Oh yeah,” and then provided the example of certain members sponsoring legislation to ban flag-burning every election season. Staffer 6 further explained this example, stating the members know the legislation is not going to go anywhere, and the issue itself does not really impact
anyone, but these members sponsor this legislation anyway, during campaign season – every campaign season.

I next asked the staff member about actions or behaviors she would categorize as being driven by an other-serving motivation and *not* by a member’s reelection needs, providing an example given to me by a member of Congress: members participating in the congressional commission on international human rights. Staffer 6 confirmed such participation is a good example of behavior motivated primarily to serve others, and then said anything dealing with international relations most likely is also driven by such a motivation. She continued, stating work done on the health or education committees may likely be driven primarily by an other-serving motivation because “these are not spending or money committees.”

At this point in our discussion, I noticed Staffer 6 had mentioned “money to the state” or “bringing money back” as eliminating behavior or action from the unequivocally other-serving motivation type quite a few times. So, I inquired into what it is about money to the home district that makes her place such committees or behaviors in different categories. She replied, “[M]oney is quantifiable,” which makes it easy for members to explain their actions or behavior. Wanting to clarify, I asked if having a dollar amount or number to present in public messages makes it easier for members to explain what they have done for the people back home. She answered yes, having a dollar amount makes it easier for members to communicate how their behavior and actions are “directly relevant” to their state or district. Yet, Staffer 6 does not contend bringing money to the district or state is a sign a member is not motivated predominantly to serve others. Rather, because this behavior has a high chance of helping a member’s reelection chances in
addition to helping the people of the district/state, Staffer 6 maintains the motivation driving this behavior is rather ambiguous.

Staffer 6 then expanded briefly the area of discussion by stating she does not find it bad if members are, in fact, driven primarily by reelection because “running for reelection means they are doing things to help their state” or district. “If they are helping people, I don’t really care what is motivating them.”

Although Staffer 6 was reticent to identify principally other-serving motivation during our conversation, she was very confident in her ability to identify the issues or projects her member found important. The staff member said it was “easy” for her to know what was important to her member because he spent a “tremendous amount of time and effort” on certain issues, both in Washington and in his home district. Moreover, because her member had served in Congress for decades by the time she worked for him, he had already made clear his priorities through his consistent work and unwavering positions on the issues that mattered most to him. Staffer 6 then stated most members have, for lack of a better expression, “a pet project or interests.”

Segueing with this statement, I asked the staff member how one can decipher which issues or projects are particularly important to members, across all members. Staffer 6 first replied to look at the records of the committee that has jurisdiction over an issue. Although members assigned to a committee are “somewhat obligated to be interested” in their committee’s issues, if a member is especially passionate about an issue or area, there will be a “record” of their involvement with an issue at the committee level. This is especially true of a member’s favored issue or area because a member will be “a leader” on their pet projects or issues, being in
the “forefront” of “legislative initiatives,” and then working to get the legislation passed through Congress and signed into law. Furthermore, members will also work on their pet issues in their home district, undertaking and supporting projects related to the issue in their community in addition to their legislative work in Washington.

My final question for Staffer 6 inquired into what makes a decision especially “tough” or “easy” for members of Congress. I first asked about “tough decisions,” to which she responded immediately that tough decisions are those in which members are fighting “momentum.” Upon my request for clarification, she further explained “being the holdout” on an issue or bill that is progressing because it is supported by a lot of other members is very difficult for members. The staff member named voting against going to war with Iraq in 2002 as one of these tough decisions. She then continued that going against their party without political cover is hard for members, especially if they are the “holdout” vote. Shifting to slightly different types of situations, Staffer 6 named “lightening rod votes” and “lack of information” as additional circumstances that make member decisions particularly difficult. I asked what she meant by “lightening rod votes.” The staff member described such votes as occurring when both the issue and the member’s position/vote are “highly controversial,” thereby making the member’s vote a “newsworthy event” which will most likely be reported by the media at length.

Conversely, the first type of “easy decision” Staffer 6 named are those regarding issues that are rather “unimportant” to a member’s district, especially if supporting one side of the issue “can get you a vote on something else.” She also said decisions wherein a member’s party supports the issue, the issue has “momentum,” and “you actually agree” are easy for members. Her final type of “easy decision” are those which include “strong constituent interaction” and the
member “has no reason to disagree.” According to the staff member, these decisions are easy for members because “active and mobilized constituents” provide the member with information on the issue, information regarding what his/her district feels about the issue, and “a rationale” for the vote or behavior.

As with other interviews, I asked Staffer 6 if she had any final thoughts or something she would like to add to our discussion. She paused for a moment and then said, “It’s so easy to castigate members and staff as only caring about reelection, but that is not necessarily true.” Most members, she explained, could be making millions of dollars or be otherwise very successful in the private sector, and staff make very little compared to what they could be making elsewhere. “People don’t do these jobs just to get themselves or their members reelected. It’s not just about reelection.” The staff member does not maintain all members are motivated purely to serve others, however. “Now, are some attracted to power?” she asked hypothetically before answering, “That is a different question.” Staffer 6 concluded by stating that it is not really possible to separate motivation from reelection because reelection is the means for members to achieve their real end.

*Finding Insights*

The fourteen interviews reported in Chapters 5 and 6 are rich with information and insight regarding 1) how interviewees determine what members find important, 2) indicators interviewees use to decipher the motivation driving members in various activities, 3) the shared notion regarding what members are supposed to prioritize, 4) how reelection fits into a member’s array of goals, 5) various personality and human qualities typically associated with members and types of members, and 6) decisions that are especially difficult for members. The next chapter
sorts and channels these insights into nine distinct findings that will be used later to construct this project’s conceptual framework and method for classifying members according to their primary type of motivation.
Chapter 7

Interview Findings: Member Goals and the Understanding and Treatment of Members, Their Resources, Their Activities, and Their Decisions

Major themes regarding members of Congress, their goals, how they perceive their purpose on the Hill, and how they tend to behave rise from the fourteen interviews reported in the previous two chapters. The themes are discussed as findings here, though the findings as explored in this chapter may be specific to this research’s interviewees. When the findings are extended to members of Congress more generally in subsequent chapters, this project uses additional research to justify the extension when necessary.

The first two findings address how scholars should approach a member’s reelection goal and deciphering a member’s motivation, given the realities of the system in which members must operate. Findings three through nine provide insights researchers can use to empirically detect and analyze members as actors primarily motivated to serve themselves or serve others. As critical findings, these broad ideas form the main foundation and tools for constructing a research framework for studying members of Congress as instrumental actors engaging in rational or extra-rational behavior.

Finding I – The Reelection Goal: Universal, Yet Typically Proximate

Almost all members of Congress and congressional staffers interviewed indicated most members are concerned with reelection to some degree, irrespective of the member’s predominantly self-serving or other-serving broader motivation. Member 5 and Member 6 spoke most directly to this universal concern, although it appeared in some form in almost all of the interviews. Member 5 asserted “there definitely is a divide” between members working primarily
for reelection and members who are “working to do the job” before directly and succinctly saying, “All members are working a bit for reelection.” He continued, “Everyone faces reelection” and then explained how he identifies members working hard to serve others. Member 6 stated expressly parts of every member’s week will always be about reelection, regardless of whether the member is principally driven to serve others in his/her other activities and behaviors.

Yet, interview responses also indicate that members typically see reelection as a means to achieve their deeper primary goals. As Member 7 shared, “I think you wouldn’t be human if you were in Congress and didn’t worry about reelection…. [I]f you think you’re doing good work, you obviously want to get reelected so you can continue to do good work.” Again, for Member 7 doing “good work” entails members working hard to promote their “best judgment” regarding policy that best serves the people. For others, according to Member 7, “They like being called “Congressman.”… So, they want to keep it.” Staffer 6’s final thoughts parallel this notion somewhat. Staffer 6 first stated clearly, “People don’t do these jobs just to get themselves or their members reelected. It’s not just about reelection.” The staffer then continued that she is not sure she can separate members’ true motivations from their reelection behavior because reelection is the means by which members achieve their actual or bigger goals. Even Staffer 4’s story of his member taking on his party to remain in a primary election – a behavior unquestionably related to reelection – told of a member fighting for reelection in order to provide constituents with effective representation. Thus, the seemingly omnipresent concern with reelection appears to typically arise from a member’s bigger or more significant goals or motivation.

Furthermore, many of those interviewed asserted members dislike greatly behavior focused exclusively on reelection. Of all interviewees, Staffer 2 spoke most explicitly to this
notion when stating, “Your life as a lawmaker is really sh--ty sometimes” because “the nature of the lives they lead, I think, is such that you’re forced to do a lot of things for electoral purposes that you find really disdainful literally on a daily basis.” Campaign fundraising, a behavior indisputably connected to reelection, was expressly named in three interviews as universally disliked by members. A staffer who had worked for multiple members said all of his members – irrespective of each member’s motivations, orientations, or personality – “hate” fundraising, even if they enjoy or enjoyed other aspects of being on the campaign trail.

Member 4 explained both members’ aversion to campaign fundraising and reasons for engaging in reelection activities when stating members “[put] up with reelection activities just to have the opportunity to serve…. If members could eliminate any activity, it would be raising money.” Similarly, one staffer named members fundraising as an example of “doing something you don’t want to do in order to get reelected” before rationalizing the behavior with, “[I]t’s kind of human nature to have to do some stuff you find unpleasant in order to pay the bills, in order to get reelected, in order to whatever you want…” Although he did not state members dislike raising money, Staffer 1 did depict raising money as a task compulsory for members to pursue their true objectives when saying most members have “aspirations of doing something” but they must also “raise money and play the game here in order to get stuff done.” Finally, in his discussion of money poisoning policy, Member 7 described members caving to moneyed interests as both personally difficult for the members and typically rationalized with the members’ understanding that money is essential for staying in Congress in order to “do good work” in other areas.
A member’s dislike of reelection specific activities is not indicative of either a self-interested or an other-interested motivation. Yet, the interviews provide a sense that members engaging in this distasteful purposive behavior are doing so because they view the behavior as a necessary means to a desired end. Accordingly, in addition to the explicit statements made by Member 5, 6, and 7 and Staffer 6, the interviews seem to indicate in general that a member’s reelection-driven activities or decisions should be understood as achieving a proximate goal, regardless of whether the member is motivated primarily to serve him/herself or others.

This understanding corresponds fittingly with the expectation among those interviewed that members facing more competitive elections will consider reelection more when making decisions than those enjoying easier races, regardless of their otherwise predominantly other-serving or self-serving motivation orientation. When describing two kinds of members whose actions and decisions are driven primarily by reelection, Member 7’s second type was members “who come from very marginal districts where every couple of years is a big struggle. That ‘survivability’ becomes an issue they think about a lot more.” Member 4 stated he expects members elected from “tight districts” to spend more time fundraising than other members. Yet, Member 4 does not believe such behavior indicates these members are principally driven by reelection. Rather, he asserted there is a high degree of “overlap” in the motivations for reelection and serving others. As Member 6 explained, members who do not have to fight hard for reelection can “focus on making things better” for others, and candidates who do not believe they have a chance to win the election “can run on issues [they] really care about.” In fact, Staffer 2 took the time to distinguish between members’ realities based on whether or not they represent “[b]attleground” districts where they face “really tough electoral circumstances.” The
staff member took care to make this distinction by because he believes electoral factors dramatically impact the degree with which reelection needs dictate member behavior. Indeed, at one point during the interview Staffer 2 expressly stated, “Not having to worry about reelection chances is definitely liberating.”

A related, but slightly different, expectation shared by those interviewed reveals a common understanding regarding how members consider reelection needs on an issue-by-issue or decision-by-decision basis. Many of those interviewed indicated the extent to which members allow reelection needs to influence their decision making is positively related to the degree of perceived electoral threat caused by one of the decision options. As Staffer 2 explained, “[R]are is the thing that wholly helps you or wholly hurts you” when it comes to the reelection impact of member behavior. “[O]nce you’re close enough to the fulcrum, if it’s going to hurt you fifty-one percent, but help you forty-nine percent, it’s a lot easier to be like, ‘F--k it, I’m going to do what I want to do. I’m going to do what I feel. I’m going to do the right thing.’ than it is if it’s like a g-d----d electoral disaster.”

Moreover, members are not expected to engage in behavior they see threatening their chances for reelection, especially if such behavior is “politically toxic” or “they’d get killed at home” for it. Member 5 named both entitlements and the gas tax as issues that are “politically risky” before further explaining, “Take Social Security and Medicare: No one will touch them although everyone knows we must do something… It’s just too politically risky to take on seniors.” Staffer 5 expressed the same notion, stating members often care deeply about certain issues, but will not actively legislate on the issues because members know doing so would be “politically toxic.”
Similarly, Member 2 blames intensely partisan districts – those that elect the candidate most faithful to the party’s ideology – for the ideologues in Congress who prioritize reelection over serving others. Member 2 seems to believe it is the election demands and “political threat” inherent in these members’ districts that prevent the members from considering ideas or policies not firmly located within their parties’ ideologies. When I asked Member 7 if the connection between a member’s campaign donors and his/her decision would be a good indicator for if the member’s decision was driven primarily by reelection interests, Member 7 stated that the threat of campaign dollars being spent against a member is a more powerful motivating factor than donations made to support the member’s campaign. Finally, Member 3 explained it is easier, “from a political perspective,” to tackle controversial issues with immediate costs and farther off, more theoretical benefits in the Senate than in the House because the longer terms in the Senate allow the benefits to materialize by the time Senators are up for reelection.

While some staffers and members seem to equate members yielding to these reelection threats with a primarily self-interested or reelection-interested motivation – namely Member 2, Staffer 2, and perhaps Member 5 – Member 7’s discussion of these decisions shows why such unequivocal connections should not be made so readily. Although Member 7 did portray surrendering to reelection threats as demonstrative of members being driven predominantly by reelection needs in the specific decision, he also provided a justification for such decisions that exposes the potential presence of intertwined other-serving motivations. First, Member 7 depicted the situations – those in which members primarily driven to serve others must choose between doing what’s “good” or “right” for the people and protecting themselves against a powerful threat to their reelection – as presenting members with unfortunate and impossible
decisions. Second, Member 7 contends many of these members who choose to avoid the reelection threat justify their decision with, “‘Well, you know what? Even if I vote with the [politically threatening interest group], I know it’s the wrong vote, but it’s not the most important issue to me. There are other issues that are more important.’ So these people justify it by making these, ‘I’ll be bad on this, but I’ll be extra good on this.’” Thus, although saddened by these decisions, Member 7 seems to believe they do not necessarily signify the member is primarily motivated by political self-interest or reelection interests in all or most of his/her other decisions.

Coupled, these two shared expectations – 1) members facing more competitive elections will allow reelection concerns to play a larger role in their decision making and 2) reelection needs influence a member’s decision based on the degree of electoral threat the member associates with one of the decision options – contribute further insights into members’ reelection-minded decisions and actions. First, they provide logical bolstering for the notion that members’ reelection-minded decisions and actions should be understood as instrumental behavior aimed at achieving a crucial proximate goal. Second, the responses suggest that an expressed concern for reelection is not evidence that members are only motivated by narrow self-interest. Therefore, instead of assuming reelection is universally driven by self-interest, one must look for and then examine motivations or goals beyond the member’s immediate, and very likely intermediate, reelection goal.

Finding II – Reelection, Members’ Purpose, and the Design of the System: Compounded Difficulty in Deciphering Motivation from Consequences of Behavior

The members and staffers interviewed seem to understand members as consequentially earning a deserved reelection victory – not necessarily fighting for or motivated by one – with
their work for or service to their district and/or the country. “[R]eelection is reaffirmation that people think I’m doing a good job,” Member 8 explained, “And if I’m not doing a good job, they shouldn’t reelect me.” Staffer 5 stated similarly, “If you are doing a good job, you are getting reelected,” and then he continued that some members do a poor job representing their district, and “That’s why we have elections.” Member 2 spoke to this relationship from a slightly different angle, focusing on members’ responsibility to represent their respective districts with, “You cannot worry about reelection. You do what is right for your district [pauses], and this typically gets you reelected. [pauses again] But, because it’s right for your district.” Earlier in our discussion Member 2 acknowledged that working hard for constituents does help a member get reelected, but he still views this work as being done in the name of serving the district, not for the subsequent reelection benefits.

The sense that members should be reelected for serving their district/the country or representing the people seems to flow from the shared perception of members’ of Congress purpose in the governmental system. Overall, those interviewed believe members’ purpose is to represent their district and serve the people. Staffer 1 and 3 both expressly stated their members understood themselves a fulfilling the role of a representative public servant, and six of the eight members interviewed spoke explicitly to this shared perception.

Member 1 said, time and time again, members have a responsibility to serve their constituents and their country, doing what is in the best interest of the people. In fact, his final thought began with, “Remember, it is all about serving the district” and ended with, “It’s about the district and America.” Member 2’s final, unprompted statement – one which he thought should be “obvious” – was, “You are sent here to represent your district. For many people, you
are the only voice they have.” When addressing what he believes to be a false dichotomy between working for reelection and serving the people, Member 3 said, “We clearly make decisions sometimes that we know that our constituents don’t agree with, but we do it very rarely because we’re not sure that that’s actually the reason we’re here…. We do want to be reelected. But we also know that the reason we’re here is to be the voice of the people we represent.” Member 4 stated twice during our discussion he respects members who hold views opposing his own. He explained at one point such members were elected by constituents who hold their same beliefs, and those member were “sent to Washington to represent their constituency,” just as he was. While sharing his beliefs regarding how members ought to behave in order to be “good members of Congress,” Member 7 said, “[I]t is a privilege to be here, and you’ve been given a gift by your constituents to serve your country, and if you’re not giving them your best judgement, then what are you doing here?... Basically I am hired to do all the research and then give you my best judgement as to what to do. If I’m not doing that, then it’s not worth being here.” Member 7 also expressed his views regarding members representing their district needs when answering my question regarding if we should interpret members’ votes supporting SNAP programs as driven by reelection interest when the members serve constituencies that rely on SNAP food assistance. Here he stated clearly such members should support SNAP programs because of their district needs. Finally, while discussing members balancing their personal beliefs with the beliefs held in their district, Member 8 named two issues where he “saw a fair number of members vote against what they thought was the best thing to do because they see it as representative of their constituents.” He then explained his view on such situations with, “And I don’t necessarily think it’s a bad thing… That’s a fair position because everybody in elected
office is always balancing their own personal opinion against what they perceive to be the opinion of the majority of their constituents. We are, after all, representatives, and that’s a fair thing to do.”

Therefore, regardless of whether the member is primarily driven by a self-interested motivation or an other-interested motivation, there is a two part common understanding that 1) the appropriate or correct consequences of member behavior is service to and representation of their people, however the member conceptualizes this service/representation and 2) when members provide such service or representation, they are appropriately rewarded with reelection. This does not mean, however, members serving the people are necessarily motivated primarily by reelection. It also does not mean members serving the people are necessarily driven primarily to serve.

Indeed, four instances rose during interviews wherein individuals spoke about members’ behavior serving the people when the members may very well not be motivated predominantly to serve others. One staffer member shared, “I think members are working really hard, and that their actions lead to benefits for other people. I do not want to venture a guess as to how well they’re connected from office to office to office… You can be working towards something [for self-interested reasons] that ends up benefiting everybody else.” Staffer 6 stated she does not find it bad if members are driven primarily by reelection because “running for reelection means they are doing things to help their state… If they are helping people, I don’t really care what is motivating them.” In fact, one member said he encourages advocacy groups fighting for the interests of poor or disadvantaged people to capitalize on members’ reelection concerns by drawing attention to the actions of members who are unwilling to serve the needs of such people
in their own districts. “Make them suffer at the polls,” he tells advocates, “Let their whole district know” what they did. Finally, when speaking about a member’s reelection interest and the interests of the people, a staffer who struggled in the moment to believe any members of Congress are primarily driven to serve others stated, “I mean, I think those interests not infrequently [align]. I mean, I’m a [member of a specific political party] for a reason. Right? I’m not a Nihilist. I think the [named political party’s] interests largely line up with good things for society. That’s how I get to work every day and not hate life.” Although these comments are somewhat different from each other, they seem to reiterate the notion that serving the people is the appropriate consequence of member behavior, regardless of the motivation driving the behavior.

