THE IMPORTANCE OF CONGRESS

by Joseph Cooper

The study of Congress has made great strides in recent decades. Given the work of Fenno, Matthews, Truman, Dexter, Huitt, Miller, Stokes, and a host of others, there is little doubt that our understanding of Congressional behavior has greatly improved since the end of the Second World War. Yet in one crucial area little progress has been made. Understanding of Congress' role in the American political system and its significance for the successful operation of that system remains quite backward. Thus, on the popular or nonscholarly level of discourse formulations of Congress' role and significance continue to be framed in the traditional and vague rhetoric of democratic ideology, e.g., that a strong and independent Congress is vital to freedom. Nor have political scientists done much to raise the level of discourse above the plane of rhetoric. Typically, formulations of Congress' role in the literature cite such functions as law making, administrative oversight, representation, impeachment, education of the populace, amendment of the Constitution, etc. As such, these formulations too are of limited value. Cataloging functions in this manner obscures more than it reveals. It leads not only to confusion since there is little coherence in or discrimination among the functions lumped together, but also sheds little light on Congress' role in and contribution to the political system as a whole since the delineation of functions is not guided by and has no relevance in terms of a more general analytical framework. In truth, then, mere cataloging is not theory, but simply an excuse for theory.

Such a situation needs to be corrected. An inadequate formulation of Congress' role and significance in the American political system impedes a full understanding and appreciation of Congress. What results is sophisticated understanding of discrete aspects of internal operation and particular linkages between Congress and its environment combined with quite primitive conceptions of the nature and consequences of Congress' position as a

Editor's Note: Mr. Cooper is Associate Professor of Political Science and Chairman of the Department of Political Science at Rice University.
subsystem of the larger political system. Moreover, an inadequate formulation of Congress' role and significance in the American political system impedes evaluation of its performance, identification of its defects, and analysis of the most promising line of improvement. What results is treatment of Congress as an isolated entity, often in highly mechanistic terms, without much understanding of either the necessary dimensions of its role or the potential for and constraints on change.

The object of this article is to begin the task of defining a satisfactory formulation of Congress' role and significance in the American political system. In so doing we shall approach the problem in functional terms and focus on the needs of the American political system and Congress' contribution to the satisfaction of these needs.

I. Functional Needs

All political systems strive to maintain their capacity to make authoritative decisions on goals, to make decisions on goals that will be binding both because they are capable of being legitimatized and because they are capable of being enforced. The reasons for this derive from the basic nature and ends of political systems abstractly conceived. The political system exists as the subsystem of the social system that arises to satisfy the broader system's need for arrangements and mechanisms to define and implement its goals as a collectivity. Thus, maintenance of the capacity to make authoritative decisions on goals stands as its primary operational imperative. Moreover, all social systems require that certain minimal conditions of order prevail as a prerequisite of their existence and the presence of such conditions is dependent on the existence of arrangements and mechanisms that can define decisions that are binding on all members of the collectivity. Thus, maintenance of the capacity to make authoritative decisions on goals and the political system's role in goal specification on behalf of the broader system are closely intertwined.

Nonetheless, political systems do not necessarily limit their ends to maintenance nor their role in goal specification to the preservation of order. Rather, since the goals of social systems typically extend to the enhancement as well as the preservation of the conditions of common life, political systems that possess a modicum of sophistication and stability strive to foster the well-being of citizens over and above what is required to protect the social system from external threats and to maintain internal tranquility. Democratic political systems are distinctive not only in terms of the dominant patterns of value and belief that govern and delimit definitions of citizen well-being, but also in terms of the institutional consequences these values and beliefs have on the arrangements and mechanisms employed in making authoritative decisions on goals. In such systems the hold of values
that center on the sanctity of individual personality combined with the hold of beliefs that foster social trust and confidence in citizen competence lead to a complex of arrangements and mechanisms designed to base the determination and implementation of authoritative goals on consent. For such values and beliefs both require collective goals to remedy impingements on the lives of individual citizens and establish citizen preferences as the ultimate determinant of the propriety and adequacy of the goals pursued.