The third component of the belief regarding the appropriate relationship between members’ reelection and their service to the people adds nuance to this otherwise almost transactional relationship: Also common among those interviewed is the notion that members should not prioritize reelection over serving and representing. This contention was expressed both implicitly and explicitly during interviews. Member 2’s frustration with ideologues seems to flow from how they stymie his efforts to pass policy and do his job. It appears he is disappointed in them, however, because he believes they prioritize reelection over doing what they know is in the best interest of their district or the country. Staffer 2 seemed saddened when sharing he presents ideas to members based on the political benefits to the actors involved, and he would “never pitch somebody on ‘X number of people in your state are going to be helped.’” Staffer 2 then trailed off before reflecting on this with, “God, it just like, it sucks. It really sucks.” When recounting some conversations he had with other members who voted against their
personal beliefs to go to war with Iraq in 2002, Member 7 described such members and votes with, “[T]hey voted for it because they were afraid of the political repercussions. I’d have a tough time looking at myself in the mirror.”

Member 3’s depiction of the House of Representatives as “more plagued” by intensely partisan districts than by the two year election cycle explicates further the expectation that members prioritize serving and representing the people – all of the people, as best they can – over their own reelection needs. While Member 3 recognizes the two year term in the House makes it difficult for House members to make “more controversial” decisions, he also sees the shorter terms as keeping members responsive to the opinions and beliefs of the district. “But of course the Founding Fathers intended upon that to happen,” Member 3 stated, “They set up the House of Representatives so that members were paying very close attention to what their voters believed.” Conversely, the “plague” of intensely partisan districts is members focusing on the key reelection constituency within the district, “a very small number of primary voters, which is not representative of [said member’s] district at large or of the state or nation.” He describes the latter situation as “the bigger problem.”

Other members were more explicit in their evaluations of members choosing to serve their reelection over serving the people. After making clear a member’s main objective should always be to serve the district and the nation, another member said, “You cannot care only about reelection and still serve your district...” Member 7’s statement about this relationship summarizes nicely the overall impression rising from the interviews with, “I think most people that come here come here because they want to make a difference. I think too often, a lot of times when people get here, they realize how hard it is to stay here, and so they make
compromises on issues that... [T]he only reason why they do that is because they want to win reelection. And I think that’s not the way our Founding Fathers envisioned this place to be.”

Furthermore, three interviewees spoke to how this shared belief – that members are supposed to choose serving the people over serving their reelection needs – leads members to try to spin, disguise, or avoid discussing their behavior that prioritizes reelection over serving the people. While speaking about ideologues, Member 2 stated that these members do not care about what is best for the district. Rather, to win reelection, “they vote their ideology, and then go home and try to explain it to their people.” Member 7 stated multiple times during our discussion that a telltale sign that a member is driven primarily by reelection in a specific action or decision is their inability to articulate clearly the reason for his/her behavior. “[I]f somebody’s just voting for political expediency’s sake and that’s it, you can usually tell when they can’t defend their vote. When they’re basically saying, ‘Oh, I think it was the right vote,’ but they can’t explain why it’s the right vote. And that’s usually a giveaway.” Finally, when Staffer 3 discussed members somehow engaging in the policy process for purely self-interested, reelection-driven reasons, he provided an internal dialogue for such members that ends with, “[A]nd I’m going to portray it as I’m doing – I have to articulate it in some way that it’s beneficial to you back in the district or I am doing it for the common good because, if not, then I have to articulate it as something else: I have to purely describe my self-interest.”

Lastly, the interviews provide an additional and significant insight highly related to the shared beliefs about deserved reelection and members’ purpose: The reelection reward for correct or appropriate behavior appears to more powerfully contribute to the difficulty of
deciphering member motivation than any other factor explored during this project’s interviews. This seems to rise from two factors.

First, because there is a shared understanding that members are supposed to prioritize serving the people over their reelection needs – and should get reelected for doing so – multiple interviewees do not trust entirely members’ explanations for their behavior. Even respondents who advised examining members’ floor speeches, explanations for votes, or other public messages for insight into a member’s motivation also all agree members will not announce publicly they are predominantly working for reelection with a given action. Such a message defeats the purpose of the action – namely, winning reelection – in a system designed to reward members for serving others. Thus, there is also a somewhat shared reticence among respondents to look at, or exclusively at, a member’s public statements to determine a member’s motivation. Accordingly, many interviewees resort to identifying the beneficiaries of members’ actions to understand member behavior.

Second, the design of the system makes it effectually impossible to determine a member’s motivation by focusing on who benefits from, or the consequences of, a member’s behavior. Because the US political system rewards members for serving others with a deserved reelection victory, member behavior that benefits others also very frequently benefits a member’s reelection. Member 8 expressed this tortuous relationship with, “I don’t know the difference between the two. I mean, getting reelected is serving the district. I don’t see how you could possibly do reelection activity without serving the district.” A staff member made a very similar statement when trying to explain an example of a member driven to serve his constituents with, “[Y]ou could say, ‘Well, but wouldn’t that also get him elected?’ And you’re like, ‘Yeah,
of course.’… Presumably being a good representative of the constituents makes you more easily elected… If you’re doing it right, you should be elected again. I mean, that’s the tough thing I guess.”

Accordingly, the US political system of reelection sanctions and rewards compounds the difficulty in using consequences of behavior to decipher member motivation. Looking at consequences of behavior to establish the self-serving or other-serving motivation driving the behavior in any situation is tenuous. Looking at consequences of behavior to establish motivation in a system designed or evolved to reward individuals for serving others is unworkable.

It should come as no surprise, then, that the insights provided by interviewees regarding how to differentiate between the motivation types driving members and/or their behaviors revolve around members’ character qualities or personal traits, the issues or activities members believe to be important, perceptions of future costs and benefits associated with a member’s behavior, and the choices members make when forced to choose between serving their own reelection/political self-interest and serving others.

Finding III – Primarily Other-Serving and Primarily Self-Serving Members: Both Exist

All interviewees contend, confidently, that members driven primarily to serve others sit in Congress. Moreover, nine of the fourteen interviewed (Members 1, 2, 3, 4, 6, and 8 and Staffers 1, 4, and 5) asserted explicitly that most members of Congress are there to serve. Member 1’s response to my question about members driven predominantly by reelection captures the overall conviction of these nine individuals. The member first acknowledged, in a detached and indifferent tone, that there are some members of Congress who care more about
reelection than serving others. Then his voice became both intense and resolved as he continued with, “but, for everyone one of them, there is a handful of other who come here to serve… There are a whole bunch of them.”

Of the nine individuals who believe most members of Congress are driven primarily to serve others, four seemed relatively disinterested and dismissive when speaking about members motivated predominantly by self-interest or reelection needs (Members 1, 4, and 8 and Staffer 5). Although they conceded the existence of primarily self-interested members, they appear to share a general sentiment that existence of such members is relatively unimportant. The following statement made by one member regarding predominantly self-interested members reflects well the overall attitude shared by these four interviewees: “I do what’s right [for my district]. Most of the people I serve with do what’s right. I may couch how I say it, how I do it, but I do what’s right. And I do what I think my constituents want me to do. Most everybody does that, not everybody, but I’m not going to judge the whole political world by the actions of a handful of people.”

In addition to these four, one of the nine individuals who contend most members of Congress are driven primarily to serve others stated clearly he does not see some members as motivated predominantly by self-interest. Rather, according to Member 3, “Obviously I think there is really no one here who is not here for the quote unquote right reasons.”

Conversely, four respondents (Members 5 and 7 and Staffers 3 and 6) seem to believe there is a more equal mix of both types of members serving in Congress. Although not all of the four expressly stated they perceived Congress to be somewhat balanced in this manner, the degree with which they spoke about both types of members without reservation or qualifications
offers their sense that the number of members driven primarily to serve others is relatively comparable to the number of members motivated predominantly by self-interest. Staffer 3, however, did offer explicitly his perceived proportion of the presence of both types of members with:

I think maybe the split is maybe 70/30… or maybe 60/40. There’s a lot of people who are out there who really want to help and are willing to be non-partisan and work with you and come up with a programmatic goals. That’s like the 40… The 60 is really people I think who are, they fit more into the partisan picture, and are working either to promote their own image or reelection self-interest.

Finally, Staffer 2 said multiple times that he rarely sees members of Congress motivated primarily to serve others. Rather, he believes most members serve their political self-interest most of the time. He did, however, make clear he did not want his responses or reflections to necessarily be applied to “politics at large,” stating his responses should be contextualized with his experience working for members facing “really tough electoral circumstances.” Furthermore, although Staffer 2 said members acting entirely for electoral gain is “part and parcel of the game” at one point during our conversation, he also spoke about certain members be described as being “pretty invested in what [they] thought was ground level altruistic advocacy.” Thus, while Staffer 2 believes that members not working largely their self-interest is more the exception than the rule, he does recognize their existence.

An additional insight rose from the fourteen interviews regarding members driven predominantly by an other-serving motivation. Seven of the fourteen interviewees – a group comprised of both members and staffers – contend the ideology or political beliefs an individual member holds does not determine whether or not the member is motivated primarily to serve others. These seven interviewees made various explicit statements about members truly believing
they are serving others when fighting to support and further policy promoting their political views, regardless of whether the particular political view aligns with the interviewees’ respective beliefs. The statements ranged from Member 8’s, “I think most elected officials are pretty good people. Even people I totally disagree with, I think their motivations are good” to another member stating he knows some members who hold opinions he passionately opposes “believe with all their heart they are right,” to a staff member describing other-serving members who hold views with which the staffer fervently disagrees as, “I think they are like, psychotic, but that doesn’t mean they’re not acting in an altruistic manner.” Furthermore, not a single individual interviewed made a statement about certain political parties, views, or ideologies indicating a predominantly other-serving or self-serving motivation.

Therefore, it seems primarily other-serving members exist alongside primarily self-serving members in Congress, and both those who serve in Congress and those who work closely with members do not understand a member’s motivation according to the member’s political ideology, political beliefs, or party affiliation.


Although unprompted by interview questions, a useful finding emerged from the interviews’ exploration of how individual interviewees decipher member motivation: Members are assessed and understood as human beings, based on qualities and traits perceived to exist across most humans. This finding rose both from particular statements made during interviews as well as the way in which individuals answered questions. More specifically, the interviewees frequently answered questions about members of Congress based on the individual’s view of
what is typical or common human behavior. Moreover, every single interviewee treated members of Congress in this manner, making clear they consider members to have the reasoning, emotions, and qualities of humans.

First, multiple respondents said they know most members are driven primarily to serve others either because of the difficult life members of Congress have to endure or due to the comparatively little personal reward members get for serving. Both Member 4 and Member 6 expressly stated they know most members are predominantly motivated to serve others because member’s lives are “demanding” or “hard.” Simply put by Member 4, “Most people would not be doing this if they were not here to serve.” Member 4 also maintains “[p]eople are here because they are overwhelmingly drawn for service” as members are “achievers…. People are not here because they cannot do something else.” In fact, Member 1’s description of members driven primarily by reelection was individuals who want to be in Congress because “[t]his is the best job they’ve ever had.” Staffer 5 used a similar reasoning, stating he knows most members are in Congress to serve others because most members have the financial resources and professional background to be secure and successful in non-congressional careers. Finally, although Staffer 6 did not claim most members are motivated to serve others, she did state, “People don’t do these jobs just to get themselves or their members reelected,” explaining most members could be making millions of dollars or be otherwise very successful in the private sector.

These assessments were made according to the individual assessors’ *personal* understanding of the costs and benefits associated with serving in Congress, a personal understanding each individual extended to members of Congress as “people.” Thus, the
interviewees’ process of assessment demonstrates they treat members as holding values and reasoning the interviewees believe to be common amongst humans.

Second, three staff members said one can decipher a member’s motivation and what truly matters to members by simply spending time with and watching members, detecting the same behavioral cues for significance and motivation one notices when spending time with non-member humans. After describing one of his members as a “normal guy” who is genuinely driven to serve others, I asked Staffer 1 how he knows his member is sincere in his “normal guy” behavior. Staffer 1 responded, “You can see that the guy is genuine when he walks into the room.” His member consistently treats and interacts with people in such a way that reveals the member’s drive to support and help others. “He always asks how people are, he asks people questions about themselves,” and he remembers what people say and details about their lives. According to Staffer 1, this is the demeanor and behavior of a person who genuinely cares about others. Staffer 1, Staffer 2, and Staffer 5 all asserted that one can “just sense” or “pick up on” what motivates and truly matters to members through normal interactions with members, noticing and noting the same factors one does when trying to decipher significance and motivation among people in general. Staffer 2 explained this as just being an “observant person,” and then, referring to me, stated, “I mean, if we spent three days together, I’d have a decent idea what motivates you and what you care about.”

Somewhat related to being an “observant person,” four members said they know what matters to other members, where other members stand on issues, and whether or not other members are driven by self-interested or other-interested motivations through knowing other members as people and having and maintaining “relationships” with them. Member 6 stated you
will know if a member’s earnestness or authenticity is sincere “[i]f you know the person,” and Member 2 said if he does not initially know a member personally, he can figure out the member’s beliefs and issue positions simply by working with them and spending a bit of time with them. One member responded to my question regarding how he knows what is important to other members with, “I don’t think any different than anybody else does. You talk to people… You treat them with respect…. Just getting to know them the best that you can.” Indeed, all four members who spoke about the importance of relationships and knowing other members as people maintain Congress would function more smoothly if current members were freer to spend more time together and develop these interpersonal relationships. Member 8 captured this sentiment well when stating, “[T]oday’s Congress doesn’t give us near enough opportunity to spend time with each other off the battlefield…. How do you know how to compromise and who you can trust with compromise until you know the person?”

Additionally, four of the interviewees used human emotion to lend insight into or explain their understanding of members’ motivations and behavior. Member 6 illustrated just how difficult “tough decisions” can be for members by sharing a story of one of his colleagues crying silently on the chamber floor while casting such a difficult vote. Member 7 recounted a similar pain, describing some members who caved to pressure from the NRA during votes immediately following the Sandy Hook shooting as “heartbroken because they had met with parents of little children who had been blown to pieces.” Member 4 also used human emotion to explain certain “tough decision,” calling situations “when you stand up for something and no one stands by you” “upsetting.” He explained these situations – wherein “you cannot help or provide a solution” – are difficult because they are “impacting people’s lives… Absence of action hurts, and it’s
upsetting and tough.” Finally, Staffer 4 used human emotion as the key indicator for a member’s motivation in one of his examples of a member engaging in behavior not driven by the member’s reelection needs. When I asked how the staffer knew the member was not driven predominantly by reelection in the situation under discussion, Staffer 4 responded:

> Because he was so. Clearly. Personally. Furious…. It was like a level of emotion that it’s just hard to imagine somebody losing it over their election chances. Right? It was the kind of anger that people get when you, you know, threaten their child. Not the kind of anger people get when… [I]f somebody threatened my job, I would be upset, but it’s not the same kind of anger. It’s not the same… intensity of anger either…

Lastly, multiple interviewees explicitly explained members and their behavior according to what they consider normal for most people or in-line with what they believe to be “human nature.” When explaining why he does not feel members working for reelection should be judged as somehow bad or wrong, Member 8 said, “I don’t know anyone who has ever had a job that they wanted to get fired from. I don’t want to get fired. I want to keep my job. And for me, it’s reelection.” Staffer 4’s final thoughts about most members being driven primarily to serve others included the qualification of, “Now, everybody has selfishness mixed in – whatever they do – everybody in the world.” One member asserted members’ individual considerations of what they can do, what they should do, and how they can explain their behavior is “normal. I think everybody does it. We just do it in the public world.” When discussing members needing to raise money or engage in other reelection activities they dislike, one staff member explained such behavior fitting within what he perceived as being human nature: “[I]t’s kind of human nature to have to do some stuff you find unpleasant in order to pay the bills, in order to get reelected, in order to whatever you want…” Finally, when asked why one of his previous members refused to join a policy effort and knowingly accepted the electoral costs for not doing so, one staff member
responded, “I just think he thought it was [garbage]…. I mean, making compromises gets easy after a while, but like, I think rare is the person that doesn’t have some sort of finite limit of the amount of [nonsense] that they can brush head into.”

The significant insight here is that many members do not conceptualize themselves – personally or collectively – as especially different from anyone else. Furthermore, the individuals whose job it is to know and understand what is important to members of Congress also do not conceptualize member as unique creatures, distinct and dissimilar from other humans. Although members of Congress have a type of life and face a daily environment different than many non-member people, the commonly held belief emerging from the interviews is members generally navigate this life and environment as most people would.

Finding V – Members Images: Projections of the Truth

A similarly unprompted finding emerged from individuals’ responses to questions regarding how they decipher member motivation and priorities: Members are relatively honest with other members and staffers. This notion runs throughout many the interviews, but solidifies around three types of statements repeatedly made across numerous interviews. First, when asked how they know members were driven predominantly by reelection in certain situations, two members and four staffers shared that members and their staff would explicitly say during private conversations if and when members were prioritizing reelection over serving others. One staffer described members and staffer participating in these internal conversations as being “very frank and honest” about what matters to members, what members will and will not do, and why.
Second, four of the staff members interviewed expressly stated members intentionally provide overt cues to communicate clearly to other members who they are, what they believe, and what their priorities are. In an attempt to clarify what he meant in his explanation of how members present themselves, I asked Staffer 4, “I think maybe what I’m hearing from you is, and again, correct me if I am wrong, that people don’t try to hide who they are here…. Members put out, very clearly, what they stand for and what they believe in…. Members know who each other are and what they stand for. There’s not a lot of hiding going on. Is that correct?” He quickly replied, “I think that’s exactly right.” Staffer 5 provided a similar description of members when he told me, “Don’t read too deeply into things here,” continuing that members and their staff are very straightforward with who they are and what they want because there is really no point in putting up a façade. In fact, one staff member asserted that members extend this honest projection beyond internal or private conversations with:

It doesn’t really pay for them to not have their motivations be overt. I think we see members of Congress as really well guarded or something, but in some ways, it’s very much the exact opposite. They are whatever their projection is… However they’re viewed in the public consciousness is largely who they are, and that’s largely a matter of intentional outward projection. I think it’s pretty easy. They’ll make it known because it’s their business to make their interests known. So, in some ways, it’s quite obvious.

Finally, four respondents identified meaning in members’ ambiguous explanations for behavior or other public messages because they believe members are direct and clear in their public messaging when they want to be. Member 7 identified a member’s inability to articulate clearly the reason for his/her vote or decision as a “giveaway” the member voted for “political expediency’s sake.” Two staff members described vague messages or ambiguity in messages as “meaningful” or “purposive,” noting the exact meaning in or purpose of the vagueness is
typically not readily identifiable. One of these staff members said that staffers employed as communications staff know they need to be clear and direct in their messaging for the member. He explained communications staff are tasked with crafting messages that state “what happened, what it is all about, and why the member what he did” to provide especially clear, concise, and explicit reasoning for their member’s behavior. According to the staffer, ambiguous messages are signs that the member is not ready, willing, or able to take a firm stance on the issue related to the behavior. The second staff member, Staffer 3, identified similar meaning in a member’s vague messaging because “[w]hen a member want to say something, they’ll go out and they’ll say it. And you can tell by the strength of the language how committed they are to actually that position…” Staffer 5 made a similar assertion, stating if members are in favor of a bill or support an issue, “they will go to the floor and give an argument for it.” Clear messages, therefore, demonstrate issue or area importance for members, according to Staffer 5. Thus, these four interviewees seem to find meaning in ambiguity because members are otherwise direct, deliberate, and definite in their public statements. Moreover, two of the staff members interpret stronger, more exacting statements as more sincere and more indicative of the member’s genuine position or view.