Thus, in democratic political systems the arrangements and mechanisms employed in decision making are biased in the following directions: in favor of treating citizen claims or demands as critical sources of information regarding the needs of collective life and the adequacy of the authoritative goals previously defined and implemented; in favor of according all such claims or demands equal status and opportunity to influence policy outcomes; and in favor of requiring decisions on the nature and implementation of authoritative goals to attain as high a level of acceptability among the general population as is compatible with the preservation of a capacity for effective action. As a result, the arrangements and mechanisms employed are shaped by the necessity of satisfying four basic functional needs. First, they must be designed to foster the articulation of demands on the part of individuals and groups in the social system. Second, they must be designed to provide such demands with access to the structures charged with the determination and implementation of authoritative goals and to insure that officials, i.e., those who occupy positions in these structures, display a high degree of responsiveness to these demands. Third, they must be designed to foster the accommodation of demands and the aggregation of support in order to achieve high levels of acceptability for decisions that define and implement authoritative goals, without at the same time setting the requirements for reconciliation and agreement so high as to vitiate the political system's ability to act to remedy sources of stress. Finally, they must be designed to provide means of holding those charged with the implementation of authoritative goals accountable for their actions in order to insure that these officials perform their duties in a responsible, effective, and nonarbitrary manner.

II. Articulation, Access, and Responsiveness

In the American political system Congress serves as one of the key mechanisms involved in the satisfaction of all four of these needs. This is neither a fortuitous nor an incidental result. On the contrary, Congress' presence and prerogatives are a direct response to the prime functional needs of the American political system as a democratic system and it exists as a source of inputs that are of critical significance for the satisfaction of these needs. The articulation of demands on the national level would be severely cir-
cumbersome if not for the existence of Congress. Such articulation involves a reciprocal relationship between leaders and followers. To a significant extent, opinion is inchoate and requires activation and organization by actors who have a stake in the articulation of demands if grievances are to be transformed into explicit demands. It is true of course that in democratic political systems elected officials and rivals for their positions are neither the only actors with stakes in the articulation of demands nor sufficient as a group to satisfy the need for such actors. Nonetheless, it is the subjection of officials to election that provides the basic foundations for a set of inducements that are general enough to cause a wide distribution of stakes in the articulation of demands. As a result, election exists as the single most important stimulus for articulation and the attributes of the election system have a crucial effect on articulation. Indeed, unless other factors are in a state of severe imbalance, the degree to which grievances are articulated as demands will vary roughly with the degree of elaborateness in the election system.

Thus, in the American political system Congress provides an essential supplement to the stimulus for articulation provided by the Presidency. If the Presidency existed as the only office in the election system, the degree to which the articulation of demands would be fostered on the national level would be severely impeded. The paucity of contests and contestants would result in a circumscription of inducements, stakes, and actors. Equally important, since any single constituency principle or definition inevitably favors certain interests, articulation would be impeded both by biases in the set of inducements provided to actors who seek to influence rather than to occupy official positions and by the effects the Presidency’s constituency base would have in leading contestants for the office to direct their attention and preference to the configuration of interests that control Presidential elections. To be sure, some compensation for these defects could probably be secured from increased reliance on nonelective or administrative officials as actors in the articulation of demands. But given the indirect tie nonelective officials have to the electorate plus the rigidities in outlook that stem from commitment to existing programs and confidence in superior knowledge, such officials are a poor substitute for the multiplicity of elective offices and diversity of constituency principles provided by Congress.

The case on behalf of Congress made with respect to articulation applies to access and responsiveness as well. Here again the satisfaction of these needs tends to vary with the degree of elaborateness in the election system. To be sure, all political systems provide citizen demands with some degree of access and display some degree of responsiveness to them. Citizen demands cannot be totally ignored if a system is to maintain its capacity to make binding decisions, though they may be treated essentially as items for
manipulation rather than satisfaction. However, if channels of access are to be made available to a wide spectrum of groups and individuals in the social system and citizen demands are to be treated essentially as items to be satisfied rather than manipulated, an election system becomes a critical necessity. It is the direct tie between citizens and officials which election involves that establishes the conditions necessary to provide and insure both a high degree of openness to a wide variety of citizen demands and a high degree of concern with the satisfaction of such demands. On the one hand, election establishes relations of dependency with the result that the officials involved are both open to citizen demands and serve as intermediaries for citizen demands upon officials not subject to election. On the other hand, since the officials who are subject to election normally control the authority and resources of those who are not, these officials too must be open and responsive to citizen demands in recognition and anticipation of the consequences that derive from the relation between citizens and elected officials.

Thus, in the American political system Congress supplements the amount of access and responsiveness the Presidency provides to a critical degree. If the Presidency existed as the only elective office, access and responsiveness on the national level would be severely restricted. The fact that the Presidency exists as a single office would severely impair both opportunities for access and inducements for responsiveness. In any large nation no single office can sustain the conditions necessary to provide comprehensive opportunities for access or the conditions necessary to insure a high degree of responsiveness to a wide variety of demands and this is especially so in a nation where interests are as numerous and diverse as in the United States. Similarly, the fact that the Presidency is based on a single constituency principle would reinforce the impairments to access and responsiveness, given the distortions present in any particular constituency principle. If the direct tie between citizens and officials that election provides were to be limited solely to the Presidency, opportunities for access and inducements for responsiveness would be highly biased in favor of the interests that control Presidential elections, even though such interests, while important, are far from exhaustive. Once again some compensation for all these defects could be secured from increased reliance on nonelective or administrative officials. Still, the same factors that make such reliance a poor substitute for the multiplicity of officers and diversity of constituency principles provided by Congress in the case of articulation make it an even poorer substitute in the case of access and responsiveness.

III. Accommodation and Aggregation

Congress' role in accommodation and aggregation is equally vital. However, analysis of Congress' critical significance for the accommodation of
demands and aggregation of support requires both a more lengthy discussion and a brief digression to preface the discussion.

The intent of the preceding pages has not been to argue that the functionality of election systems in democratic political systems varies directly in relation to the degree of their elaborateness. On the contrary, since demands must be accommodated and support for particular lines of action aggregated if alternatives are to be defined and choices made, limits exist to the degree to which it is desirable to stimulate the differentiation of demands and to establish relations of dependency between officials and citizen demands. Rather, our intent was simply to argue that without the existence of Congress provision for articulation, access, and responsiveness on the national level would be severely restricted, that it would be inadequate to satisfy the needs the American political system does have for differentiation and dependency. A similar point applies to the accommodation of demands and aggregation of support. This need, too, though crucial, must be satisfied rather than maximized. Democratic systems have to preserve their capacity to act as well as their capacity to base action on approval and support.

It is within such constraints that Congress’ role in the accommodation of demands and aggregation of support must be understood. The American political system cannot and does not posit unanimity or even near unanimity as a prerequisite for action. Rather, limits on the degree of reconciliation and agreement required for action permeate the processes involved in accommodation and aggregation, e.g., the majority principle. Nonetheless, the American political system does strive to attain high levels of acceptability for programs of action and its ability to do so on the national level would be seriously impaired if not for the existence of Congress.

In the American political system as in all democratic systems the attainment of high levels of program acceptability encompasses all three of the decision-making stages involved in the definition and implementation of authoritative goals. The work of accommodating demands and aggregating support begins at the electoral stage as a consequence of the subjection of key officials to election. Intransigency in the assertion of demands is penalized and flexibility rewarded by the existence of limits to the elaborateness of the election system. Thus, elections serve not only to differentiate, but also to unify. They induce the compromise and combination of demands and the aggregation of support for policy proposals as part of the process of mobilizing support for candidates. Moreover, the degree of accommodation and aggregation achieved at the electoral stage is of great significance for subsequent decision-making stages. The variety and complexity of demands must be reduced and lines of support for policy proposals delineated if accommodation and aggregation are to be carried on successfully once the focus of decision making shifts from the mobilization of support for candi-
dates to the mobilization of support for specific, detailed programs of action.