Overall, one portion of this finding may not directly contribute to the construction of a research framework for detecting and understanding members’ motivations because these frank and honest conversations seem to occur in private or otherwise internal settings. Although one staff member contends members’ honest projections of themselves extend to the “public consciousness,” no other individual interviewed made a similar explicit claim. Unless researches are privy to these internal discussions, they may not experience the same degree of member
honesty as those who are a part of such conversations. Yet, this component of the finding bolsters the likelihood that the insights provided by interviewees here are relatively representative. The second part of the finding – that firm messages with specific reasoning and strong diction are most likely sincere – is more directly applicable and useful for this research’s framework creation, as it may help decipher a member’s genuine motivation in certain situations.


Many of the respondents depicted a member’s time as a scarce resource, with multiple interviewees indicating members make tradeoffs and face opportunity costs associated with how they spend their time. The understanding of a member’s time as scarce is most apparent in how members themselves speak about their time, their lives as members of Congress, and their schedules. Members 4, 6, 7, and 8 describe their lives as “busy” and “demanding” because their jobs are “all encompassing” and members are “absolutely running the whole time.” When speaking about their days spent in D.C., Member 6 described Monday through Thursday on the Hill as “chaos” and explained members have no real personal time. Member 7 shared, “[T]here is very little down time, and it can be exhausting.” Yet, days spent in their home district do not appear to contain much free time for members either. Member 7 said he typically spends his days in his home district traveling to and then meeting with constituents, “[b]ut it rarely includes a day of nothing. If I want to go to a movie, I’ve got to schedule it…. My anniversary is coming up. I have to make sure I schedule it, because if I don’t, it gets filled up with something.” Another member spoke to how full his days spent in district are, and then reflected on how “lucky” he is
his wife travels with him and attends constituency meetings with him when he is in his home
district because he would not get to spend very much time with her otherwise.

Almost all interviewees indicated a member’s time should be considered a resource
members use to “do their jobs” and achieve their goals. This notion rises partially from their
shared understanding that how a member spends his/her time demonstrates what matters to
members, an understanding that is discussed at length in Finding VII below. Summarized here,
members spend their time on the issues and activities they find important, as furthering the issue
or engaging in the activity is how members achieve their goals. Put differently, time is what
members use universally to function as instrumental actors. As Staffer 6 explained, her
member’s reelection needs and proximate goal of reelection “informed his time and effort” spent
on a specific project which was especially salient to his constituents. Furthermore, as Staffer 1
shared in his juxtaposition between the two members he has served, some members are more
calculating than others in how they spend their time. Although some members reserve their
time for issue goals that have a high chance of being achieved while others devoting time to all issue
goals, spending time working on issues is how both types of members try to achieve their issue
goals. Accordingly, time is commonly understood and treated as a resource, and, as the above
paragraph shows, it is a scarce one.

Interviewees’ discussions of tradeoffs and opportunity costs associated with how
members spend their time further develops the conceptualization of a member’s time as a limited
and precious resource. Member 1 stated he does not “waste his time judging” the motivation of
others because spending time trying to determine others’ motivations means he is not spending
his time doing his job. When Member 5 said he believes members not working hard on issues are
more likely to be focused on reelection than members working hard on issues, I asked the clarification question, “Because these members not working hard on issues, they have more time to work on reelection?” Not only did he agree with my understanding of his statement, but he answered it with a, “Well, yeah,” as if the answer was obvious. Less obviously, Member 6 asserted members who do not have to fight hard for reelection can “focus on making things better.” In fact, according to Staffer 1, staff members of his “Mr. Smith Goes to Washington” type often try to focus their members on fewer projects or issues at a single time because members choosing to spend their time working on a large number of issues or projects means said members cannot devote enough time to any single issue or project for issue/project goals to be achieved. The most direct statement made during this project’s interviews regarding time tradeoffs came from a member recounting something he was told when he was first elected to Congress. When he first “got to Congress,” the member “was given the ratio of fourteen to one. For every one meeting I said yes to, I had to say no to fourteen other people.”

Finally, Staffer 2 incorporates opportunity costs associated with a member’s time allocation in his discussion of time tradeoffs. When speaking about members who appear on political television shows frequently, Staffer 2 first described these members as spending time and energy on something other than reelection. He then relayed, “[I]f you ask them in real time, ‘Do you know that going on [political television shows] a billion times, when actually, you could be in call time, you could be doing an event in your home state that would make it easier for you to get reelected?’” most of them would understand appearing on television “as not harmful to their reelection chances, but, again…” As he trailed off, I clarified with the quick, “It’s opportunity costs?” to which he responded emphatically, “Exactly. Right.”
Not only did most of the interviewees depict a member’s time as a scarce resource, time was the only concept spoken about like a resource in more than one interview. Furthermore, only two other concepts were discussed like a resource. Staffer 4 spoke somewhat about members’ staff as a resource when discussing the organization of a member’s office as indicative of which activities are most important to members. Yet, even here the organization of a member’s staff seems to be more about time as a resource, as Staffer 4’s discussion of staff appeared more about the amount of man-hours the office puts into various issues or activities. Finally, one member named a member’s office budget as a good “quantifiable indicator” to compare members with each other regarding how they feel about issues or activities. Interestingly, the member named the office budget only after he agreed how members spend their time is a good indication of what matters the most to them, but he sees difficulty in comparing members to each other by “quantifying time” because members face “very different realities.” Accordingly, a member’s time seems to be commonly understood amongst those interviewed as a scarce resource members use to achieve their goals, and a member’s time is the only concept treated almost universally as a resource across all interviews.

Finding VII – Indicators of Importance: Time Allocation, Working on and Leading in Legislative Issue Areas, and Consistency

Although some respondents struggled to name clear indicators for member motivation across all members and circumstances, all interviewees were relatively confident when identifying indicators for which issues or activities are important to members and members’ genuine positions or views on various issues. The indicators for issues or activities of importance apply to members regardless of their primary self-serving or other-serving motivation. Thus,
they only signify an issue or an activity is important to the member, not why it is important. Type of motivation will be discussed in the next finding.

At the highest conceptual level, how a member spends his or her time demonstrates which issues or activities are important to the member. Broadly speaking, if a member spends time on an issue or activity, said issue/activity is important to the member. Some of the interviewees expressly named a member’s time allocation as indicative of the issues or activities that matter to the member. For example, Staffer 6 said it was “easy” for her to know what was important to her member because he spent a “tremendous amount of time and effort” on certain issues, both in D.C. and in his home district. In the same vein, Staffer 2 stated a member’s personal calendar would provide insight into the member’s priorities and then later proposed looking at how retiring members spend their time because “once you really completely remove the electoral think, what you’re left with is probably really who they are on a fundamental level.”

After stating a member’s ambiguous messages about an issue or decision provide little insight into how a member feels about the issue/decision, Staffer 3 agreed that how a member spends their time “would be a nice indicator…. If a member gives a very sort of vague, noncommittal public statement regarding, you know, potential legislation or an upcoming issue, but you can see that they’re also meeting with a number of groups, they haven’t pushed this off their calendar, or maybe they’re actually attending committee meetings about the subject…. Yeah, I think that matters a lot more.”

Other individuals did not make as explicit of statements, but provided the sense that time spent is a meaningful sign of what is important for members. For example, Staffer 5 stated that every member wants to pass legislation, “but there are a lot of hurdles, and it’s very hard” before
agreeing that, therefore, members authoring bills is a pretty clear sign they care about the issue in the bill. Similarly, Member 8 said he spends most of his time in Washington building and developing relationships with other members because it is through relationships that he accomplishes ninety percent of what he gets done in D.C.

Although all respondents somehow relayed they look at how members spent their time to see what matters to members, many of the interviewees also spoke to the need to incorporate the nuances of a member’s time and political environment when using time as an indicator. First, one member stated using total amount of time each member spends on a specific issue across all members – e.g., Number of hours Member A spends working on an education policy versus number of hours Member B spends on the same education policy – may be problematic as different members face different realities. As Member 4 shared, he expects members facing a tough reelection to spend more time campaigning and fundraising than members who will have an easier time getting reelected, regardless of whether the member is driven primarily to serve others or to serve their own self-interest. Member 4 also contends geography impacts how a member spends his/her time in D.C., as members who cannot make it home very frequently tend to spend more of their time in D.C. meeting with constituents than those who can meet with constituents in their home district. According to Member 4, it is not that geography necessarily influences the total amount of time a member spends meeting with and focusing on constituents, but, rather, geography influences how that time can be split between the home district and Washington. Therefore, it seems total amount of hours spent on a specific issue should not be used as a comparative metric to determine whether Member A cares more about an issue or
activity than Member B, and researchers should take geographic, electoral, or other realities into account when comparing members to other members regarding how they spend their time.

Second, some of the interviewees named specific activities as requiring member participation or certain issues as requiring member time and attention, regardless of the degree with which the member believes them to be important. After making clear that spending time in committee meetings is not a good use of most members’ time, Member 8 then said, “I go. We all go, but not for that reason.” Along the same lines, Staffer 6 relayed members are “somewhat obligated to be interested” in their committee’s issues, stating the degree of involvement at the committee level is more indicative of whether or not a member is especially passionate about the issue than a member’s seat on the committee or completion of their committee-related obligations. Finally, both Member 4 and Member 6 stated all members have to spend some of their time on reelection activities, regardless of whether or not they are driven predominantly by reelection. As Member 6 shared very frankly, some parts of every week will always be about reelection for all members, namely fundraising telephone calls and meetings. Therefore, when deriving significance a member’s time allocation, one must consider if certain activities or issues realistically require members to spend at least some of their time fulfilling these obligations.

Lastly, multiple interviewees seem to believe that there are some members who do not spend time on certain issues or activities they find important because of the political risks associated with doing so, with two interviewees explicitly stating so. Both Member 5 and Staffer 5 deemed certain issues to be too “politically risky” or “politically toxic” for members to engage with or work on seriously, even if members genuinely believe the issues to be important. Thus, members may not spend time working on all issues they find important due to the political risks
associated with certain issues. In fact, both Member 5 and Staffer 5 contend it is when members *do* engage with such politically risky issues they are confident members find the issues important.

The above caveats – 1) total amount of hours spent on an issue by one member should not be used as a comparative metric across members due to various geographic or political realities powerfully influencing members’ beliefs regarding how they *can* spend their time, 2) when comparing how members spend their time, researchers should take into account these geographic and political realities, 3) there are certain tasks or issues on which members are practically required to spend at least a minimum amount of their time, and 4) member may not spend time on *all* issues/activities they find important due to the political costs they will most likely have to pay for doing so – provide additional structure and clarity to interviewees’ common understanding that a member’s allocation of time is a clear indicator of what the member deems to be important. Overall, even when working within the geographic, political, and obligatory time constraints placed on how a member can spend their time, interviewees contend members vary in their devotion of their own and their staff’s time to issues or activities *based on what the individual members believe to be “worth it.”* Member 6 captured this notion well when describing a member’s willingness to exert energy and time on a specific issue as “existing on a spectrum,” with members spending their time “based on what they think is worth doing.”

Although the individual calculus members use to determine if something is “worth doing” undoubtedly varies across members, in order for any activity or issue to be worth doing, members must see *some degree or type of value* in the activity/issue. Thus, spending any amount
of time on an issue or activity likely demonstrates the member believes the issue/activity has some sort of value or utility, assuming the member is an instrumental actor. Even the issues or activities on which members are somewhat obligated or required to spend time appear to have some sort of value to the member. For example, as Member 4 made clear, members dislike raising money, but will spend time fundraising in order to get reelected. This is because members see some type of value in reelection. Moreover, in order for an activity or issue to be “worth doing,” members must see a large enough value or utility in the issue/activity to warrant them spending their time on it. Using the same fundraising example, members value reelection _enough_ that spending time on the distasteful activity of fundraising is “worth it.” Member 5 and Staffer 5 explore the other side of this notion when discussing members’ unwillingness to work on issues or activities they find important yet politically risky. Both Member 5 and Staffer 5 imply such members do not work on the important yet politically risky issues/activities because members do not see enough value in doing so. Therefore, while members’ time allocation may not indicate all activities they believe to be important, it does reveal which issues/activities members have identified as being important _enough_ to warrant their time and attention.

Furthermore, according to many interviewees, members spend large portions of their own and their staff’s time on the issues and activities the members believe to be _most_ important. Again, Staffer 6 knows which issues are important to her member because he spent “a tremendous amount of time and effort” on certain issues. Staffer 4 both explicitly and implicitly articulated what was most important to his member based on the same reasoning. Finally, one member answered a question regarding his schedule in Washington by relaying he never misses a floor vote and most of his time goes to meetings about issues, committee work, and committee
hearings. Later he asserted he believes working on issues and legislation is his most powerful method for working for his constituents.

Notably, “large portions,” “a tremendous amount,” and “very frequently” are not precise measurements of a member’s time. Yet, none of the interviewees appeared uncomfortable with assessing what matters most to members according to these and other inexact measurements of time. It is not the total or precise amount of time members spend on certain issues or activities that makes clear to the interviewees what matters most to members. Rather, it is the large amount of time members spent on issues and activities compared to the smaller amount of time they spend on other issues that demonstrates which issues/activities are most important to members.

This somewhat broad conceptualization for identifying member priorities is strengthened by the more specific tasks or behaviors interviewees also named as demonstrating a member finds the issues/activity to be important. Six of the fourteen respondents expressly named bill sponsorship/authorship or the bills members “work on” as a clear indication the member considers the issue addressed in the bill to be important. In fact, Staffer 4 stated bill authorship is the “number one” factor he looks to when determining which issues matter to members. Yet, it seems some of interviewees differentiate between merely sponsoring/authoring a bill and working hard to facilitate the progress of the bill through the legislative process. Two staffers and two members said they know issues addressed in members’ sponsored legislation are especially important to members when they actively work to build support for and secure the passage of their bill.

In-line with actively working to make legislative progress on an issue, four interviewees explicitly stated they know an issue matters to a member when the member is known for
“working across the aisle” on the issue or has an “open door” regarding working on the issue. These individuals said members’ willingness to take on opposition within their party or potentially help members of the other party in order to build the legislative coalitions necessary to move forward on issues makes clear the issues are particularly important to members.

Moreover, five interviewees said they know an issue is important to a member when they are “taking the lead,” “spearheading” policy, or are in the “forefront” of “legislative initiatives” in an issue area. One member shared he may sign onto a letter or be an additional cosponsor on a bill if he feels he needs to make a statement about or take a clear position on an issue. Conversely, he will author a bill and work hard to see it passed or “lead the charge” on issues that are really important to him. Although authoring a bill does not require a member lead in an issue area, those leading in issue areas commonly do so, in part, by authoring bills. It seems the key behavioral distinction between authoring a bill and taking the lead on an issue is more than just temporal. Leading on an issue also appears to require the member associate his/herself, as an individual member, with the issue to a relatively high degree and the member devote a relatively large amount of his/her time and energy working on the issue. As Member 5 stated, members who are “stepping out in front…coming out early on issues as opposed to letting the politics play out on issues are working hard to do their job.”

Related to, but distinct from, leading on issues and authoring legislation, both Staffer 3 and Member 4 said members will develop areas of expertise surrounding the issues they care about the most. Accordingly, both Staffer 3 and Member 4 look to a member’s committee work to identify which issues matter most to members, as both interviewees identified committees as where members will typically develop their expertise. Similarly, Staffer 4 and Staffer 5 said they
often identify which issues matter to members according to their committee assignments because members request seats on the committees that allow them to work on the issues they find important. Staffer 6 also looks to committees to determine which issues matter to members, but not to committee assignments. Rather, Staffer 6 contends there will be a “record” of a member’s involvement on an issue or piece of legislation at the committee level if the member is especially passionate about an issue or area. Thus, while these five respondents look to committees to identify a member’s issue priorities, it seems the jurisdictions’ of a member’s committee assignments are not as powerful or as clear in indicating which issues are important to members as the member’s work on an issue or development of an issue area expertise.

Finally, almost all interviewees said they know what matters to members based on what members have done before, which issues they have worked on in the past, and how they have previously engaged with issues. Furthermore, every staffer looks to which issues their members have consistently worked on over the course of their careers to identify member priorities. Both staffer and member responses reflect a strong shared sense that members will behave consistently regarding the issues or areas they believe to be important. In fact, Staffer 4 said he believes it is difficult to sway members on their “core issues” with some sort of political incentive, and he does not see members having dramatic changes in preferences regarding these issues. Similarly, Member 5 shared he would question if an issue was actually important to a member if the member changes his/her position in-line with a change in constituency preference.

The understanding members will consistently work on the issues they prioritize somewhat unites all of the indicators named as demonstrating an issue or activity matters to a member. Again, at the highest conceptual level, how members allocate their time indicates to
interviewees what members find to be important enough to warrant their time. Additionally, members will spend a large portion of their time on the issues or activities members believe to be most important. All of the specific activities or types of behavior interviewees identified as demonstrative of a member finding an issue important – creating and then guiding bills through the legislative process, leading or spearheading in an issue area, and developing a policy expertise – are time consuming and often difficult. Accordingly, members consistently engaging in these behaviors or activities are most likely spending large amounts of their time working in the respective issue areas.

Finding VIII – Indicators for Member Motivation: Types of Issues/Activities and Personality Qualities

Although numerous interviewees expressly commented on how difficult it is to decipher an individual’s motivation, all provided insight into differentiating between a member’s primarily other-serving motivation and a member’s primarily reelection-serving or politically self-interested motivation. The discussions point to two different features of members and their actions as demonstrative of a member’s motivation orientation: the issues or activities members find important and a specific personality quality emanating from member behavior.

When using a member’s issue or activity priorities to indicate a member’s motivation, interviewees appear to juxtapose the issues/activities with the views of actors who can powerfully affect a member’s reelection chances. A member’s constituents and political party were named as such actors across all interviews. Powerful interest groups were also identified as potentially affecting a member’s reelection chances, but to a much lesser degree than constituents and political party. If a member’s behavior or favored issue does not align with the
views of these actors, the member’s engagement with the issue is understood among the interviewees as most likely driven primarily by an other-serving motivation. At the end of his interview, Staffer 3 nicely articulated the main criteria most interviewees seem to use for determining if a member’s specific behavior is driven predominantly by reelection or another political self-interest. After proposing one look at 1) party registration of voters within the district, 2) ethnic make-up of district, looking specifically for diasporas that may affect foreign policy decisions, 3) the member’s party platform on the particular issue, and 4) campaign donations, Staffer 3 continued with, “[I]f you’re looking at the party, if you’re looking at district make-up, if you’re looking at money, you can probably get a really good indicator if something is self-interested or not because you can tie the motivations back.” Approaching the same notion from a different angle, Member 5 advised one look to members “taking political risks…putting themselves out there and pushing things that would be difficult” to find members working primarily to serving others. Similarly, Member 7 stated multiple times that members who vote simply to avoid the political difficulties associated with the specific vote are doing so to further their reelection interest.

Additionally, some interviewees named specific issue areas, activities, or behaviors as most likely motivated principally by an other-serving motivation. Staffers 3 and 6 both agree that members are most likely motivated primarily to serve others when working hard on human rights and foreign policy/international relations issues, justifying their statements with their understanding that constituents typically “don’t care about” such issues. In fact, Staffer 3 added a qualification to members working on foreign policy issues, stating a member may be driven by a different type of motivation if the policy is related to a US intervention or related to an ethnic
diaspora in the member’s district. Staffer 3 made his qualification because he believes a member’s constituents do tend to care about these specific types of foreign policy issues. Member 7 also named human rights as an issue likely driven predominantly by an other-serving motivation before adding poverty issues, pro-environmental issues, and civil/voting rights issues to his list. When identifying poverty issues as being primarily about serving others, Member 7 provided the explanation, “Poor people don’t vote, by and large.” Lastly, Member 8 shared the time and effort he has spent traveling to and working on issues related to foreign countries is clearly not related to his reelection needs. “I can’t imagine I have gotten one single vote with that work,” he explained. He then answered my follow-up question regarding how such work impacts reelection with, “No, generally it hurts. People see it as junkets.”

Others interviewees did not provide examples of issue areas or behaviors, but rather used examples of specific situations wherein the individuals know the member involved was driven primarily by an other-serving motivation. All but one of these situations involve members going against the views of powerful interest groups, their party, and/or key voting constituencies in order to promote or support something the member believed was more important than the member’s own reelection. The one example which did not include a member taking a stand against an actor which could powerfully influence the member’s reelection chance was provided by Staffer 4. Yet, according to Staffer 4, the member in this example – whose work to publicize a dire situation in his district led him into a public fight with a political pundit – “did it because he was personally offended on behalf of his constituents… He was in it from the beginning because he thought that the district was not getting the attention it deserved.” Taken together, all of the interviewees’ examples describe the members involved as working for ideas or groups the
members hold to be more important or larger than the member as an individual, whether it be upholding the constitutional protection of states’ rights, ensuring the equal application of law, or faithfully representing and fighting for the interests and opinions of the district and the nation.

The understanding common among the members in these examples – that they, as an individual, are less important than the ideals, the system, and the people their work is supposed to serve – is the general personality quality other interviewees also seem to believe indicate a member is driven predominantly to serve others. This quality is especially prominent in the discussion of Staffers 1, 3, and 4. Both Staffers 1 and 3 described their members as “ethical,” with Staffer 1 stating his members – who he also identified as being otherwise quite different – have been people who “were there to do the nation’s and the people’s work.” When I asked Staffer 1 if this quality was “humbleness,” he disagreed and said it was more that they understood themselves, as individual people, to be much less important than their work and their official position. Staffer 3 cast his member in a similar light, as recognizing his role, his purpose, and the government system itself to be more important than the member himself. Finally, Staffer 4, who described his member as being “very, very public interest regarding,” said part of why he knew his member’s principled stands were driven by a motivation to serve the people and not reelection was because his member was “a quiet guy. He’s not going to generate a lot of publicity for himself. He just took stands for what he thought was right.”

The members interviewed also spoke to this quality, but much less directly. Member 1 and Member 4 said they were confident most members of Congress were there primarily to serve others because they don’t personally need their job in Congress. Another member shared that, although he wants to continue to serve, members “have to realize that we’re all replaceable.”
Finally, when recounting a time when he voted against his district’s opinion, and willingly accepted the political costs for doing so, one member described the decision as one he “had” to make. When I asked him why, he shared he had to protect civil liberties and he could not allow an outside threat to “change America.”

The members interviewed spoke much more directly to the quality they see as indicative of members driven primarily by reelection or other political self-interest: members understanding themselves, as individuals, to be extremely important, valuing the power and status associated with serving over the service itself. Member 7 depicted such members as, “They like the status, they like the trappings, the like the attention, the like the prestige…. They just like it. They like the feel of being here. They like being called ‘Congressman.’… So, they want to keep it.” Similarly, Member 1 described members driven primarily by reelection as feeling really powerful and overestimating their personal importance to the point that their “heads get so big their ears don’t fit.” Another member said of such members, “Some people want to be a member of the elite club.” Lastly, Staffer 1’s “country clubbers” are also defined by this quality: members who like the job, who enjoy being in D.C., and who love the game and the power they hold as members of Congress.

This quality seems to manifest itself in two general types of behaviors interviewees identify as demonstrating a predominantly political self-interest-serving or reelection serving motivation. The first is the behavior of the “country clubbers,” who Staffer 1 said “aren’t going to push the envelope too much because they want to stay” in Congress. Member 5 shared a similar sentiment, saying he believes the members who are not working hard on issues are driven primarily by reelection. The second type of behavior interviewees named that also fits with
members believing themselves to be more important than the system, their serving, and the people is behavior that prioritizes the member’s personal reelection needs over the needs of the people. Member 7 explained this type of behavior with, “So, sometimes you get members of Congress who are voting in a way that is popular for them personally in their districts, but it is really against the self-interest of the people who live in their district.”

This type of behavior was often identified with situations wherein members choose to follow the views of their party, their constituents, or a powerful interest group – again, the actors understood to powerfully affect a member’s reelection – instead of what members personally believed to be “in the best interest of the people.” Staffer 3 expressed the broad understanding of predominantly self-serving members engaging in behavior to serve their party, their personal image, or their reelection at the expense of serving the people with his juxtaposition of the forty percent of members “who really want to help and are willing to be non-partisan and work with you and come up with a programmatic goal” against the sixty percent who “fit more into the partisan picture, and are working either to promote their image or reelection self-interest” expresses. In fact, the disappointment Members 2 and 7 have in members driven primarily by reelection resides in their notion that such members are prioritizing reelection over the needs of the people.

Beyond behavior readily connected with the personal quality identified by interviewees, respondents named a final type of behavior as demonstrating a predominantly reelection or self-serving motivation: behavior that would have no real impact on people’s lives. The interplay in Staffer 6’s interview between her usage of examples wherein her member’s work was “very impactful” and “directly impactful” on people’s lives and her named example of behavior driven
almost entirely by a member’s reelection needs illustrates nicely this final type of behavior. First,
Staffer 6 used the same situations of her member’s behavior being “very impactful” and “directly
impactful” on people’s lives both as examples of members working primarily to serve others and
as illustrations of the difficulty in distinguishing between motivation types by looking at
behavior. She sees behavior that affects people’s lives – later describing it as “helping people” –
as potentially being driven by an other-serving or a reelection serving motivation. However,
Staffer 6 easily identified an example of member action/behavior motivated almost entirely by
reelection needs. She described the members in her example as knowing the legislation was not
going anywhere and the issue as not having a real impact on anyone. Yet, these members sponsor
this legislation anyway, during campaign season – every campaign season. When a member’s
behavior or actions positively impact people’s lives, Staffer 6 is a bit uncertain about the
motivation driving the behavior/action. It is a member’s expectation of absence of impact and the
proximity of the action to campaign season that makes clear to Staffer 6 this behavior is driven
primarily by a member’s reelection interests.

Staffer 4 also names this type of behavior as indicating a member’s reelection-interested
motivation. Staffer 4’s discussion of when reelection interests will powerfully impact a
member’s legislative votes or actions include the circumstance when the behavior is “more
symbolic,” which he describes as an issue that is “going down upon arrival” in the chamber.
Similarly, one member shared he knows members’ behavior is primarily driven by reelection
when they take public stances in support of or spend a lot of time pushing legislation through one
chamber while knowing “it’ll be dead on arrival” in the other. Neither the member nor Staffer 4
make a connection between such behavior and campaign season, but rather identify the behavior
as being driven primarily by reelection interests because the members know it will not serve the people. Simply put, if the members believe their actions will not serve the people, then the motivation for the action is not an other-serving motivation.

Noticeably, none of the interviewees named work on a specific issue as clearly driven almost entirely by a member’s reelection or political self-interest. The respondents more so knew members were driven primarily by self-interested motivations based on if members were prioritizing themselves or their respective parties over working on issues or serving the people. Staffer 3 shared he knew when other members were working on legislation predominantly to serve their reelection or other political self-interest – as opposed to serving the people – when:

their concerns [about the legislation] aren’t genuine to necessarily that issue, like the bill in discussion. If instead, it was about the author or the ownership of the initiative because they weren’t necessarily caring too much about the issue, they were more caring about them being somebody who passed a major piece of legislation.... And also it might be about self-ownership: “Hey, I’m the person who’s in this particular position which controls legislation that would authorize something like this. I should be the guy who is primarily promoting this, not you.”

Although there could be numerous explanations for interviewees not explicitly identifying certain issues with member self-interest, overall they appeared reticent to make blanket associations between issues or behavior that somehow served a member’s district or the nation and a predominantly self-serving motivation. In fact, Member 3 and Member 8 argued against such associations being made.

Finding IX – Tough Decisions: Policy, Electoral, and Value Considerations

The last finding this project explores is related to interviewees’ beliefs regarding decisions that are “tough” for members of Congress. Some of the interviewees struggled to
answer the question about what makes certain decisions tough for members, but had an easier time naming factors that make decisions easy for members. Again, the purpose of this question module is to decipher the various factors or actors/groups members generally consider important and will try to support or promote with their behavior. Accordingly, the alignments of factors/actors/groups interviewees named as making a member’s decision especially “easy” are incorporated into the finding as making a decision tough when the factors/actors/groups are conflicting.

Overall, respondents assessed a decision’s degree of difficulty based on whether certain factors aligned or conflicted with each other, but the factors identified by interviewees varied across interviews. First, eleven of the twelve interviewees asked this question module indicated a member’s “personal philosophy,” “conscience,” or “beliefs” about what is “right,” “best,” or “reasonably balanced policy” significantly affects if a decision is “tough” for a member. While some of the interviewees spoke more explicitly about a member’s opinion than about policy, discussions of a member’s “beliefs” or “philosophy” always revolved around a policy decision. In fact, after providing an exclusively policy related answer to the question, one staffer stated whether a decision is difficult for a member “obviously” has to do a lot with what the member believes personally. Accordingly, answers about choices being the “right” or “best” seem to be reflections of policy quality. Moreover, the examples of policy related tough decisions were typically about policies interviewees seemed to believe would likely impact citizen’s lives. Thus, it appears many respondents, though perhaps not all, associate a member’s opinion regarding the “right” or “best” policy decision with what the member believes are the “right” or “best” effects policy will have on the people.
Two members interviewed provided answers that only explored policy considerations or what a member believes to be the “right” or “best” policy decision. Staffer 2 was the only individual who did not include a member’s personal beliefs as a factor when responding to my questions about tough decisions. He did, however, incorporate a member’s personal opinion as a more minor factor in his discussion of a member’s decision-making calculus more generally. Additionally, Staffer 2, of all interviewees, was by far the most convinced that members of Congress are rarely motivated by anything other than some form of political self-interest, which may have impacted his answers to this question module.

The respondents spoke to three main types of dilemmas members face when considering only their personal opinion on policy. First, five interviewees named as tough decisions those wherein members do not have enough information or expertise to decipher the right policy choice, especially when members agree somewhat with arguments for both decision options. Second, three interviewees said overall good bills that have a bad “attachment,” title, or section create tough decisions for members. Finally, Member 4 also described a tough decision as one wherein two issues are pitted against each other and he cares very much about both issues.

The second factor interviewees believe may make a decision tough is the preference or opinions of a member’s constituents. Ten of the interviewees said members face tough decisions when “what the district wants,” the member’s “district,” “constituency,” or “constituents,” or the “opinions” or “preferences” of a member’s constituents conflict with one other factor. Not all interviewees who named a member’s constituency as a factor that may make a decision tough used the words “opinion(s),” “preferences,” or “want” when naming a member’s constituency. However, when interviewees identified a member’s constituency as a factor and connected it to
the member’s reelection, the interviewees answer appeared to be more about the constituency’s opinion than what was “best” for the constituency or district, and was treated as such here.

The third factor respondents named as potentially making a decision tough for members is the interest of the constituency or district. Three of the interviewees said decisions can be tough for members when what is “right,” “good,” or “best” for the district or constituency or what is in the “(best) interest” of the district or constituency conflict with another factor.

The fourth, fifth, and sixth factors interviewees said may create a tough decision for members are the views of a member’s political party, moneyed interests or non-district related “groups,” and the nation’s best interest. Three individuals believe members face a tough decision when the views of their political party conflict with another factor, and three said moneyed interests or other non-district related groups can make a decision tough if their preferences conflict with another factor. Finally, two interviewees said tough decisions arise when members must choose between what is best for their district and what is best for the nation. Interestingly, the two individuals who named the nation’s best interest as potentially making a decision tough for a member only incorporated the national interest into their discussion of tough decisions in its capacity as potentially conflicting with the district’s or constituency’s best interest.
According to the interviewees, members face tough decision when two of the six factors conflict. The number of times each specific tough decision was named during interviews is shown in Table 1:

<table>
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<tr>
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<th>Nation's Best Interest</th>
<th>Moneyed Interests'/Groups' Opinion</th>
<th>Party Opinion</th>
<th>Constituents' Best Interest</th>
<th>Constituents' Opinion</th>
<th>Personal Opinion/Best Policy</th>
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<td>1</td>
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<tr>
<td>Constituents' Best Interest</td>
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<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>X</td>
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<tr>
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<td>X</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moneyed Interests'/Groups' Opinion</td>
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<td>0</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nation's Best Interest</td>
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<td>X</td>
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Table 1: Number of "Tough Decisions" Identified by Conflicting Factors

As the table shows, the most frequently named type of tough decision is one requiring members to choose between what they believe to be good or the best policy decision and pleasing or supporting the opinion of their constituents. The natural inclination here may be to assert that these decisions are difficult for members because members must choose here between making “good policy” and serving their reelection needs through supporting constituents’ opinions. Yet, a couple of interviewees appear to believe a member’s understanding of his/her role as a representative official – not a member’s concern with reelection – may be what makes this decision tough for certain members. In such instances, these decisions may be difficult for members because members are struggling to determine what they believe to be the best or most appropriate way to serve the people. This being said, most of the respondents identified these decisions as difficult because they pit members’ reelection interests against their desire to serve the people through making the best policy possible in the immediate decision. Accordingly, if
researchers use this type of difficult decision to determine a member’s motivation, they should investigate the member’s beliefs about appropriate representative behavior in addition to the decision itself.

Three other types of difficult decisions were named and described universally as forcing members to choose between serving their reelection needs and serving the people’s best interests/making the best policy decisions. These decisions are those wherein 1) the view of moneyed interests/groups conflicts with a member’s beliefs regarding good policy, 2) the view of a member’s party conflicts with a member’s beliefs regarding good policy, and 3) constituents’ opinion conflicts with what the member believes is in the constituents’ best interest. Thus, it appears that members cannot always serve the people through good policy/serving the people’s interests while simultaneously serving their own reelection or political self-interest. In fact, as explored above in Finding VIII, the interviewees seem to use the decisions members make when forced to choose between serving the people and serving their reelection needs as key indicators of members’ motivation in their decision.

The remaining types of difficult decisions appear to force members to choose 1) between pleasing two groups both identified as serving members’ reelection interests, 2) between serving the interests of their constituents and serving the interests of the nation, or 3) between two policy options, with members struggling to identify which policy option is indeed the “best.” None of the interviewees seem to use a member’s choice when faced with these types of decisions as indicative of a member’s motivation type. This is not surprising due to the fact that the same general type of motivation likely drives either choice in each type of difficult decision.
The final component of this finding is that some respondents believe that members face these difficult decisions relatively infrequently. Of the twelve individuals asked questions about “tough decision,” five stated – without being prompted – that members do not face tough decisions very often. Member 1, 4, and 8 all said they rarely face tough decisions, and these three members also spoke to the high correlation they see between a member’s personal beliefs and the beliefs and opinions held by their constituents. Member 8 shared he does not face difficult decisions because the congressional leadership’s unwillingness to compromise “have made my votes easy, even when they could have been making them difficult.” Additionally, Staffer 4 explained his statement that members rarely have to make tough decisions with, “[P]eople live in pretty gerrymandered districts. Like, faithfully, they do a pretty good job of representing the people. The people might be wacked out to the right or wacked out to the left, and they’re crazily unrepresentative of the country, but their members represent their crazy unrepresentative district faithfully.” Thus, it appears members must make tough decisions less frequently when a member’s beliefs are closely aligned with the beliefs of the member’s constituency.

Only Member 7 provided the sense that members may have to make tough decisions regularly. Member 7 did not state explicitly that members face tough decisions often, but rather finished his discussion of difficult decisions with, “You name the issue, and depending on where you represent, where public opinion is, or where the money is, it can be a difficult decision to make.” Therefore, he appears to believe, more so, tough decisions are not issue specific because all issues have the potential to put moneyed interests or a constituency’s opinion in conflict with a member’s personal opinion. Thus, it appears the frequency with which tough decisions occur is contingent on the frequency with which such conflicts arise.
Ready to Construct

This chapter’s nine findings lend insight into multiple features regarding members of Congress: their goals, their perceived purpose, their notions regarding their time, how they tend to behave, and the factors which may make their decisions difficult. With these nine findings in hand, this project will next blend insights, concepts, and approaches from evolutionary biology, congressional studies, and rational choice research with the nine findings to build a conceptual framework and method for classifying members according to their primary motivation type. This research framework will allow scholars to empirically detect and study systematically members of Congress as instrumental actors engaging in rational or extra-rational behavior.
Chapter 8

A Research Framework for Identifying Legislator Types in the US Congress

What follows is a proposed framework that provides researchers with both a conceptual guide and an empirically based tool for studying members of Congress according to their primary motivation for behavior. A conceptual framework is first constructed and then a process for empirically classifying members according to their respective primary motivation type is developed. The conceptual framework and method for classification blend: 1) the ideas and concepts from rational choice as well as the proposed conceptualization for human behavior presented in Chapter 2; 2) the insights, concepts, and approaches from evolutionary biology reviewed in Chapter 3; 3) additional concepts and insights used by rational choice and congressional scholars; and 4) this project’s findings as reported in Chapter 6. The member motivation classification scheme allows researchers to identify empirically members’ primary motivation type as it ranges from predominantly driven to serve others to predominantly driven to serve their self-interest. The construction of the framework and method for classifying members completes the initial and crucial step for systematically studying members of Congress by their primary motivations.

Reviewing the Construction Plan

As developed in Chapter 2, the behavior of an individual can be conceptualized as rational, extra-rational, or extemporaneous. Rational and extra-rational behavior are both instrumental; actors intentionally choose these behaviors in order to achieve a goal. *Rational behavior* is motivated primarily by the actor’s self-interest in that the goal driving the actor’s
behavior is ultimately or predominantly to serve him/herself in some way. *Extra-rational behavior*, conversely, is driven primarily by the actor’s motivation to serve others. *Extemporaneous behavior* is not instrumental, and is not considered here.

In addition to the accounts of altruistic members of Congress discussed in Chapter 1, this project’s findings indicate a difference between members primarily driven to serve others and those primarily driven by political self-interest. As Staffer 3 shared, “I think there’s motivators behind the majority of people. Whether it’s for a passion for a specific issue, whether it’s constituents, whether it’s party, whether it’s campaign money…. [A]s far as finding those…reasonable people willing to do the right thing, no matter where you came from, who you are as the posing member. Yeah, they do exist.” Although the fourteen individuals interviewed do not make up a sample necessarily representative of the beliefs and experiences of all members of Congress, all interviewees contend that both types of members sit in Congress. As such, there is ample justification for developing a research framework for studying both types of members, especially considering that such a framework does not require that members are predominantly driven to serve others. Rather, the proposed framework offers a means for assessing if and to what extent members are driven primarily to serve others or to serve their own self-interest.

As Chapters 1 and 2 demonstrate, neither the field of congressional studies nor research using the rational choice approach provide conceptualizations and operationalizations useful and appropriate for studying members of Congress engaging in extra-rational behavior. However, both offer ways to study members engaging in rational behavior. Because there are differences in types of behavior and the members who engage in them, this project turned to evolutionary biology for research approaches, insights, and concepts to investigate extra-rational behavior.
Weaving together insights and concepts from the three modes of thought is both useful and appropriate for investigating members of Congress because all three research fields explain outcomes according to “choices being made” in order to achieve the most optimal result possible (see Okasha and Binmore 2012).

The key approaches, insights, and concepts from evolutionary biology used here rise from the field’s exploration of fitness and social behavior (see Chapter 3). In addition to providing a parallel way to approach subjects of study according to their instrumental behavior, evolutionary biology demonstrates through its ongoing internal debates that fitness and social behavior must be defined and operationalized carefully and appropriately, given the purpose of the research and the realities of the subjects being studying. Accordingly, this research tailors concepts of evolutionary biology to best suit the realities facing members of Congress and the researchers who study them. One significant difference between work in evolutionary biology and this project is that this project defines types of instrumental behavior based on an individual’s motivation while evolutionary biology defines various types of behavior according to the consequences of behavior. This and other adjustments are made to ensure this project uses the insights and concepts from evolutionary biology in ways appropriate for studying members of Congress.