The next decision-making stage, the stage at which specific programs are formally authorized and funded, is of equal, if not greater, importance than the electoral stage. In all democratic orders the degree of accommodation and aggregation that can be achieved at the electoral stage is restricted. The very features of an election system that serve to penalize intransigency and reward flexibility, e.g., large rather than small constituencies, geographical rather than functional representation, plurality rather than proportional voting, etc., inhibit highly precise forms of accommodation and aggregation on any comprehensive basis. As a consequence, though success at the second stage is highly dependent on the character of results at the electoral stage, much of the work of accommodation and aggregation must be postponed to and achieved at this stage.

This effect, moreover, is intensified in the American political system by the loose and weak programmatic character of the main agents and instruments of accommodation and aggregation, the major political parties. As a result, though elections do induce precise forms of accommodation and aggregation on a segmented basis, i.e., within and among particular groups on particular issues, and the formation of broad coalitions among overlapping clusters of organized and unorganized portions of the population, the overall consequences of elections serve only to establish general orientations to policy through the bestowal of advantage on classes of demand that form part of winning coalitions and to provide materials for fashioning program decisions through the delineation of patterns of demand and support.

Thus, the American political system places a heavier burden on the second stage than a number of other democratic systems. At this stage basic decisions on the concrete nature of additions to or modifications of authoritative goals must be made and made in such a way that results are acceptable to most groups and elements in the population, whereas the weighted pattern of demands and bases of support that emerge from the electoral stage furnish only a general framework and materials for decision.

Finally, despite the importance of the second stage, in the American political system as in other democratic political systems, decision making at this stage does not exhaust the need for accommodation and aggregation. Rather, the work of building agreement continues and must continue into the third stage, the stage at which decisions on authoritative goals are implemented.

Though concrete and detailed programs of action are defined at the second stage, all questions of policy are not and cannot be resolved at this stage. In part, this result is intended. Just as the ends of accommodation and aggregation are served at the first stage by not seeking to resolve differences past the point necessary to form a coalition capable of electing a
candidate, so too at the second stage certain questions and issues may be left open in the interests of mobilizing support for a specific program. In large part, however, it is an inescapable result. Since the problems that must be dealt with are highly complex, decision makers at the second stage have neither the time nor the foresight to resolve all policy questions, to resolve all questions regarding the nature of authoritative goals. Consequently, a great deal of discretion must often be delegated to administrative officials.

The third stage, thus, is not simply a ministerial one. Though officials at this stage usually operate within a far more precisely defined context than officials at the second stage, they too must participate in the accommodation of demands and aggregation of support if the highest levels of program acceptability consonant with the achievement of program objectives are to be attained. As a result, democratic orders must and do seek to politicize the administrative process. In the American political system as in other democratic political systems this is accomplished primarily by making elected officials the source of the legal authority and funds employed in the administrative process and by placing elected officials at the top rungs of the administrative apparatus. In this way both elective and nonelective administrative officials are placed in a position where they can have their decisions reversed and their positions undermined if they fail to please groups and elements in the population with leverage over elective positions. Hence, officials at the third stage are induced to strive both to maintain the framework of aggregated support for a program that derives from preceding stages and to limit or at least not aggravate the costs imposed on elements of the population whose interests are adversely affected.

Given all this, the critical role Congress plays in satisfying the American political system's need for accommodation and aggregation can easily be shown. At the electoral stage the plurality of offices Congress provides adds significantly to the inducements for accommodation and aggregation and thus greatly enhances the possibility of more precise forms of accommodation and aggregation at subsequent decision-making stages. If the electoral system on the national level were limited to a Presidential election, the consequences of election in terms of simplifying and assigning weights to demands and establishing bases of support for proposed policies would be far more hazy and imprecise. A national contest for a single office suffers from the range of demands to be accommodated and the bases of support to be aggregated and this is especially true in the American political system where the interest configuration is so varied and complex that it rules out the construction of majority coalitions by national parties on any but a highly vague and incongruent basis. As a result, even in terms of the limited potential for accommodation and aggregation at the electoral stage, the ability of contests for the Presidency to induce accommodation of demands and ag-
The aggregation of support for specific lines of policy in the American political system is extremely restricted, except in those few instances where highly visible and encompassing policy issues are involved, i.e., where demands have an intense, immediate, and easily recognizable effect on the lives of large portions of the population. In contrast, local and state elections involve more limited groups and elements of the population. Consequently, accommodation and aggregation can be carried further, though with reference to a narrower range of issues. However, since the consequences of local and state elections involve the resultants of a multiplicity of such elections whose sum embraces the political system as a whole, the totality of outcomes defines patterns of demand and support in all issue areas.

Thus, on the whole, a multiplicity of local and state elections provides a more concrete and malleable set of materials for precise forms of accommodation and aggregation at subsequent decision-making stages than a national contest for a single office. In so doing they fill in interstices left open by the Presidential election and provide vital building blocks for achieving high levels of reconciliation and agreement at subsequent decision-making stages. Indeed, the effect is dynamic rather than static. The patterns of demand and support that are defined do not evaporate between elections. Rather, they furnish a continuing input into the system and are capable of various permutations and combinations as the focus of decision shifts from issue area to issue area and as issues change and emerge in the interelection period. To be sure, if the President existed as the single elective officer at the national level, he and his agents would try to accommodate demands and aggregate support in the process of defining specific programs in order to maintain and augment the majority coalition that elected him. But even with the best of intentions the task would be exceedingly difficult and frustrating since the bases for achieving high levels of program acceptability would be far more amorphous. Undoubtedly, some further degree of accommodation and aggregation would occur, but to a far less extent than when patterns of demand and support supplied by a multiplicity of local and state elections define the terms and provide the materials necessary to attain precise forms of accommodation and aggregation with reference to specific programs.

Similarly, at the second and third stages the existence of Congress provides a set of inducements vital to the achievement of high levels of program acceptability. At the second stage the fact that the President cannot rule by fiat but rather must win Congressional consent insures that the accommodation of demands and aggregation of support will be carried substantially forward from the levels attained at the electoral stage.

It is true, of course, if Congress did not exist, inducements for accommodation and aggregation would still be present. As noted above, the President's subjection to periodic election would provide inducements for further
accommodation and aggregation in the process of making concrete decisions on authoritative goals. Moreover, the need to gain the cooperation and acquiescence of citizens in the implementation of programs would also provide incentives for the recognition and satisfaction of demands at the second stage. Nonetheless, the ability of both types of inducements to lead the President and the agents on whom he would rely to modify important aspects of pet proposals would leave much to be desired.

The need to gain the cooperation or acquiescence of citizens is a far less pressing one than the need to win their consent or the consent of a body of their representatives and it can be met by manipulation, force, and/or mere token satisfactions of demand. Indeed, it usually produces substantial incentives for accommodation only when officials egregiously misjudge the limits of citizen tolerance. It thus provides a very frail reed on which to rely given the attachment officials form for their programs and their tendency to regard their own wisdom as superior. As for the inducements that derive from election of the President, here too great elements of weakness exist. The length of the President's term, the broad and multifaceted character of his coalition, the restriction of options that flow from electoral control of a single, national office, the advantages of incumbency, and the President's ability to win support on nonprogrammatic grounds all serve to reduce the incentives for the recognition and satisfaction of demands that interfere with the cherished policy goals of the President and his key agents. These inducements too, then, are severely limited and vary greatly in relation to the status of a group or element of the population vis-à-vis the President's electoral coalition, its importance to and independence of that coalition, and the degree to which a particular issue raises fundamental problems of continued loyalty for that group or element of the population.