**Conceptual Framework: Rational and Extra-rational Behavior as Political Social Behaviors**

Both members of Congress who want to get reelected – which is most members – and evolutionary biology’s research subjects operate in a world where they struggle to survive. Evolutionary biology investigates the likelihood of a trait, genetic material, or behavior
continuing to exist – or survive – over multiple population generations given the realities of the biological world of the populations being studied. For members of Congress, continuing to exist in their political world – or their political survival – requires they win their next election. In fact, Member 7 labeled a member’s “big struggle” with reelection an issue of “survivability” and described a member who wins reelection as a member who “survived.”

Rationale choice scholars, notably Bueno de Mesquita and collaborators, conceptualize “survival” for political officials as their ability to stay in office (Bueno de Mesquita and Siverson 1995; Bueno de Mesquita et al. 1999; Bueno de Mesquita et al. 2002; Bueno de Mesquita and Smith 2009; Bueno de Mesquita and Smith 2010). Yet, like many rational choice studies, these works assert survival is necessary for all elected officials to achieve their other goals, and then use the proximate goal of survival as a justification for dismissing further examination of an actor’s ultimate goals and/or primary motivation orientation. This dismissal is similar to much of the work in congressional studies that does not investigate members’ primary motivation based on researchers’ assertions that all members must get reelected, regardless of whether they are predominantly driven to serve others or serve their own self-interest (see Chapter 1). While elected officials must “survive” in order to achieve their other goals, these works name reelection or staying in office as the proximate goal but then use it as the only goal driving elected officials.

Treating the proximate goal as the only goal motivating an instrumental actor may be conceptually inappropriate; a proximate goal is proximate because it serves an ultimate goal. Moreover, such treatment can be empirically inappropriate given elected officials have goals beyond reelection that likely influence their behavior (see Chapter 1). As Member 7 stated, “I don’t think anyone enters this place with that as their desire: ‘Elect me to Congress so I can
spend the rest of my time just trying to get reelected.’ I think most people like to come here and say, ‘When I leave here, I would like to be able to say I helped do some things, and here they are.’ More than just, ‘I survived.’” Finding I underscores this notion: while re-election is somewhat universal goal for members, it is also typically a proximate goal. Because the re-election goal is both proximate and does not vary significantly across members, it lends little direct insight into the ultimate goal driving member behavior. It is only by treating the proximate goal of re-election, or surviving, as a separate, proximate goal that researchers can begin to study actors according to their ultimate goals and the primary motivations associate with the goals.

This project applies concepts from evolutionary biology to distinguish between members’ proximate goal of re-election from their respective ultimate goals by treating members as subjects in a constant struggle to survive. Again, evolutionary biology studies the likelihood of a trait, genetic material, or behavior surviving over multiple population generations given the realities of the biological world populations being studied face. The trait, genetic material, or behavior that is the “fittest” for the given environment is most likely to survive through the increased likelihood for reproduction bestowed upon biological individual’s carrying the “fittest” trait, genetic material, or propensity for behavior. Thus, fitness is defined according to the likelihood of a trait, genetic material, or behavior surviving over multiple population generations due to the individual carrier’s likelihood of reproducing given the realities of the environment. Increases and decreases in fitness, therefore, are understood as increases and decreases in the likelihood of the trait, genetic material, or behavior surviving due to increases and decreases in the likely reproductive capacity of the individual carrier. The behaviors of biological individuals that
decrease the likelihood of the trait, genetic material, or behavior of surviving are behaviors that decrease fitness and vice versa.

Again, all members of Congress seeking reelection operate in a political reality wherein they are trying to survive. Thus, for members fitness is conceptualized as political fitness – their likelihood of surviving by winning their next election. Increases and decreases in a member’s political fitness, therefore, are increases and decreases in the member’s likelihood of surviving reelection. Behavior that decreases a member’s likelihood of surviving his/her next election is behavior that decreases the member’s fitness and vice versa.

There are disagreements within evolutionary biology as to the time frame necessary for studying fitness because it may affect a study’s conclusions regarding fitness as well as a study’s understandings of the impacts of behavior on fitness. Accordingly, evolutionary biology’s time frame debate highlights the importance in choosing the time frame most appropriate to the subject whose survival is being investigated. Additionally, some evolutionary biologists disagree over whether fitness should be measured in absolute or relative terms. Here, too, the debate revolves around operationalizing fitness in a way that is most appropriate given the process of how the subject being studied is selected according to its fitness level. Finally, various evolutionary biologists disagree regarding if, how, and/or when to incorporate the fitness of others into the subject’s total fitness measure. These debates demonstrate the importance of identifying others whose fitness interests may align or conflict with the fitness interest of the research subject as well as the necessity for these interests to be separable in order for certain types of behavior to be investigated systematically and meaningfully.
Because this research investigates members of Congress, and because members must win reelection in order to survive, the time frame for investigating a member’s survival is a member’s single term. Although other research may study appropriately members over multiple terms, the correct time frame for conceptualizing members as surviving or continuing to exist is a single term because they must win reelection at the end of every term in order to remain in Congress. Additionally, this project proposes measuring fitness in absolute, as opposed to relative, terms. While members’ survival requires voters to “select” members based on members being “more fit” for reelection than their opponents, many members are unopposed or do not face “serious challengers” in their elections (Cox and Katz 1996; Levitt and Wolfram 1997; Jacobsen 2013). This reality prevents a meaningful relative fitness measure. Finally, a member’s total fitness as conceptualized here will not include a measure of indirect or group fitness. Although a member’s fitness can be affected by party, constituents, interest groups, or other significant political actors, these groups/actors do not face comparable pressures for political survival. Therefore, the political fitness of these groups/actors cannot be incorporated into a member’s fitness measure. Rather, members’ anticipation of the effects these groups/actors will have on members’ fitness is incorporated into members’ perception of how or if their individual personal political fitness aligns with the interests of the groups/actors. Accordingly, a member’s political fitness is an absolute measure of the member’s perception of the likelihood of winning the next election and does not include a distinct component of other actors’ or groups’ fitness.

When a member’s behaviors affect his/her political fitness while simultaneously affecting the interests of at least one other group/actor, the behaviors parallel the social behaviors studied by evolutionary biology. Figure 1 repeats from Chapter 3 the typology most evolutionary
biologists use to discuss and define social behavior according to the “costs and benefits to individual’s fitness” (West, Griffin, and Gardner 2007, 418):

Figure 1: Evolutionary Biology Social Behavior Typology

<table>
<thead>
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<th>Effect on Actor's Fitness</th>
<th>Effect on Recipient's Fitness</th>
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<td>Costly to Actor</td>
<td>Costly to Actor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beneficial to Recipient</td>
<td>Costly to Recipient</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Mutual Benefit</strong></td>
<td><strong>Selfishness</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beneficial to Actor</td>
<td>Beneficial to Actor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beneficial to Recipient</td>
<td>Costly to Recipient</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

A few alternations must be made to the typology in order to conceptualize appropriately social behavior for members of Congress. First, as demonstrated in Finding II, one cannot identify members’ primary motivation orientations by looking at the consequences of their behavior. Furthermore, as discussed in Chapter 3, the *motivation* driving political actor’s behavior must be studied in order to understand the actor and his/her behavior. Thus, this project defines member behavior according to the type of anticipated, intended, or desired effects on the actor and recipient, not the actual effects. Second, because this project does not conceptualize or define the fitness of non-member actors, desired effects on recipients will be roughly understood as desired effects on the recipients’ interests.
This project’s typology of member political social behavior is as follows:

**Figure 2: Member Political Social Behavior Typology**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Desired Effects on Recipient’s Interests</th>
<th>Beneficial</th>
<th>Costly</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Political Altruism</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Costly to Member</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beneficial to Recipient</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Political Spite</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Costly to Member</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beneficial to Recipient</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Political Mutual Benefit</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beneficial to Member</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beneficial to Recipient</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Political Selfishness</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beneficial to Member</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

When members engage in behavior they anticipate will benefit the interests of others while decreasing/being costly to their individual political fitness, they are engaging in *political altruism*. When members engage in behavior they anticipate will increase/benefit their political fitness while benefiting the interests of others, members are engaging in *political mutual benefit*. *Political spite* is political social behavior wherein members intend their behavior to be costly to the interests of others while decreasing/being costly to members’ individual political fitness, while *political selfishness* is zero-sum political social behavior wherein members intend their behavior to be costly to the interests of others while increasing/benefiting members’ individual political fitness. Political altruism is an extra-rational behavior, political selfishness is a rational behavior, and political mutual benefit can be extra-rational or rational, depending on the whether
the member is driven primarily to benefit the interests of others or primarily to benefit/increase
the member’s political fitness.

Intentionally serving others and intending to benefit the interests of others are essentially
the same concept. Taken from Staffer 6’s interview, this entails members working to “help
people” in way that is “directly impactful” on their lives. Therefore, members motivated
primarily to serve others can engage in both political social behaviors depicted in the left column
of the above typology – political altruism and political mutual benefit – in order to achieve their
primarily other-serving ultimate goals.

Members intending to serve their political self-interest do not have a directly equivalent
behavior in the political social behavior matrix. This is because the increases/benefits and
decreases/costs to the member displayed in the matrix are increases/benefits and decreases/costs
to the member’s fitness, not his/her political self-interest. This does not mean, however, that a
member working to serve his/her political self-interest is not captured in the research framework
proposed here. Rather, such members are identified when they choose reelection over serving
others, as the choice indicates the member is more driven by the proximate goal of reelection
than the ultimate goal of serving others. This reasoning and process is further developed below.

Staffers 2 and 3 spoke explicitly about a member’s political self-interest beyond
reelection, and Member 7 and Staffers 2 and 6 further described this political self-interest when
providing a contrast to members driven primarily to serve others. Overall, political self-interest is
understood as the “power” members personally hold as individual members of Congress. Both
Staffer 2 and Staffer 3 further explained that this power may come in two forms: the power
associated with being a member of Congress and the power members wield within their political party.

Congressional scholars frequently name individual power as one ultimate goal potentially motivating member’s reelection seeking behavior, typically citing Fenno (1973), Mayhew (1974), or Dodd (1977) when doing so. As reviewed in Chapter 1, Fenno (1973) proposes members have a combination of three basic goals motivating their behavior: “reelection, influence within the House, and good public policy” (1). Based on members’ own words, Fenno describes “influence within the House” as “‘power,’ ‘prestige’ or ‘importance’” relative to other members (2). Here Fenno seems to agree with this project’s interviewees’ understanding of personal power as a goal motivating some members’ instrumental behavior. Mayhew (1974) actually cites Fenno (1973) when discussing member goals (16) and does not further develop or define the concept.

Dodd (1977), however, both further develops the concept of a member’s individual power as well as depicts the goal as almost entirely motivated by a member’s self-interest. According to Dodd, a member’s “quest for personal power…may derive from any number of deeper motives: a desire for ego gratification or for prestige, a search for personal salvation through good works, a hope to construct a better world or to dominate the present one, or a preoccupation with status and self-love” (270). Although Dodd does include “a hope to construct a better world” in his list, it is one of the seven otherwise self-serving motives he names, including “good works” driven by a goal of “personal salvation.” Thus, Dodd’s conceptualization of personal power provides the sense that members working to gain, maintain, or increase their individual power are almost always or typically driven by self-interest.
When members are motivated to serve or benefit the interests of others in order to reap the election rewards for doing so, they are engaging in political mutual benefit. Political mutual benefit can also describe the behavior of members intending to benefit the interests of the recipients while simultaneously intending to increase their political fitness through the electoral rewards they anticipate receiving due to benefiting the interests of others. Both instances of political mutual benefit require an anticipated reciprocal cooperation wherein both the member and the recipient intend for mutual benefit. Political mutual benefit is neither political selfishness nor political altruism, regardless of members’ respective primary motivations.

Returning to the member political social behavior typology (Figure 2), members driven primarily to serve others will consistently engage in behavior intended to benefit the interests of others, either political mutual benefit or political altruism. Both types of behavior allow the member to achieve the goal of serving others, but with disparate desired effects on the member’s political fitness. Conversely, members driven primarily by self-interest will consistently engage in behavior intended to increase their political fitness because it is the only way they can achieve their ultimate goal. Thus, such members will only engage in political mutual benefit or political selfishness. Accordingly, members primarily driven to serve others will engage in the behaviors depicted in the left column of Figure 2 while members primarily driven to serve their political self-interest will engage in the behaviors depicted in the bottom row.

As Finding I demonstrates, reelection should fit into the contextual framework as a proximate, not ultimate, goal. All members of Congress must win reelection, whatever their ultimate goals. As discussed in Chapter 1, congressional scholars also identify reelection as a practically universal proximate goal (most famously by Mayhew 1974; see Fenno 1978; Arnold...
Members engaging in behavior in order to increase their political fitness – increases their chances for reelection – should, therefore, be understood as engaging in the behavior so they can, as Member 7 put it, “continue to do good work,” or, as Staffer 2 stated, “serve their political self-interest.” Accordingly, members intending to increase their political fitness should not necessarily be interpreted as motivated solely by narrow self-interest.

The telling difference between a member driven primarily by an other-serving motivation/goal and one driven primarily by a self-serving motivation/goal is whether a member will accept a decrease in political fitness in order to benefit the interests of others. Assuming a degree of consistency in member’s primary motivation/ultimate goal type, members will prioritize the achievement of their ultimate goal over the proximate goal of reelection. Member 7, Staffer 4, and less directly, Staffer 3, asserted most members are not easily swayed by reelection concerns on the issues they care about the most. In fact, Member 6 shared that if members were to change their positions in-line with constituency preference on an issue they had always claimed was important, he would question if the members ever really cared about the issue in the first place.

Thus, when forced to choose, members predominantly motivated to serve others will most likely choose to benefit the interests of others over their own political fitness, while members predominantly motivated to serve their political self-interest will not. The primarily self-interested members will, rather, prioritize their ultimate, self-interested goal. Yet, the only method for such members to achieve their ultimate, self-interested goal in this situation is to increase/avoid a decrease in their political fitness. Accordingly, both types of members will most
likely make opposite choices in their prioritization of their opposite ultimate goals when forced to make such decisions, with members primarily driven to serve others choosing to engage in political altruism and members primarily driven to serve their political self-interest choosing to engage in political selfishness.

Detecting Empirically Members’ Types of Primary Motivations

Again, in order to decipher members’ primary motivation type, one must determine which types of ultimate goals drive members. This requires separating a member’s proximate goal of reelection from his/her ultimate goal type, a separation made possible when a member is forced to choose between reelection and serving others. Yet, members may not have to overtly choose in many or most of their activities. In fact, one part of Finding IX is members rarely face such stark decisions. Additionally, one member shared that members hardly ever have to make such choices because, if members held views dissimilar to their constituents on the issues with which constituents decide their votes, “they wouldn’t get elected in the first place.” How, then, does one separate a member’s primary motivation/ultimate goal from their proximate goal of reelection?

The answer resides in momentarily suspending consideration of members’ reelection goal and, instead, focusing on identifying their ultimate goals. Thus, the question to ask when trying to decipher the motivation behind members’ behavior should not be, “Does their behavior serve reelection?” Rather, researchers should inquire into two areas with the following questions: 1) With which issues or activities does the member regularly engage, and which type of goal does each of the member’s chosen issues/activities primarily serve? 2) When forced to choose overtly
between reelection and serving others, which option does the member choose? The answers to these questions identify both the type of motivation/ultimate goal type driving members in a large portion of isolated behaviors as well as a member’s underlying propensity to engage in political altruism or political selfishness. These are the same two factors interviewees use to identify a member’s primary motivation for behavior (see Finding VIII).

Inquiry Area One

The first inquiry area provides insight into a member’s ultimate goal type by investigating the issues or activities in which members regularly engage. Because members’ choices regarding how to spend their time reveal members’ individual priorities, answering the above two part question – With which issues or activities does the member regularly engage, and which type of goal does each of the member’s chosen issues/activities primarily serve? – helps researchers identify empirically a member’s primary motivation type.

As Finding VI shows, members understand time to be a scare resource, and they allocate their time based on what they think is “worth it.” Congressional scholars tend to agree (Fenno 1978; Hall 1996; Wawro 2000; Burden 2007), with Burden asserting, “Time is perhaps a legislator’s most valuable resource” (2007, 48), and Fenno taking the claim even further with, “Time is a House member’s scarcest and most precious political resource” (1978, 34). A member’s decision to spend time on an issue or activity demonstrates the member’s belief that the issue/activity is important enough to warrant the use of his/her precious resource of time. Furthermore, as Finding VII shows, members typically spend large amounts of their time on the issues or activities they believe to be the most important. Exhibiting the same connection made
by interviewees between Findings VI and VII, Hall (1996), Wawro (2000), and Burden (2007) contend how members spend their time – a scarce and valuable resource – identifies the issues or activities members believe are important.

Moreover, a member’s time is a resource whose allocation entails opportunity costs and tradeoffs (see Finding VI; Fenno 1978, 34; Wawro 2000, 15-6). When members allocate their own and their staffers’ time to one issue or activity, they are diverting that time from being spent on other issues or activities. However, this does not mean that an issue or activity necessarily serves only one purpose or goal. For example, a member may engage in an activity with the intention to simultaneously increase his/her political fitness and benefit the interests of his/her constituency. Yet, when members engage in a specific activity, they cannot engage simultaneously in a second activity. Thus, members’ decisions regarding how to spend their time demonstrate directly which issues or activities they believe to be important as well as indirectly the issues or activities they believe to be less important.

Furthermore, members’ decisions regarding how to spend their scarce resource also reflect the type of goal/motivation primarily driving members in the issues/activities they deem the most important. This is because the opportunity costs and tradeoffs associated with members’ decisions regarding how to prioritize their time provide a less overt, less dramatic, yet practically daily choice wherein members may choose to primarily serve others, primarily serve their political self-interest, or simultaneously serve others, their reelection needs, and/or their political self-interest. Put differently, members’ everyday choices regarding how to spend their time – their issue/activity priorities – indicate their typical and consistent decision regarding whether to engage in political altruism, political mutual benefit, or political selfishness.
Finding VII provides empirical indicators for identifying the issues or activities that matter the most to members, with interviewees sometimes referring to these as “core issues” or “pet issues.” Overall, members will spend a large proportion of their time on the issues and activities that matter most to them, often authoring legislation and working to move the bill through the legislative process, spearheading or leading policy initiatives in the issue area, developing expertise in the issue area, and/or consistently promoting the issue over the course of their career. The indicators of authoring legislation and then working to move the bill through the legislative process and spearheading or leading policy initiatives in the issue area are powerful indicators of a member’s pet issues because of the amount of time these activities consume. As Sulkin (2005) asserts, introducing a bill and “possibly shepherding it through the chamber” requires the most of a member’s time, energy, and staff resources, while making floor statements about the issue requires a moderate amount of member resources, and “cosponsorship entails only officially signing on to an existing piece of legislation” (35).

Moreover, multiple interviewees said they know issues are important to members when they are willing to work with or seek support from members of the opposing political party for their policy initiatives or core issues. Although working with members of the other party may also have repercussions for a member’s political fitness and individual power (discussed below), reaching across the aisle to build a policy coalition takes more time and energy than working solely within the member’s own party. Such time and energy commitments can be extensive, as three members shared, given the hyper-partisanship and polarization currently present in the congressional environment.
Yet, members may not all hold the same beliefs regarding the most effective way to use the legislative process to make progress on policy issues. As Member 8 stated, he does not author many bills because he believes the current reality of Congress makes it unlikely his bills will pass. Accordingly, Member 8 and members holding a similar belief regarding the effectiveness of authoring bills may not author bills or be conspicuous leaders in the legislative arena when working hard on the issues that matter to them. Rather, such members may work on their core issues legislatively like Member 8, who explained he will “either work it into the bill, and you’ll never know it, or it doesn’t happen. I mean, 90% of what I do is stuff you’ll never know.”

Just because members may not be authoring bills or spearheading legislative initiatives, they most likely are still spending time on the issues/activities they believe are important. First, developing expertise in issue areas, whether or not members author bills, requires a fair amount of member and staff time. As Member 7 stated, even becoming well versed enough to “ask questions” and be “up to speed” on the bills coming before his committee – not even to the degree of developing expertise – requires he and his staff spend time learning about the issues covered in bills on practically a daily basis.