In contrast, the presence and prerogatives of Congress at the second stage serve to correct these deficiencies. In each and every area of policy the existence of a body of men whose constituencies differ from that of the President and whose consent must be secured before programs can be authorized and funded forces the President to come to terms with a variety of demands he might otherwise ignore. Moreover, it performs this function not only on behalf of opposing groups but on behalf of portions of his own broad electoral coalition as well. Nor, as is often alleged, are the results of Congress' position and prerogatives simply to expand the influence of local or particularistic interests. Since citizens in Congressional constituencies have interests that are wider than their states or localities and since national elections draw on and reward groups and segments of the population with particularistic interests, both Congress and the Presidency represent a mix of general and particularistic demands, though admittedly the nature and proportion of the mix vary. Hence, the value of the inducements for accom-
modation and aggregation that Congress provides are not undermined by their character. On the contrary, Congress' position and prerogatives at the second stage serve to remedy the distortions that stem from reliance on any single constituency principle. It thus not only provides much, if not most, of the motive power for further accommodation and aggregation at the second stage, but also broadens the scope of accommodation by making its own distinctive mix of general and particularistic demands a factor in decision making.

The argument made with reference to the critical significance of Congress' role in the accommodation of demands and aggregation of support at the second stage applies in general to the third stage as well. To be sure, in the process of implementing authoritative goals as in the process of specifying them the President's subjection to periodic election and the need to gain the cooperation and acquiescence of citizens have their effects. However, once again in the absence of Congress the possibility of making additional, substantial gains by way of reconciling differences and broadening or extending bases of support would be greatly impaired. In part, the reasons for this stem from the same factors that are controlling at the second stage: the restricted nature of the inducements for accommodation and aggregation that derive from quadrennial Presidential elections and the need to placate the governed. In part, however, another hitherto unmentioned factor is also of great importance: the difficulty of Presidential direction and control of the bureaucratic establishment. In other words, in the American political system as in other democratic political systems the influence of the inducements for accommodation and aggregation that stem from election of the chief administrative officer is undermined by the limited time, knowledge, and span of attention of the relatively small political segment of the executive branch on which this officer must rely. As a result, the immense bureaucratic core of the executive branch has great ability to evade or even negate pressure for further accommodation that is channeled through its nominal superiors and to follow instead its own policy predispositions.12

Thus, at the third stage as at the second, the presence and prerogatives of Congress serve to correct deficiencies that would exist in its absence. Its control over legal authority and funds allow it both to intervene in decision making at this stage through investigations, appropriations restrictions, informal contacts, etc., and to transfer the locus of decision back to the second stage in instances in which opposition to executive decisions is particularly intense and widespread. As a result, officials at all levels of the executive branch must take citizen sentiment expressed directly or indirectly through Congress into account in the exercise of their discretionary authority: they must anticipate reaction and deal with response as they seek to spell out the implications of authorized program goals in order to ward off the pen-
alties Congress can impose on their careers and their programs. Hence, Congress’ presence and prerogatives add substantially to the strength of the inducements for accommodation and aggregation at the third stage. Here as elsewhere, the presence of an independent and influential popularly elected legislative mechanism is essential to supplement and reinforce the benefits that flow from election of the chief administrative officer if the system’s need for accommodation and aggregation is to be satisfied.

IV. Accountability

Thus far we have dealt with three of the four functional needs whose satisfaction we identified earlier as prerequisites for the successful operation of a democratic political system. Let us conclude our analysis of the importance of Congress in the American political system by turning our attention to the fourth: the need to hold executive officers accountable for their performance in order to insure that they implement authoritative goals in a responsible, effective, and nonarbitrary manner.

So defined this need has a number of facets. By responsible implementation we mean implementation that is in accord with or faithful to the goals defined in authorized programs. By effective implementation we mean implementation that achieves authorized program goals at minimum cost. By nonarbitrary implementation we mean implementation that is humane and fair procedurally. Now, to be sure, the need for accountability overlaps the need for accommodation and aggregation. The line between adherence to established program goals at the third stage of decision making and the exercise of discretion in defining subordinate goals at this stage is a relative rather than an absolute one. Moreover, the same powers and sanctions that give mechanisms the ability to hold executive officials accountable for their acts also provide leverage for inducing further accommodation and aggregation in the course of executive decision making. Nonetheless, the two needs are indistinguishable. The ends of accountability are both narrower and broader: narrower in the sense that they are more restricted to formally defined goals and broader in the sense that they encompass the quality of performance. In sum, the need for accountability is a need for preventive and corrective control, a need premised on the assumption that the achievement of authoritative goals cannot be trusted simply to the good intentions and self-discipline of those charged with implementing these goals and the assumption that, given adequate sanctions, the ability to hold executive officials accountable is the ability to prevent and correct pernicious forms of executive behavior.13

Once again, however, our intent is not to argue that Congress in and of itself is sufficient to satisfy the American political system’s need for arrange-
ments or mechanisms to enforce executive accountability. Rather, here as elsewhere, our point is simply that the system's ability to satisfy this need on the national level would be severely impaired if not for the existence of Congress. It is true, of course, that the subjection of the President to periodic election both establishes a mechanism for controlling the behavior of this official and his chief appointees and substantially reinforces the inducements these officials derive from their positions in the executive hierarchy to check tendencies toward aggrandizement of power, malfeasance, and officiousness among the larger mass of civil servants. Similarly, the federal courts provide basic guarantees of responsible and nonarbitrary behavior on the part of officials at all levels of the executive branch. Still, the ability of a single national election to hold the President and his chief lieutenants accountable for their acts and the acts of their subordinates is limited as is the ability of these officials to check misdeeds on the part of their subordinates. The reasons for this have been touched on previously: the immense scope of Presidential elections which makes them extremely blunt instruments of control and the limited time, knowledge, and span of attention of the top political echelon of the executive branch. And to these factors can be added the limits of command and the need top officials have to win the cooperation of their subordinates, the desire of such officials to protect themselves against political attack, and the tendency of such officials to indulge in excusing or minimizing failures that occur within the areas of their responsibility. As for the federal courts, though the protections they provide are important, their reach is limited to flagrant instances of irresponsible or arbitrary behavior.

Thus, here again, Congress' role in the political system is of crucial significance for the satisfaction of a prime functional need. Its control over legal authority and funds combined with its organizational resources give it the ability to subject any aspect of executive performance to detailed review, while the inducements it derives from its direct tie to the electorate endow it with a strong desire to find and correct instances of executive malfeasance or failure. Congress therefore exists as a potent instrument of accountability, one which is capable both of causing officials at all levels of the executive branch to be wary of irresponsible, ineffective, or arbitrary behavior and of punishing and correcting such behavior when it does occur. In short, then, the presence and prerogatives of Congress add substantially to the American political system's ability to hold executive officials accountable for their performance and by so doing provide a margin of protection against irresponsible, ineffective, and arbitrary behavior on the part of executive officials that is critical for the existence of adequate guarantees against such behavior.
We may conclude that Congress' existence and position in the American political system are matters of indifference for the successful operation of the system. Rather, the system's ability to achieve its ends is dependent on its ability to satisfy the basic functional needs we have outlined, and on the national level Congress constitutes a vital and indispensable factor in the satisfaction of these needs.

All this, however, is not to argue that Congress as presently organized and as it presently operates is above reproach. In other words, it is not to prejudge the functionality of existing Congressional arrangements and mechanisms, to prejudge the degree to which Congress contributes to the satisfaction of the system's prime needs. To demonstrate that Congress is a source of inputs that are of critical significance for the satisfaction of these needs, we have necessarily had to treat it without regard for impediments to its viability and effectiveness just as one would have to disregard them in explaining the critical significance of an engine to a car or an organ to the body. Our point, however, is only that the American political system's ability to satisfy its prime functional needs is dependent on Congress' role in and contribution to the system and to argue this is not to provide a blanket justification for the status quo. On the contrary, to see the satisfaction of general systemic needs in relation to the adequacy of the arrangements and mechanisms established to serve these needs is also to see particular components of the system in these terms. It is thus to recognize that as far as actual performance is concerned the degree to which Congress contributes to the satisfaction of general systemic needs can vary and is itself dependent on the adequacy of the particular arrangements and mechanisms that define its external relations and internal processes.