Second, members engage with issues by spending time on issues outside of the more traditionally understood legislative arena. Members can engage with issues through spending time working on/with congressional caucuses or other issue-focused groups, such as the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission. Two staffers interviewed spoke to members’ work within caucuses – not just caucus membership – as indicating members find the issues championed by the respective caucuses to be important. Additionally, as Staffer 6 explained, members are likely to spend time on the issues they believe to be important in their home district, working on and
promoting their pet issues outside of the legislative process. Finally, as Member 8 shared, he has spent over a decade traveling to and focusing on issues within another country because he thinks visiting other countries, in general, and the issues within this specific country are “important.” Therefore, members can and do spend time on the activities they find important beyond spearheading/leading political initiatives or authoring and then ushering bills through the legislative process. Accordingly, it should be time spent – not solely legislative work – that serves as the key indicator for what matters to members.

Thus, researchers can identify the issues or activities members hold to be important by assessing the issues or activities on which members focus large proportions of their time, both within and outside of the legislative area. Moreover, how members speak about the issues and activities on which they spend their time and what they say may provide additional insight into the importance members may or may not place on the issues and activities. As discussed in Finding V, if members clearly articulate why certain issues or activities are important and use strong or forceful diction while doing so, there is a high chance the member sincerely believes the issue/activity is important. Additionally, as Finding IV indicates, if the member speaks about the issue/activity passionately, displaying powerful human emotion regarding the issue or activity, the member most likely genuinely finds the issue/activity to be important.

After identifying the issues and activities members deem important, one can answer the second part of the question guiding inquiry in this area: Which type of goal does each of the member’s chosen issues/activities primarily serve? Put differently, are the issues and activities aimed at serving the interests of others, serving the member’s political self-interest/political fitness, or both simultaneously? As reported in Finding VIII, interviewees identify a member’s
work on issues/activities as likely driven predominantly by a motivation to serve others based on the views of those actors or groups who can powerfully affect a member’s reelection, namely the member’s political party, the member’s constituents, and interest groups. The individuals interviewed spoke about two general scenarios wherein the juxtaposition of the views of these actors/groups and the member’s core or pet issues are telling of a member’s primarily other-serving motivation. In both general scenarios, members are engaging in behavior falling squarely into the political altruism category.

The first scenario is when members engage in activities or with issues with a low likelihood of increasing/benefiting a member’s political fitness. Although researchers should investigate views of the actors/groups who can powerfully impact a member’s political fitness on a member-by-member basis, three of this project’s interviews produced specific issue areas, activities, and behaviors that have a high chance of being driven by a predominantly other-serving behavior across most members. Staffer 3, Staffer 6, and Member 7 agreed members are most likely motivated primarily to serve others when working on human rights issues. Additionally, Staffer 3 and Staffer 6 named work on foreign policy/international relations issues as most likely driven by a predominantly other-serving motivation, unless, according to Staffer 3, the particular policy is related to a US intervention or an ethnic diaspora in the member’s district. Member 7 also stated poverty issues, pro-environmental issues, and civil rights/voting rights as areas wherein members’ time is likely to be spent to primarily benefit the interests of others. In general, these issue areas are focusing on “public goods” which are not especially important to a member’s voting constituency or obviously supported by a powerful interest group.
Second, multiple interviewees contend when work on an issue or activity has a high chance of decreasing/being costly to a member’s political fitness the member engaging in the work is most likely driven by a primarily other-serving motivation. These issues and activities are understood to be those that can displease an actor or group able to influence a member’s reelection. The individuals interviewed spoke to two broad circumstances wherein a member’s work may very well upset such actors/groups. The first entails members working on issues or activities that displease members’ potential voters. Member 5 and Staffer 5 described these issues as “politically toxic” or “politically risky,” with Member 5 providing the examples of entitlement reform and the gas tax. Member 8 described his time spent traveling to and working on issues related to a foreign country as a “political liability,” answering my question regarding how such work impacts reelection with, “No, generally it hurts. People see it as junkets.” In fact, Member 5 said to look to members “taking political risks… putting themselves out there and pushing things that would be difficult” to find members working primarily to serve others.

The second circumstance that most likely decreases a member’s political fitness involves the member working on issues/activities that upset the member’s political party. Staffer 3 was the only interviewee who expressly spoke to members taking a position opposite their party when working on issues as indicating those members are motivated primarily to serve others, and he did so indirectly. Yet, Staffer 3 and Staffer 4 provided examples of their members working hard to serve the interests of others, identifying the primary other-serving motivation based on the members going against the wishes of their party. More prominent in the interviews was the belief that members who have an “open door” on the issue, “willing to work across the aisle,”
disregarding the impact their work will have on their political party are driven primarily by an other-serving motivation.

This being said, fewer interviewees named working with members of the opposing party as indicative of a member’s predominantly other-serving motivation than indicative that the immediate issue is important to the member. Moreover, multiple individuals interviewed said a member will engage in behavior or work on an issue to please constituents even if doing so displeases the member’s political party. The interviewees disagreed with labeling members as motivated primarily to serve others in such circumstances because the members were serving the interests of their constituents, a group with powerful influence over the members’ reelection.

Thus, a significant caveat must be made: It is only when the interests of the recipient and the political fitness of the member can be separated that interviewees are willing to identify an issue or activity as being driven primarily by an other-serving motivation.

This caveat holds true for interviewees naming specific examples of issues or activities most likely motivated by a member’s political self-interest. The interviewees provided two general types of issues or activities they contend are driven primarily by a member’s political self-interest. Both types fit within the political selfishness category of political social behavior.

The first type is an issue/activity that has a high likelihood of benefiting a member’s political fitness while simultaneously being costly to the interests of the member’s constituents. Interviewees described these issues/activities as pleasing the actors/groups who can affect a member’s reelection chances – specifically a member’s constituents, a member’s political party, or interest groups – while not serving the best interests of the people or the district. Member 7 captured the essence of this type of issue or activity when speaking about a member’s similarly
circumstanced vote with, “So, sometimes you get members of Congress who are voting in a way that is popular for them personally in their districts, but it is really against the self-interest of the people who live in their district.”

Second, multiple interviewees contend members are motivated primarily by political self-interest when working on issues or activities that have no realistic chance of impacting the daily lives of the people, but benefit the member’s political fitness. These issues or activities were described as those which members 1) know will not contribute to the creation or furthering of policy because the legislation required to do so will be “dead upon arrival” or is “going down upon arrival” in one or both congressional chambers, but 2) members work on the issues or activities because they believe it will please their constituents and/or political party. Because these issues or activities have a very low likelihood of benefiting the interests of the people, they are understood as not being motivated to serve others.

Finally, all interviewees were unwilling to classify activities or issues which are intended to benefit the interests of the recipient and which may lead to reelection rewards for the member as either primarily driven by an other-serving or a self-serving motivation. The mere realistic potential for an activity or issue to benefit a member’s political fitness was enough for interviewees to question the type of motivation driving a member’s work on an issue/activity which also appears to serve the interests of others. Again, only when the interests of the recipient and the political fitness of the member can be separated are interviewees confident in their ability to identify an issue or activity as driven predominantly by a member’s motivation to serve others or a member’s political self-interest.
Inquiry Area Two

The second area of inquiry provides insight into a member’s *propensity* for serving a specific ultimate goal type. Inquiry in this area should be guided by the question, “When forced to choose overtly between reelection and serving others, which option does the member choose?” Although Finding IX indicates that members rarely face such decisions, it also indicates members must, at times, choose between benefiting the interests of the recipient and benefiting/avoiding a cost to their political fitness. Moreover, multiple interviewees used these decisions as evidence of a member’s propensity for serving a specific ultimate goal type.

As explained in Chapter 1, altruism is a motivation for actual behavior and can be understood as a propensity underlying an individual’s behavior. This research conceptualizes both a primarily other-serving motivation and a primarily self-serving motivation as driving isolated behaviors as well as having the potential to be propensities underlying most of the member’s behaviors. As propensities, political altruism and political selfishness become character qualities of individual members, as members with such propensities are predisposed or inclined to engage in politically altruistic behavior or politically selfish behavior. Thus, the *consistent* engagement in politically altruistic or politically selfish social behaviors indicates the member likely has the corresponding propensity. Conversely, members who are inconsistent in their types of social behaviors, or who engage in different types of social behavior in a relatively equal degree, are less likely to have a propensity for a single type of social behavior.

Multiple interviewees spoke to the notion of a member’s propensity when discussing a character or personal quality they use to identify a member’s predominantly other-serving or predominantly political self-interest-serving motivation. These interviewees shared they knew
members were or are driven primarily to serve others or serve their political self-interest based on members’ respective understandings of their own, individual importance in relation to the ideals, governmental system, and people their work is supposed to serve. Interviewees identify members primarily driven to serve others when members consistently behave and engage with others in such a way that makes clear the members understand themselves to be much less important than their work or their official position. Conversely, interviewees identify members predominantly driven by their political self-interest based partially on such members understanding themselves, as individuals, to be extremely important, valuing the power and status associated with being a member of Congress over their service and governmental system in which they serve. The importance a member places on him/herself as an individual in relation to the system, people, and ideals the member is supposed to serve reveals a member’s propensity for engaging in a specific type of political social behavior because it highlights the purpose likely underlying most of the member’s instrumental behavior.

Interestingly, none of the interviewees who spoke to this character or personal quality questioned their ability to detect accurately how members understood their importance in relation to the system or their shared purpose. In fact, more interviewees were comfortable speaking to this quality as an identifying propensity than were willing to name specific issues or activities that indicate a member’s primary motivation across all members. The individuals interviewed seemed to identify this quality based on two factors. First, interviewees named how members consistently interact with all other political actors – constituents, fellow members, interest group leaders, party leaders, and staff – as well as member’s core issues and explanations for behavior as indicative of the member’s propensity for behavior. This project does not provide here a
specific method to parallel this first detection technique because researchers will need to select their respective methods based on their studies’ chosen data sources. However, suggestions for various methods will be made in this project’s concluding chapter.

Second, interviewees looked to the choices members made when forced to choose overtly between serving others or serving their political fitness needs. Finding IX shows interviewees identify such types of “tough decisions” as occurring when members much choose between what they perceive to be “in the best interest” of their constituents/the nation or pleasing the actors/groups who the member understands as having a powerful effect on the member’s reelection. When members choose to benefit the recipient’s interest by doing what members believe to be “right” or “in the best interest” of their constituents/nation while simultaneously displeasing an actor/group who can affect a member’s political fitness, the member is likely motivated primarily to serve the interests of others with the immediate decision. The opposition decision demonstrates the member is likely driven predominantly to serve his/her political self-interest with the immediate decision.

Interviewees use these decisions to identify a member’s propensity for serving others or serving their own political self-interest because such decisions indicate a member’s underlying belief regarding whether the member, as an individual, or the system, the people, and the member’s supposed purpose to serve is more important. The interviewees who identified members as predominantly motivated to serve others typically described such members as “principled” and “taking difficult positions” against their party, powerful interests groups, and/or the opinion popular with their constituents. When reflecting on one of multiple examples of his member taking firm stands against his party or popular positions – a member he labelled as being
“very, very public interest regarding” – Staffer 4 shared, “And he did things like that quite often. He was somebody who cultivated a reputation of being a principled guy. He used to joke with people that we worked in the Alamo.” Similarly, after identifying a member as one who Staffer 2 “bet[s] he acts pretty altruistically,” Staffer 2 continued to describe the member as, “[H]e’s this uncompromising guy who knows the right answer and knows what’s going to help people and fights for that thing.”

Thus, it seems the unwillingness to yield to reelection needs in order to do what the member believes to be “in the people’s best interest” is the most telling sign the member is the type of member motivated primarily to serve others. Put differently, by indicating a member’s conceptual understanding of his/her actual – as opposed to supposed – purpose, these choices unveil a member’s underlying propensity, or lack thereof, to engage in political altruism or political selfishness. Accordingly, this research uses a member’s choices when forced to choose overtly between serving others and safeguarding his/her political fitness to identify the member’s corresponding propensity for one primary motivation type.

Identifying Primary Motivation Orientation and Classifying Members

With information from the above two areas of inquiry, researchers can classify members based on their primary type of motivation. Researchers make this identification at the end of a two-step process during which they place members within a conceptual space according to members’ political social behavior. The conceptual space allows member motivation to range from pure-form political altruism (entirely other-serving) to pure-form political mutual benefit (equal mixture of other-serving and self-serving) to pure-form political selfishness (entirely self-
serving) to pure-from political spite (equal mixture of decreasing the interests of others and decreasing one’s self-interest). There is no expectation that any member is always driven entirely by an other-serving or self-serving motivation, and the conceptual space does not require such universal motivation in order for a member to be placed within the space. Rather, the conceptual space provides researchers a way to identify members’ respective primary motivations and classify members according to the general degree with which they are more or less driven by an other-serving or self-serving motivation.

The member motivation classification conceptual space is:

**Figure 3: Member Motivation Classification Conceptual Space**
The space conceptualizes each type of motivation as being strongest in their respective corners. At the center is a zero primary motivation space. Members located in the center either have an equal balance of all motivations or an equal balance of the two motivations diametrically opposed to each other, namely political altruism and political selfishness or political mutual benefit and political spite.

The motivations which include an other-serving element – political mutual benefit and political altruism – are represented on the left half of the space. There members are motivated more to serve others than to not serve others. Of members driven to serve others, those driven to serve others more than serve their political self-interest will fall in the upper left quadrant of the space. Conversely, members more motivated to simultaneously serve their political self-interest and serve others than motivated to just serve others will fall in the lower left quadrant of the space. The closer members are to the horizontal zero primary motivation line dividing the left side of the conceptual space, the more they are equally driven by political altruism and political mutual benefit.

The motivations which include a self-serving element – political mutual benefit and political selfishness – are located on the bottom half of the space. Thus, members located in the bottom half of the space are driven more to serve their political self-interest than to not serve their political self-interest. Of members driven to serve their political self-interest, those driven to serve their self-interest more than serve others will fall in the lower right quadrant of the space. Conversely, members more motivated to simultaneously serve their political self-interest and serve others than motivated to just serve their political self-interest will fall in the lower left quadrant of the space. The closer members are to the vertical zero primary motivation line
dividing the bottom half of the conceptual space, the more they are equally driven by political mutual benefit and political selfishness.

Although this research does not dismiss the possibility of political spite motivating members of Congress, neither this project’s interviewees nor congressional studies literature provides insight into such behavior or motivation. Accordingly, this research will not explore members driven by political spite in its process for classifying members based on primary motivation.

Members who always engage in political altruism social behavior – always working to benefit the interests of others and always willingly to accept the political fitness costs required to do so – will fall in the far upper left corner of the space. Members who always engage in political selfishness social behavior – always working to benefit/avoid costs to their political fitness and always willing for recipients to accept the costs to their interests required to do so – will fall in the far lower right corner of the space. Members who always engage in political mutual benefit social behavior – always working to simultaneously benefit their political fitness and the interests of the recipient – will fall in the far lower left corner of the space.

Again, this research has no expectation that any member always engages in a single type of political social behavior or that any member is entirely driven by a single type of motivation. Yet, members primarily driven to serve others will consistently engage in political altruism and political mutual benefit social behaviors while members primarily driven to serve their political self-interest will consistently engage in political selfishness and political mutual benefit social behaviors. Thus, when members engage in political mutual benefit social behavior, one cannot identify if members are driven predominantly to serve others or serve their political self-interest.
with the specific behavior. Moreover, members may not be motivated primarily by one or the other in their political mutual benefit behavior, but may rather be driven to serve both interests, *e.g.*, through an anticipated cooperative reciprocity. This is why the pure-form political mutual benefit *motivation* is conceptualized as an equal mix of the other-serving and self-serving motivations. It is the non-mutual benefit political social behavior that will pull members towards the lower right quadrant or upper left quadrant in the conceptual space, thereby allowing for member identification according to primary motivation type.

The two steps for placing members within the conceptual space capture the two critical components of classifying members used by interviewees (as discussed in finding VIII): members’ core issues and members’ propensities. Researchers gain insight into the first component by looking to a member’s core issues and the respective predominant motivations behind each, while researchers gain insight into the second component by looking to member’s decisions when forced to choose between serving others and serving their political fitness needs, as described in the two areas of inquiry above. Thus, scholars gathering information in order to classify members’ motivation types are not identifying and then somehow aggregating the presence or absence of an indicator over a series of repeated behaviors or observations. Rather, researchers are placing observed indicative behavior or qualities into categories and then combining these categorized observations to derive a member’s overall primary motivation type.

Although each component indicates a member’s primary motivation, they evince different aspects of the motivation. The first provides a description of how members *have behaved* while the second provides information regarding a member’s *proclivity and corresponding character quality* in this realm. By combining the components, this project’s
classification scheme provides a more holistic understanding of members than one would gain if using only one component. Thus, using both components to classify members better identifies member as types than using only one.

The first step in placing members within the conceptual space is based on researchers’ determinations the ultimate goal type each of members’ core or pet issues serves. When determining where to place the member in the conceptual space based on their core or pet issues, the researcher must weight each core/pet issues based on the priority or significance the member gives to the core issue relative to all of the member’s core issues. Because members indicate their priorities according to the amount of time they spend on issues/activities as well as their consistent treatment of issues/activities, member’s beliefs regarding the relative importance of his/her core issues can be assessed with the same factors used to initially identify the core issues.

If members hold all core issues to be equally important, then each issue should enter into the researcher’s assessment equally. For example, if a member has three equally important core issues, each issue should be equally weighted at 1/3. If members hold some pet issues to be more important than others, the weight allotted to each issue should be in rough proportion to the importance the member places on core issue across all core issues. For example, if a member has two core issues, but gives one twice as much time and energy than the other, the more important issue should carry a weight of 2/3 while the less important issue should carry a weight of 1/3.

Once weights have been assigned to core issues, researchers can calculate the magnitude with which they should move members within the conceptual space by summing the weights of all pet issues driven by a predominantly other-serving motivation (by the political altruism motivation), then summing the weights of all pet issues driven by a motivation to simultaneously
serve others and serve a member’s political fitness (by the political mutual benefit motivation), and then summing the weights of all pet issues driven by a predominantly political self-interest-serving motivation (by the political selfishness motivation). The core issue weight sum for each motivation type should be calculated with the following formulas:

Political altruism weight sum: \[ \sum_{i} a_i = x_a \]

Political mutual benefit weight sum: \[ \sum_{i} m_i = x_m \]

Political selfishness weight sum: \[ \sum_{i} s_i = x_s \]

Where,

\( a_i \): importance weight of altruistic core issue \( i \), ranging from 0 to 1;

\( m_i \): importance weight of mutually beneficial core issue \( i \), ranging from 0 to 1; and

\( s_i \): importance weight of selfish core issue \( i \), ranging from 0 to 1.

The core issue weight sum for each motivation type \((x_a, x_m, \text{ and } x_s)\) provides researchers with vectors to complete the first step in placing members within the conceptual space, with “x” being the magnitude of the vector and “a” (political altruism), “m” (political mutual benefit) or “s” (political selfishness) being the direction of the vector. Members should only have weight sums/vectors for the types of motivations identified as driving at least one of their core issues. Thus, if a member only has core issues driven by the political mutual benefit motivation, the member should only have an \( x_m \).

To place members within the conceptual space, researchers should use the diagonals of the conceptual space as axes to determine plot points for each of the member’s core issue motivation vectors. Then the researcher should sum the individual vector plot points to find the member’s corresponding intermediate placement within the conceptual space.
Once members have been placed within the conceptual space according to their summed core issue vectors, researchers can take the second step for placing members within the conceptual space. This step entails adjusting the member’s placement based on the member’s propensity for being driven by the political altruism or political selfishness motivations. As discussed above, a member’s propensity is indicated by a member’s decisions when forced to overtly choose between serving others and benefiting/avoiding a cost to his/her political fitness. When choosing to serve his/her political fitness over serving others, the member is understood as engaging in political selfishness social behavior, and members are understood as engaging in political altruism social behavior when making the opposite choice. Again, only when the member’s political fitness is distinct from the interests of the recipient can a member make such a choice, and, consequently, only then can the researcher move the member within the conceptual space according to this factor.