Nor do we wish to imply that our formulation of Congress' role and significance in the American political system does not stand in need of further refinement and further elaboration. In the first regard, our formulation is open to refinement on the basis of improved conceptualization of the ends of the American political system and the needs these ends establish. In addition, it is open to refinement on the basis of new empirical evidence or empirical evidence not adequately taken into account in our formulation. It is true, of course, that role formulation primarily involves abstraction on the basis of the accepted or governing values to be realized by behavior in particular social contexts. Thus, it is norms, rules of behavior derived from values, that define roles. Still, in the case of Congress as elsewhere the task of abstraction from experience must be circumscribed and informed by fact, by actual behavior, if it is to produce an accurate and realistic result.

In the second regard, David Truman has noted that understanding of
Congress and efforts to strengthen it have been stymied by lack of an adequate conception of Congress' "distinctive functions" in the American political system. We, however, have not framed our analysis in terms of distinctive functions, but rather in terms of the common functions performed by various, major subsystems in the political system. This is quite valid since on the most general level of abstraction there is nothing inherently distinctive about the functions Congress performs. It rather participates in the performance of the same functions as other major subsystems, e.g., the party system. Still, this does not mean that Truman's point is not well taken. It is also true, as our discussion of decision-making stages implies, that Congress for a variety of reasons, e.g., position in the system, size, capabilities, etc., has particular advantages and disadvantages that lead it and qualify it to perform distinctive aspects or portions of the general functions it shares with other major subsystems. Moreover, it can well be argued that any formulation of Congress' role that does not differentiate its functions in detail in relation to other major subsystems is deficient since roles when fully conceptualized do not exist in isolation but rather as parts of a structure of roles, as parts of a structure of divided labor. If, then, we have not attempted any detailed delineation of Congress' distinctive functions, it is only because we have assumed that this is not the point at which to begin in formulating Congress' role in the American political system, but rather something to be worked out in relation to a more general analytical framework. If our assumption is correct, such delineation is, as we have treated it, beyond the scope of this article. Nonetheless, it exists as the logical point at which to extend or elaborate the framework of conceptions and propositions that we have defined.

NOTES

1. This is true of the overwhelming majority of general books on Congress. See, for example, William J. Keefe and Morris S. Ogul, The American Legislative Process, Congress and the States (Englewood Cliffs, N. J., 1964). The authors of this work have done quite a creditable job of organizing and presenting material on Congressional processes and behavior. But in their treatment of function they remain tied to the formalistic categories of the past. One recent work, however, does attempt to escape these categories. See Malcolm E. Jewell and Samuel C. Patterson, The Legislative Process in the United States (New York, 1966). The authors of this work define legislative functions in general as the management of conflict and the integration of the polity. This represents a step forward, but ties function too narrowly to the task of maintenance.


5. Thus, the leading study of constituency influence in Congress concludes: "Therefore, although the conditions of constituency influence are not equally satisfied, they are met well enough to give the local constituency a measure of control over the actions of its Representatives." See Warren Miller and Donald Stokes, "Constituency Influence in Congress," The American Political Science Review, LVII (March, 1963), 56.


9. Given the current skepticism concerning the policy significance of national elections, the conclusions of perhaps the leading work on voter behavior are worth quoting: "...it would be altogether wrong to suppose that the electoral process does not profoundly influence the course of government. Unquestionably it does. The decisions of the electorate play a role primarily in defining broad goals of governmental action or very generalized means of achieving such goals." See Angus Campbell et al., The American Voter (New York, 1964), p. 545.


11. See Campbell et al., op. cit., p. 546.

12. See Key, Politics, Parties, pp. 690-696. It may also be noted that Schedule C employees, i.e., employees in important policy positions who serve at the pleasure of the President, number only about fifteen hundred of a total of more than two and a half million civil employees. See Herbert Kaufman, "The Growth of the Federal Personnel System," in Wallace S. Sayre (ed.), The Federal Government Service (Englewood Cliffs, N. J., 1965), pp. 50-52.