As indirectly noted by Staffer 2 and directly stated by Staffer 4, not all tough decisions are equal in their difficulty. While discussing the degree with which a member’s reelection needs restrict a member’s behavior, Staffer 2 explained, when the negative reelection impact of a member’s behavior is likely to be small, “it’s a lot easier to be like, ‘F--k it, I’m going to do what I want to do. I’m going to do what I feel. I’m going to do the right thing.’ Than it is if it’s like a g--d----d electoral disaster.” Furthermore, Staffer 4 asserted the process for identifying members’ motivation types based on these decisions should include both the frequency of a member’s specific choices as well as “how hard these varying decisions were. And so, there’s a frequency but also a difficult measure. Like, how hard was it? How much it impaired their reelection chances…”
An especially difficult altruistic choice should weigh more than an easier altruistic choice because members are prioritizing serving others more in the first situation than in the latter situation. Similarly, members who choose to engage in political selfishness when faced with an especially tough decision are prioritizing their political fitness over serving others to a much higher degree than members who make a similar choice when facing an easier decision. Thus, the magnitude with which researchers move members within the conceptual space should be larger when members are facing harder or tougher decisions.

The degree of difficulty researchers associate with a member’s tough decision should include an assessment of how much the member believes the decision will impact his/her reelection chances as well as how important doing what is “right” regarding serving others/serving others with the decision is to the member. The member’s perception or anticipation of how his/her decision will most likely impact his/her reelection should take into account how salient the decision is with the various groups/actors who can affect a member’s reelection, how many of these groups/actors have communicated clearly their views to the member, the intensity of the views held by the groups/actors, and the degree of agreement between the views of the groups/actors.

Determining how important it is to the member to do what is “right” regarding serving others benefit the interests of the recipient with the decision can be gauged by looking to the member’s previous engagement with the issue around which the decision centers. This includes both if and to what extent the member has worked on the issue prior to the decision as well as any official positions the member has taken on the issue. If the issue is one of the member’s core issues, and the core issue is predominantly driven by a motivation to serve others, the researcher
knows the issue and doing what is “right” regarding serving others/serving others is important to the member in the immediate decision. If the issue is one of the member’s core issues, and the core issue is motivated primarily to serve the member’s political self-interest or political fitness, it does not indicate doing what is “right” regarding serving others is especially important to the member in the immediate decision. As both Member 7 and Staffer 2 stated, members are more likely to allow reelection concerns affect their decisions on the issues that are less important to members because the issues themselves are less important to members. Thus, if the member has never spent time working on the issue prior to the decision, it is less likely doing the “right” thing regarding serving others with the specific decision is especially important to the member because the issue itself is less important to the member.

Additionally, if the member has taken an official position on the issue before faced with the tough decision, researchers can look at the messages the member used to take and communicate their position to identify both the member’s position and the sincerity with which the member holds the position. Again, as discussed in Findings IV and V, clear explanations for the member’s position articulated with powerful diction and/or human emotion indicate the member most likely genuinely believes in the position s/he has taken. Therefore, researchers can identify if and to what degree doing the “right” thing regarding serving others/serving others is important to members in the immediate decision based on their position prior to the decision and the message they used to articulate the position.

The hardest of all decisions are those made by members whose sincere and passionate positions or core issues put what the members believe to be “right” regarding serving others at odds with an impassioned and influential actor/group members anticipate as likely to have a
sizable negative impact on the members’ chances for reelection. As the degree with which the member cares about serving others/doing what is “right” decreases and/or the anticipated size or degree of costs to the member’s political fitness decreases, the degree of difficulty associated with the decision also decreases.

To determine the magnitude for moving members within the conceptual space based on these sorts of decisions, researchers should calculate two weighted proportions, one for choices to serve others/do the “right” thing and a second for choices to serve the member’s political fitness. The proportion should be number of political altruism/political selfishness choices out of total number of difficult decisions, and the proportion should be weighted by average difficulty of each type of choice. Because the weighted proportion incorporates both the consistency with which members make each type of choice as well as the difficulty associated with each type, it captures both key features of these difficult decisions that indicate a propensity. Finally, researchers should use both weighted proportions equally to move members within the conceptual space. Thus, if a member a has a weighted proportion for choices to serve others that is the same magnitude as his/her weighted proportion for choices to serve his/her political fitness, the two weighted proportions will effectually cancel each other out when moving the member within the conceptual space. Such a cancellation of effects on a member’s movement within the conceptual space is appropriate because the weighted proportions are being used as indicators for propensities. Diametrically opposed and equally strong inclinations indicate the lack of a meaningful propensity.
The weighted proportion for each choice type should be calculated with the following formulas:

Political altruism choice weighted proportion:

\[
\frac{\text{# of ac}}{\text{# of all difficult decisions}} \times \frac{\sum d_{ac_i}}{\text{# of ac}} = y_{ac}
\]

Political selfishness choice weighted proportion:

\[
\frac{\text{# of sc}}{\text{# of all difficult decisions}} \times \frac{\sum d_{sc_i}}{\text{# of sc}} = y_{sc}
\]

Where,
ac: a political altruism choice (choosing to serve others over one’s political fitness);
sc: a political selfishness choice (choosing to serve one’s political fitness over serving others);
d_{ac_i}: difficulty of political altruism choice i, ranging from 0 to 1; and
d_{sc_i}: difficulty of political selfishness choice i, ranging from 0 to 1.

The weighted proportion for each type of difficult choice \(y_{ac}\) and \(y_{sc}\) provides researchers with vectors to complete the second step for placing members within the conceptual space, with “y” being the magnitude of the vector and “ac” (political altruism choice) and “sc” (political selfishness choice) identifying the direction of the vector. Members should only have weighted proportion/vectors for a type of choice if the member, in fact, made such a choice. Again, these vectors represent a member’s propensity for political altruism or political selfishness.

To adjust a member’s placement within the conceptual space based on the member’s propensity vectors, researchers should use the diagonals of the conceptual space as axes –
consistent with how they used the axes in the first step of the member placement process – to
determine the respective plot points for \( y_{ac} \) and \( y_{sc} \). The researcher should then sum the individual
propensity vector plot points to find the member’s net propensity vector plot point. Finally, the
researcher should sum the member’s net propensity vector plot point with the member’s
intermediate plot point (the member’s location determined by step one of the process) to move
the member to his/her final placement within the conceptual space.

If the magnitude of \( y_{ac} \) or \( y_{sc} \) is larger than the remaining distance between a member’s
intermediate location and the outermost corner of the conceptual space, the researcher should
place the member at the outermost corner. This is because the purpose of placing members
within the conceptual space is to classify members based on their primary motivation type. Once
members have reached the outermost corners of the space, they can be identified as primarily
other-serving or self-serving, and further distinction need not be made in order to classify
members based on their primary motivation type.

Slightly different, the magnitude of \( y_{ac} \) or \( y_{sc} \) may place members outside of the
conceptual space’s left outermost limit or bottom outermost limit. If this occurs, the researcher
should initially move the member out of the space, placing the member according to the sum of
the member’s net propensity vector plot point and intermediate plot point. Then, the researcher
can return the member to the space for classification by moving the member in a line
perpendicular to the bypassed outermost limit, finally placing the member at the outermost limit
of the conceptual space. This will not affect the classification of the member, as the researcher is
not adjusting the member’s proximity to any of the space’s outermost corners.
To illustrate the process for placing a member in the conceptual space, suppose there is a member who has three core issues and has made three difficult decisions. Of the time the member spends on all three core issues, the member allocates roughly $\frac{1}{4}$ of this time to the third priority core issue and divides the remaining $\frac{3}{4}$ of this time equally between the other two. The researcher investigating the member determines the third priority issue is an altruistic core issue and the other two issues are both mutually beneficial core issues. Using the formulas for calculating the weight sums of core issues, the researcher calculates the member’s core issue weight sums/vectors as follows:

Political altruism weight sum ($x_a$) = .25

Political mutual benefit weight sum ($x_m$) = .375 + .375 = .75

The researcher then uses the diagonals of the conceptual space as axes to ascertain the plot points determined by each core issue vector. Using the diagonal running from political altruism to political selfishness as the x-axis and the diagonal running from political spite to political mutual benefit as the y-axis, the outermost corners of the space have the following plot points:

Political altruism: (-1, 0)

Political mutual benefit: (0, -1)

Political selfishness: (1, 0)

Political spite: (0, 1)

Thus, the plot point for each core issue vector would be:

Altruism core issue vector plot point: (-.25, 0)

Mutual benefit core issue vector plot point: (0, -.75)
Then, by summing the core issue vector plot points, the researcher determines the member’s intermediate placement in the conceptual space to be (-.25, -.75).

The researcher then adjusts the member’s placement based on the member’s choices when faced with difficult decisions. Of the three difficult decisions the member made, the researcher determines the first decision had a difficulty of .6 and the member chose the political selfishness option, the second had a difficulty of .5 and the member chose the political altruism option, and the third had a difficulty of .4 and the member chose the political altruism option. Using the formulas for calculating the weighted proportions for each choice type, the researcher calculates the member’s choice type weighted proportions/vectors as follows:

Political altruism choice weighted proportion \( (y_{ac}) = \)

\[
\frac{2}{3} \times \frac{.5 + .4}{2} = .3
\]

Political selfishness choice weighted proportion \( (y_{sc}) = \)

\[
\frac{1}{3} \times \frac{.6}{1} = .2
\]

The researcher then uses the diagonals of the conceptual space as axes – consistent with how the researcher used the axes to determine the member’s intermediate placement – to ascertain the plot points for each of the member’s choice type/propensity vectors. Thus, the plot point for each choice type/propensity vector would be:

Political altruism choice vector plot point: (-.3, 0)

Political selfishness choice vector plot point: (.2, 0)

Then, by summing the propensity vector plot points, the researcher determines the member’s net propensity vector plot point, which is (-.1, 0). Finally, the researcher sums the
member’s net propensity vector plot point with the plot point of the member’s intermediate placement – (-.25, -.75) – to arrive at the plot point for the member’s final placement in the conceptual space. This member’s final placement plot point is (-.35, -.75), and the member’s final placement in the conceptual space appears as follows:

Figure 4: Illustration of Member Final Placement

After completing the two steps for placing members within the conceptual space, researchers can identify a member’s primary motivation and corresponding member type based on the member’s final location. Members located near one of the outermost corners of the space
are classified as driven primarily by the corresponding motivation type, and members located near the center zero motivation space are identified as not driven predominantly by a single motivation type. Members located in the lower half of the conceptual space, but near to the zero motivation line dividing the political mutual benefit and political selfishness quadrants are identified as being more driven to serve their own interests than not serve their own interests, with a relatively equal combination of political selfishness and political mutual benefit motivating their behaviors. Similarly, members located on the left half of the conceptual space, but near the zero motivation line dividing the political mutual benefit and political altruism quadrants are identified as being more driven to serve others than not serve others, with a relatively equal combination of political altruism and political mutual benefit motivating their behaviors. Thus, the member used in the above illustration would be identified as much more driven to serve others than to not serve others, with slightly more political mutual benefit motivating the member than political altruism.

Finally, although the interviews did not indicate that reelection is an ultimate goal for members, congressional scholars who study the effects of various primary goals on member behavior often include reelection in their conceptualizations of such goals (see Hall 1987, 1996; Krehbiel 1991; Rohde 1991; Uslaner; Wawro 2000; Schickler 2001). When doing so, researchers typically cite Fenno’s 1973 conceptualization of members’ dominant goals, which depicts members as likely driven in specific behaviors by the primary goal of reelection, making good public policy, or gaining person power in their chamber (1).

While this project treats reelection as a proximate goal for all members in order to ascertain a member’s ultimate goal type, its conceptual framework and method for classifying
members can still be used if members’ ultimate goal is reelection. Such members would likely have predominantly political mutual benefit core issues. Thus, these members’ intermediate placements within the space would be in the political mutual benefit quadrant, relatively close to the outermost corner of the space. When forced to choose between serving their political fitness and serving others, members driven by the ultimate goal of reelection would likely choose serving their political fitness. Thus, such members’ choices would likely demonstrate the member has a political selfishness propensity, and members would be moved toward the political selfishness quadrant based on the magnitude of their net propensity vector. Accordingly, these members would be classified as more likely to serve their political self-interest than not serve their political self-interest, and the relative combination of the political selfishness and the political mutual benefit motivations would be contingent on the magnitudes of the members’ core issue and net propensity vectors.

This classification of a member driven by the ultimate goal of reelection is intuitive and fitting. Members motivated by the reelection goal for the sole purpose of getting reelected are not driven by a predominantly other-serving motivation and, thus, should be classified as more self-interested than other-interested. Therefore, this project’s treatment of reelection as a proximate goal still allows reelection to be an ultimate goal for some members and identifies such members’ primary motivation orientation appropriately.

Construction Complete: Ready for Inspection

The research framework developed in this chapter provides researchers with a process for identifying members of Congress according to their primary motivation for instrumental
behavior. Accordingly, this project has completed the initial step for studying systematically altruistic members of Congress and members motivated primarily by self-interest as types of legislators. In the following concluding chapter, this project will review the conceptual framework and method for member classification for limitations and strengths, name methods and areas for further development, identify research areas for potential future use, and discuss the implications and significance of this research project.
Conclusion

High Hopes: Beyond the Single-Minded Seekers of Reelection

This project has constructed a research framework to provide an empirically based method for classifying members of Congress according to their primary motivation. Its conceptual framework and process for categorizing members allows researchers to identify altruistic members, predominantly self-interested members, and those relatively equally driven by both motivation. Thus, this project has completed the first step necessary for studying systematically these members as types across all or most of their official behaviors. In doing so, this project has achieved both its named goal – to construct such a framework – and intended purpose – to provide researchers with a component vital for investigating members of Congress as types defined by their primary motivation. Although the conceptual framework and classification scheme offered here can be improved, they have research strengths and provide for areas of future study. Additionally, the overall project raises implications regarding America’s governmental system as well as which types of members Americans may or may not want serving in their First Branch. Collectively, the elements presented in this concluding chapter implore scholars to use and strengthen the research framework when useful and appropriate in order better understand the US Congress and its members.

Future Work on Generalizability, Accuracy, Member Propensity, and Viability

This project’s research framework can be strengthened through future work which increases its generalizability, assesses and improves its accuracy, provides additional methods for indicating a member’s propensity for a specific primary motivation type, and tests and
increases its viability. As previously stated, the interviewees for this research do not comprise a sample representative of all members of Congress. While this project is confident it the quality of its research framework for exploring the current congressional environment, researchers using the conceptual framework and process for classifying members should be mindful of how to apply the research framework to the members in their immediate study. Scholars should take care that the members they are studying face an environment to which the research framework applies and adjust their use of the framework accordingly. For example, the current condition of hyper-partisan polarization likely affects members’ perceptions of how their behavior and decisions will impact their political fitness as well as the amount of time and energy members will or must allocate to ushering their core issues through the legislative process. While the method for classifying members developed here can be used to investigate members operating in a less polarized, less partisan environment, researchers studying such members will need to alter their use of a member’s political party within the framework to best suit the different political reality.

Performing additional interviews can address both the framework’s generalizability and its accuracy. First, interviewing more subjects can provide additional information regarding when and how the process for classifying members developed here should be employed. Additional interviews may also lead to insights regarding how to expand or adjust the method for classifying members to enlarge the scope of members on which the process can be used without additional modifications. Second, although this research uses scholarship from congressional studies to bolster its findings and develop its research framework, additional interviews could help verify and potentially further elaborate or upgrade the conceptual framework and
classification scheme. Additionally, expanding the type of interview subjects to include other individuals whose profession or daily lives require they decipher member motivation – e.g., lobbyists or members of the media who report on Congress – would likely provide insights that could strengthen the framework and improve its immediate scope of applicability.

One area that was not explored in this project is identifying members according to the motivation of political spite. As stated in Chapter 7, neither this project’s interviews nor congressional studies research provides insight into or indicators of political spite. Yet, political spite may motivate some members, and the conceptual space allows for such a motivation. Therefore, this project’s method for classifying members may be strengthened by developing a way to detect political spite and identify members predominantly driven by it. When doing so, researchers would need to determine 1) a method for identifying behavior intended to both decrease a member’s political fitness and be costly to the interests of others and 2) a way to distinguish between a member’s propensity for political spite and propensity for political mutual benefit.

The method for classifying members can also be augmented with empirical indicators for members’ altruistic or self-serving propensities beyond the decisions they make when forced to choose between serving others and serving their political fitness. Again, interviewees identify members’ propensities according to members’ respective understandings of their individual importance in relation to the importance of the ideals, governmental system, and people their work is supposed to serve. Interviewees sensed such understandings based on members’ consistent official and interpersonal behavior, although this project’s interviews did not provide specific indicators for these understandings besides a member’s choices when forced to choose
between serving others and serving his/her political fitness. Performing more interviews with questions focused on uncovering additional specific indicators for a member’s understanding of his/her individual importance may provide researchers with additional methods and markers for identifying members’ propensities. Instead of or in conjunction with completing additional interviews, scholars can also look to work done in other fields that investigate individuals’ understandings of their personal importance in relation to others.

Research focusing on a culture’s degree of individualism/collectivism may lend insight into how researchers can detect a member’s propensity based on the member’s typical or everyday behavior. Philosophy and numerous social science fields have contributed to this research area (see Triandis 1995, ch. 2 for a history of its cross-disciplinary development), although the current conceptual framework is typically attributed to Geert Hofstede and Harry Triandis (Kim et al. 1994, xvii). Triandis (1995) defines collectivism and individualism as follows:

Collectivism may be initially defined as a social pattern consisting of closely linked individuals who see themselves as parts of one or more collectives (family, co-workers, tribe, nation); are primarily motivated by the norms of, and duties imposed by, those collectives; are willing to give priority to the goals of these collectives over their own personal goals; and emphasize their connectedness to members of these collectives. A preliminary definition of individualism is a social pattern that consists of loosely linked individuals who view themselves as independent of collectives; are primarily motivated by their own preferences, needs, rights, and the contracts they have established with others; give priority to their personal goals over the goals of others; and emphasize rational analyses of the advantages and disadvantages to associating with others (2).

Although the above definitions and some of the research exploring individualism/collectivism focuses on phenomena at a societal or cultural level, the patterns of individual behavior researchers use to classify a culture’s individualism/collectivism orientation
may provide insight regarding the types of behaviors which reflect a member’s understanding of his/her personal significance in relation to the significance of the people and his/her official role. Furthermore, scholars using the individualism/collectivism conceptual framework also study *individuals* based on the degree to which they “believe, feel, and act very much like collectivists” or “believe, feel, and act the way individualists do” (Triandis 1995, 5; see Triandis 1994 for a brief review of the individual-level research). Thus, researchers seeking to develop an empirical method for identifying members’ respective understandings of their relative individual importance may find methods/indicators for doing so from both the culture-level and the individual-level work done by scholars using the individualism/collectivism concepts and approach.

Moreover, researches may find guidance for deciphering a member’s understanding of his/her relative individual significance from works that investigate individuals’ interpersonal communication and interaction. In fact, scholars have used individuals’ interpersonal communications/interactions to better understand individuals and cultures according to the individualism/collectivism conceptual framework (see Gudykunst, Ting-Toomey, and Nishida 1996 for one collection of such studies).

Outside of the individualism/collectivism framework, other researchers have used individuals’ informal communication to identify their respective understandings of their personal significance. For example, in his self-described “‘micro’ sociology” study, Derber (1979) analyzes data gathered from 1,500 face-to-face conversations observed in six designated settings as well as 100 tape-recorded dinner conversations between friends and acquaintances to “explore dynamics of everyday face-to-face behavior within the context of the culture and socioeconomic
system of American society” (5). Working entirely within the American culture “which encourages self-interest and self-absorption” (3), Derber develops empirical indicators to classify conversation components as “attention-getting” or “attention-giving” initiatives (ch. 1), and further demonstrates how each type of initiative is indicative of an individual’s “self-oriented” or “other-oriented” character type (ch. 2). For Derber, attention-getting behavior “reflects an underlying character structure of ‘self-orientation’” wherein “[t]he self-oriented character type develops a highly egocentric view of the world and is motivated primarily by self-interest” (21). By contrast, attention-giving behavior is “based on the tendency for the individual to focus attention on the needs and concerns of others as well as himself in social life” (21, fn 1).

Derber’s study aligns nicely with many of the interviewees assertions that they sensed members’ understandings of their relative importance by simply being “observant” of members’ consistent behaviors and how they interact with others on a daily basis. Staffer 1’s assessment of one of his member’s primarily other-serving orientation speaks most extensively to this claim shared amongst many interviewees. Again, Staffer 1 said the member’s actions and how he consistently treats and interacts with people reveals the member’s drive to support and help others. According to Staffer 1, “He always asks how people are, he asks people questions about themselves,” and he remembers what people say and details about their lives. Thus, the insights, methods, and indicators from studies which focus on how individuals typically interact with others may be fruitful sources for researchers in their efforts to develop methods for detecting members’ respective understandings of themselves in relations to the ideal, the system, and their people their work is supposed to serve. Furthermore, using the insights and indicators from such studies has an additional strength: Because the indicators used in these studies appear to align
with the unarticulated indicators used by interviewees, these indicators likely fit nicely with the research framework offered here and are likely verifiable through additional interviews.

The third area of existing scholarship that may provide researchers with methods for identifying a member’s understanding of his/her relative significance is research that has developed scales for assessing individuals’ attitudes towards social responsibility (most famously Gough, McClosky, and Meehl 1952; Harris 1957; Berkowitz and Daniels 1964; Berkowitz and Lutterman 1968). Social responsibility, as defined by Harris (1957), is “a composite of attitude elements reflecting behavior classifiable as reliable, accountable, loyal, or doing an effective job” (322). The works that have created scales for measuring an individual’s social responsibility tend to rise from the field of social psychology, with many of these projects using questionnaires or experiments to identify research subjects’ respective measures. The social responsibility scales typically describe the most responsible individuals similarly to how Gough, McClosky, and Meehl’s “brief character sketch” depicts their most responsible research subjects:

[P]ersons with a deep concern over broader ethical and moral problems, with a strong sense of justice, with a rather high, but somewhat rigid, set of self-demands and standards, a rejection of privilege or favoritism, an inability to enjoy “uneearned” rewards, and almost excessive emphasis on carrying one’s own share of burdens and duties, a strong and unflagging sense of confidence in self and in the basic rightfulness of the larger social world, and a rejection of the light, trivial, or dangerous (77, 1952).

Clearly, neither the concept of social responsibility nor these scholars’ data collection methods fit perfectly with research investigating members of Congress and their altruistic or primarily self-serving propensities. However, the operationalization within the research that develops and uses social responsibility scales may lend insight into the more general types of indicators that could allow researchers to identify a member’s understanding of his/her personal
importance in relation to the significance of his/her duty to serve. Moreover, numerous research projects that study altruism as a personality trait use a measure of social responsibility to investigate and analyze “the altruistic personality” (see Rushton, Chrisjohn, and Fekken 1981; Oliner and Oliner 1988; Bierhoff, Klein, and Kramp 1991; Carlo et al. 1991; Bierhoff and Rohmann 2004). Thus, it seems individuals’ understandings of their responsibility to society contribute, at least in part, to their propensity for altruistic or predominantly self-serving behavior. Accordingly, carefully drawing from research on social responsibility appears both useful to gain insight into members’ respective understandings of their relative personal significance, and appropriate given such member understandings will be used as indicators for a member’s propensity to engage in either political altruism or political selfishness.

One final way the method for classifying members may be improved entails researchers testing the process for viability. Admittedly, the research framework developed here has yet to be fully employed, and attempting to do so may unveil difficulty in its application. However, because the research framework allows researchers to make choices most appropriate for their respective projects regarding data type and data collection, potential difficulties will likely not prove insurmountable.

Strengths and Future Research

While the research framework offered here can be improved, it has marked strengths in its current form. Overall, this framework has five major strengths. The first four are somewhat distinct from each other, while the fifth emanates from the other four. First, the framework provides researchers with a method to conceptually and empirically separate members’
proximate goal of reelection from their ultimate goal type and corresponding primary motivation. Because reelection is a somewhat universal proximate goal, such a separation is crucial to distinguish altruistic members from predominantly self-serving members.

Second, the process of classifying members according to their primary motivation type uses two discrete, yet interrelated, empirically detectably components. These components supply information on two aspects of a member’s primary motivation type: a description of how a member has behaved in the actual daily congressional environment as well as insights into how a member may likely behave if faced with different circumstances. Obviously, combining these two components provides a more complete understanding of a member’s primary motivation. More important, using both components to classify members allows researchers to somewhat overcome difficulties in detecting political altruism and political selfishness in Congress when members are not forced to overtly engage in either type of political social behavior on a regular basis.

Third, the research framework provides scholars with flexibility regarding which data and data collection methods to use in their respective studies. While the framework requires researchers to identify a member’s issue priorities and corresponding type as well as a member’s difficult decisions, degree of difficulty associated with each decision, and type of choices made, researchers can use various sources and methods for collecting the information. For example, scholars can look to the member’s official schedule, meet with the member’s chief of staff or other knowledgeable staffer, or explore the policies/issue areas on which the member’s policy staffers spend their time to gain insight into a member’s allocation of time and energy. Researchers can also gather information to identify a member’s core issues and priorities by
meeting with caucus or interest group leaders to determine how much time and energy the member puts into his/her work on caucus issues or issues related to the interest group. If researchers cannot gain access to these individuals or a member’s official schedule, they can also collect information on the bills a member authors, a member’s floor speeches, and a member’s testimony before a congressional committee – all of which provide insight into a member’s core issues – with a likely higher degree of ease. Furthermore, depending on the information scholars want, they may be able to gather it though archival research, interviews, surveys, or participant observation data collection methods. The flexibility in data and data collection allowed by the framework makes the framework readily usable across a wide variety of research projects.

Fourth, the research framework encompasses and further develops the approach which has dominated congressional studies for the past four decades, as opposed to contradicting or dismantling it. While completely new or contrarian frameworks and approaches play important roles in scientific research, this research agrees that investigating members of Congress as instrumental actors is useful and appropriate. By expanding on the existing and currently leading approach within the field, this project’s research framework is both grounded in congressional studies’ knowledge and provides researchers with a method for improving and continuing to build upon this knowledge base as it presently exists. Accordingly, congressional scholars can use what they know presently as an illuminating guide for directing future research efforts to increase and refine the field’s understanding of members of Congress and their behavior.

Together, the first four strengths of this research framework provide a fifth strength: broad applicability in and facilitation of future research. Because it provides researchers flexibility regarding data choices and allows members to be driven predominantly by political
altruism or political selfishness, this project’s research framework can apply to any research project aimed at studying members of Congress as purposive actors. Additionally, the two components used to classify members according to primary motivation type can be used separately if researchers want to focus solely on describing members’ actual engagement in a type of political social behavior in specific past situations or on how members would likely behave given certain circumstances. Moreover, because the framework expands on the approach typically used by recent and current researchers, it allows congressional scholars to harness the power of their existing knowledge and channel it into future projects. Finally, because the framework helps researchers isolate reelection from a member’s primary ultimate goal type, the framework enables scholars to explore more broadly the behavior and effects of members not driven primarily by reelection or political self-interest.

While this project’s framework and classification method have a wide applicability, there are some areas of future research for the framework and classification scheme that are at once apparent. First, scholars can evaluate past congressional studies research that explains individual member and collective congressional behavior according to members’ narrowly-understood self-interest. Using this project’s framework, researchers can start assessing whether the assumption of narrow self-interest in these works is an empirical reality as well as the degree with which a member’s narrow self-interest causes or affects the phenomenon under immediate investigation. Scholars can also use this project’s framework to evaluate the existing research that dismisses meaningful investigation of a member’s non-reelection goal based on the assertion that reelection is effectually a universal proximate goal. Because the research framework developed here allows researchers to separate a member’s reelection goal from a member’s ultimate goal type,
Researchers can first evaluate if the near universal proximate goal of reelection justifies dismissing an analysis of members’ respective ultimate goals. Researchers can then investigate how members’ various ultimate goal types affect the phenomenon under study. Furthermore, researchers may be able to begin to determine when, if ever, dismissing a meaningful exploration of members’ ultimate goal types is appropriate.

Scholars may also use this research framework to assess if and how the presence or proportion of altruistic members in Congress affects chamber/institutional decisions or policy outcomes. Such projects will have a strong foundation of existing knowledge and previous research on which to build as, again, the research framework offered here fits with and expands the framework used by the dominant approach within congressional studies. Relatedly, researchers may be able to perform longitudinal or historical studies to investigate if/how the increase of career service has affected the presence or proportion of altruistic members in Congress.

Additionally, this project’s framework and method for classifying members enables scholarship that explores the persistence of political altruism in Congress. Such research can first assess the degree with which altruistic members win their respective reelections in comparison to members who more regularly engage in political mutual benefit or politically selfish behavior. Because altruistic members of Congress are classified as such due to their willingness to accept decreases in their political fitness, logic dictates altruistic members are less likely to win reelection than other types of members. However, some research shows members who sporadically act against their constituents’ wishes in order to make “good public policy” are not generally voted out of office for doing so (see Lascher, Kelman, and Kane 1993, 98). Thus, this
project’s framework can be used by scholars to enlarge the scope of inquiry from impacts of sporadic engagement in political altruism on a member’s reelection to consistent engagement in political altruism.

Research that investigates the persistence of political altruism in Congress can also focus on why or when some individual altruistic members are steadfast in their political altruism while other initially altruistic members begin to engage in more self-interested behavior. Staffer 3 and Member 7 both shared their belief that most members first arrive in D.C. with a primary motivation to serve others, but the realities members face can change what predominantly drives their behavior. Similarly, Staffer 1 explained members must “raise money and play the game up here in order to get stuff done,” and the members who do not get completely sucked into “the machine” are the members Staffer 1 sees as evidence of primarily other-serving members. By providing a method to classify members as altruistic types, this project’s research framework can facilitate research that uncovers institutional, party, electoral, or other political factors that may affect if and how an altruistic member remains primarily altruistic.

Lastly, this project’s conceptual framework may be used as a guide to study the political social behavior of other elected officials. While the framework would need to be adjusted to better suit the political fitness and environment of the actors being investigated, it will still enable researchers to separate the proximate goal of reelection from other ultimate goal types for all elected officials. One might even apply a variation of the conceptual framework offered here to explore the political social behavior of non-elected political actors – such as interest group leaders and bureaucrats – again assuming researchers conceptualize political fitness and political survival appropriately for the political actors under immediate study.
Implications

Overall, this project raises three interrelated implications. First, as mentioned above, altruistic members are not expected to typically persist in Congress. Although future research can hopefully demonstrate the degree with which this expectation holds true, the fact remains that the current system simply does not readily reward, encourage, or champion behavior that puts members at odds with the wishes expressed by fellow members, political party leaders, or their constituents. Yet, when such behaviors are political altruism, they are altruistic because of the sanctions imposed by the system. Rather than rewarding all forms of political altruism, the existing system rewards compromise and representing constituents’ opinions.

The second implication rises somewhat from the first: from a practical standpoint, Americans may not want Congress to be regularly comprised of a majority of altruistic members due to the effects it may have on policy and the legislative process. First, if altruistic members are typically voted out of office or serve only a couple of terms, and a majority of members are altruistic, then a majority of Congress at any given time will be relatively inexperienced. Research on the effects of term limits on state legislators demonstrates that the inexperience of legislators which accompanies high turnover in legislatures affects the quality of the body’s policy. Berman (2007) finds inexperienced legislators are more likely to make mistakes when making policy, and Straayer (2007) warns of the negative ramifications for policy quality that result from the lack of “policy champions.” According to Straayer, policy champions are “lawmakers who would spend a decade or more working on a particular policy problem, learning its ins and outs, introducing and advocating bills on the subject year after year, slowly perfecting policy instruments and programs, and building collegial support around the state and across the
aisle” (2007, 116). Inexperienced members cannot yet be such policy champions, and if members are constantly getting voted out of office, they can never become these champions. Straayer contends the lack of policy champions may lead to “major unanticipated policy consequences emerg[ing] from sloppy legislation” (2007, 116). Finally, based on survey responses used in their case studies of nine states, Kousser and Straayer find inexperienced members have lower levels of the expertise necessary to make good policy, noting they have less knowledge about statewide issues, the legislative process, and the issues that come before their committees (2007, 150).

Even if these theoretical policy effects can be averted through experienced and skilled staffers, party leaders, and other members, the unwillingness to yield or compromise that is often associated with altruistic members of Congress may lead to strong policy gridlock in a Congress regularly filled by a majority of altruistic members. Binder (1999) conceptualizes gridlock as reflecting “the relative ability of the political system to reach legislative compromises that alter the status quo” (523), with a lower ability indicating a stronger state of gridlock. If altruistic members do not agree on what “serving others” is or on the best way to serve others through their core issues, and a majority of Congress is comprised of members unwilling to yield when it comes to serving others, then the body may very likely prove incapable of making the legislative compromises necessary to avoid strong policy gridlock.

Highly related, altruistic members of Congress may have difficulty building the coalitions necessary to pass policy due to two main factors. First, because altruistic members have a propensity for serving others, they are less likely to support other members’ policy proposals or other issue activities if the proposals/activities do not align with what the altruistic member
believes is serving others. This, in turn, may decrease the number of allies the altruistic member has inside Congress. Staffer 3 explained this notion well with:

If you just act as an independent crusader, about doing the right thing, you don’t endear yourself to anybody else. And so, when it comes to actually doing something, which Congress is a cons— even within your own party, it’s a consensus organization… You become kind of worthless because you can’t get anything done. “You did not come out and back me on something else? I cannot come out and finally back you.”… That’s the sort of dilemma you run into is that, if you’re constantly just doing what you think is the right thing and won’t bend and support something else for somebody else, you don’t have any allies.”

Second, and slightly different, altruistic members may struggle to build coalitions large enough to make progress on their proposed policies if they are unwilling to change their policy proposals in order to increase the number of members willing to support them. While this may be a problem for any “stubborn” member, altruistic members may struggle in this manner due to their propensity for prioritizing serving others. If an altruistic member has to alter his/her other-serving policy proposal in a way that changes or diminishes its service to others, and the altruistic member views the altered proposal as no longer creating policy that serves others or serves others enough, the altruistic member may decide not to alter the proposal. Staffer 2 somewhat spoke to this difficulty a member he branded “altruistic” has in building coalitions when describing the member as:

Totally uncompromising. Totally unwilling to see anyone else’s perspective…. It’s liberating to be like, “I have the right answer. You have the wrong answer. My answer’s going to help more people. And what the f—s wrong with you?” … Again, having been in the room with him on many occasions, I think he’s a piss poor coalition builder, and there are a lot of other reasons I wouldn’t support him politically, but, but, yeah, he’s this uncompromising guy who knows the right answer and knows what’s going to help people and fights for that thing.
All of the above arguments aside, it seems perfectly reasonable for Americans to want their members of Congress to be driven by a primarily other-serving motivation. Members of Congress are, in fact, public servants. Although the design of the governmental system allows a member’s daily efforts to further his/her narrow self-interest while also benefiting others – a.k.a. political mutual benefit – members of Congress do sometimes face situations wherein they must choose between serving others and serving their reelection needs. In such circumstances, the common belief is that members should choose to serve others because members are elected to serve the people. Yet, because members seem to face these sorts of difficult decisions relatively infrequently, members driven by political altruism and political selfishness may engage in the same political mutual benefit social behavior much or even almost all of the time.

Which leads to this project’s final implication: Does it really matter what motivates members as long as their behavior and actions ultimately serve the people? Practically speaking, it may not. Two members shared that they pay no attention to and do not care what motivates other members as long as the other members support their work. When asked how he knows what motivates other members, one member replied, “Why do I care what your motivation is, as long as you vote the way I want you to vote. That’s between you and God. If I can get a ‘yes’ out of you, who cares why you are voting ‘yes.’” As Staffer 6 succinctly stated, as a collective, “If they are helping people, I don’t really care what is motivating them.”

This being said, it does appear that some Americans care what motivates their members of Congress. Some Americans seem to want a First Branch that puts the people first, even when it is politically difficult for individual members to do so. Three staffers who believe their members were predominantly driven to serve others described themselves as “lucky” and
“fortunate” to be working for such “awesome,” “great,” and “ethical” people who “were there to do the nation’s and the people’s work.” Staffer 2 – by far the most cynical of all interviewees with regards to the existence of members with primarily other-serving motivations – answered my question of why people do not pay attention to members’ motivations with, “I think you don’t pay attention to it precisely because it does matter.” In fact, it seems to matter enough that the belief among the American public that “members of Congress could be using their power for the good of the country, but instead use if for their own self-interested advantage” (Hibbing and Theiss-Morse 1995, 62) is affecting legislators’ ability to create policy they believe best serves the public interest. As explored briefly in Chapter 1, American’s lack of trust in members’ motivations has negatively impacted members’ ability to deliberate (Bessette 1994), and the public is now looking to the judicial branch to make policy regarding rights and morality (Waldron 2003).

In Federalist No. 57, Madison asserts, “The aim of every political constitution is, or ought to be, first to obtain for rulers men who possess most wisdom to discern, and most virtue to pursue, the common good of society; and in the next place, to take the most effectual precautions for keeping them virtuous whilst they continue to hold their public trust” (Madison [1788] 1961, 350). Madison continues to explain that an electoral system with frequent direct elections is a large part of how the newly proposed government will do so. If the American people want altruism in Congress, they can elect altruistic members to Congress and then choose to keep them there. The examples of such members in Chapter 1 demonstrate that altruistic members have been elected in the past, and Finding III shows there are likely some serving
currently. And the research framework offered in this project can be used to better understand them, their behavior, their effects on the institution, and their impacts on policy.

Moving Forward

The conceptual framework and method for classifying members developed here is an expansion on the rational choice approach that has dominated congressional studies since the 1970s. Distinct from the dominant approach, however, this project’s research framework allows scholars to wield the power of studying members as purposive actors without eliminating a meaningful analysis of the ultimate goals that drive them in their instrumental behavior. This project thereby provides a means for researchers to investigate systematically members of Congress according to their primary motivation type, an endeavor in which scholars have previously engaged in only limited or inadvertent ways. These previous works, consequently, have contributed important yet somewhat disjointed insight into primarily other-serving members, leaving the field’s knowledge of such members limited and piecemeal.

In their defense of rational choice, McCubbins and Thies contend, “The fifth and final step in the scientific method is to rethink the initial question. What have we learned, and how might we push our research program in order to learn more?” (1996, 20). As a field, congressional studies has learned a lot by treating members as primarily driven by narrow self-interest. The field can now learn more. This project provides a sturdy conceptual foundation and a classification scheme with which the field can begin to assess existing scholarship, harness its current knowledge base, and study an area only previously explored in limited ways in order to better understand Congress and its members.
In closing, this project returns to Mayhew, and contends that Mayhew was right: a fair amount of congressional behavior can be explained by treating members of Congress *as if* they are “single-minded seekers of reelection” (1974, 5). It was, indeed, a useful intellectual exercise. Much of the work rising from congressional studies over the past four decades is a testament to his claim. Yet, we know not all members are always driven by the reelection goal. Thus, in order to better understand Congress and its members, the field should also investigate members *as if they are not*, incorporating both reelection and members’ ultimate goals into its research. By embracing and potentially refining the knowledge afforded by Mayhew’s suggestion, and using the research framework developed here for future work, congressional scholars can now begin to move beyond the single-minded seekers of reelection.


——. *Participation in Congress.* New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.


