
OBSERVATION,
CONTEXT, AND
SEQUENCE
IN THE
STUDY OF
POLITICS

RICHARD F. FENNO, JR.
University of Rochester

Observation is at the heart of political analysis. Observing the behavior of U.S. senators involves watching them in two contexts—at home and in the capital city. It also entails sensitivity to the sequences of events or contexts which impinge upon senatorial behavior. Contexts and sequences of legislative life have not been observed in the rich detail they deserve, because not enough political scientists are presently engaged in observation.

All students of politics are, perforce, students of politicians. Whether we place them near the center or at the periphery of our work, we cannot avoid thinking about those people who, in any society, pursue public careers, make public decisions, and enmesh themselves in public values. There are, of course, many ways to study politicians. I wish to talk about one of them: observation. By observation, I mean following politicians around and talking with them as they go about their work. Because I shall draw upon my experience in observing some United States senators, I shall speak most directly to people with an interest in American legislative politics. But I should like, in the course of my remarks, to engage all those who have an interest in what politicians do and why. Hence the pretentiousness of my title. The main question I wish to pose is, What, if any, value can the close personal observation of politicians

bring to our studies of politics? A secondary question is, Should we, as a discipline, encourage more of it?

The observation of which I shall speak is, for lack of a better term, interactive observation. It is not like looking through a one-way glass at someone on the other side. You watch, you accompany, and you talk with the people you are studying. Much of what you see, therefore, is dictated by what they do and say. If something is important to them, it becomes important to you. Their view of the world is as important as your view of that world. You impose some research questions on them; they impose some research questions on you. That interaction has its costs—most notably in a considerable loss of control over the research process. It also has benefits. It brings you especially close to your data. You watch it being generated and you collect it at the source. It is not received data. Furthermore, these data—the per-

ceptions, the interpretations, and the behavior of working politicians—are data that bring you close to serious political activity. This immediate proximity to data about serious political activity produces sensitivities and perspectives which, I shall argue, do give observation some “value added”—almost certainly for students of American legislative politics, and quite possibly for all political scientists who think about politicians.

We are not talking here about a theory of politics. We are talking about a mode of research. But it is a mode of research which can—potentially at least—inform, enrich, and guide theories of politics. Its potential may be greater for some bodies of theory than for others. The very activity of observing politicians carries with it a bias in favor of individual-level theorizing. It is individuals you are watching and it is generalizations about individuals that become the building blocks of your analysis. My own view begins with the idea that politicians are both goal-seeking and situation-interpreting individuals. It proceeds to the idea that politicians act on the basis of what they want to accomplish in their world, and on the basis of how they interpret what they see in that world. It moves from there to the idea that we can gain valuable knowledge of their actions, perceptions, and interpretations by trying to see their world as they see it. And hence to observation. I shall make a minimum claim for it—that it brings value added to individual-level analysis. But I hope that others might explore its further reaches for possible contributions to more macro-level theorizing.

There are, I shall argue, two large lessons to be drawn from observation. Each flows directly from a basic condition of observation as a research mode. First, in order to observe politicians, you must leave the place where you live and work, where routines and people are familiar, and go to some other place where you

intrude—more or less—upon the lives, the work, and the routines of less familiar people. In order to observe politicians, you must operate in an unfamiliar context. And that basic condition drives you, inevitably, to a sharpened appreciation of *context* as a variable in your analysis.

The relevance of context becomes increasingly evident as you move from the observation of one politician to the observation of another. You are driven to ask, in each new encounter, Who is this person I’m with? What is he or she trying to accomplish? What is the situation in which he finds himself? How do he and his situation differ from that of other people I have observed? The object of your attention is “this person.” But unless you are engaged in the study of individual psyches—as most of us are not—the unit of analysis is always “this person in this situation.” You face an individual who is pursuing certain goals, holding certain personal attitudes and values, carrying a residue of personal experience. But you also face an individual who is perceiving, interpreting, and acting in a complex set of circumstances. And you cannot know what you want to know about that individual until you have knowledge of these “circumstances,” or this “situation,” or, this “context.” By knowledge, I mean to include what you learn by looking at the context yourself and what you learn by seeing the context through the eyes of the individual politician. Observation involves interviewing; but it involves much more than interviewing.

There are two master contexts in which all legislative politicians work—home and the capital city. They can be observed in both places. I began by observing some United States senators at home. That experience conveys, overwhelmingly, the importance of context.

During my first two days with a senator from a large state, he held consecutive meetings with a conference of black ministers, a conservative citizens’ group,

1986 Observation, Context, and Sequence

representatives of two dozen national PACs, officials of the statewide Catholic Conference, a group of Jewish community leaders, the political operatives of the State Education Association, and officers of the Teamsters Union. Three weeks later, I spent my first full day with a small-state senator, driving across vast farmlands for a series of leisurely visits with groups of citizens in three small-town cafes. I saw the meetings in the large state as impassioned importunings, with various groups interviewing a prospective advocate for their cause. I saw the meetings in the small state as easygoing exchanges, with each group reassuring itself that the visitor was "one of us."

The contextual contrast I saw fit with each senator's own perceptions and interpretations. The large-state senator sees himself working in a contentious context, characterized by a great diversity of organized and insistent groups. He calls his state "a microcosm of the United States." Cultivating it, he says, presents "the same problem that a lawyer with a general practice has, of handling many clients without a specialty. It's the problem of dealing with hundreds, even thousands of interests." The small-state senator sees himself as working in a context dominated by rural-agricultural interests. He cannot escape "a specialty." "In [my state]," he says, "we either farm or we farm the farmers." And he sees no microcosm. He speaks, instead, about the uniqueness of his state, historically, culturally, and environmentally. As for cultivating it, he says, "When they accept you as family, it's easy." To observe senators at home is to become acutely aware that the observation of politicians does indeed, involve "this person in this context." The constituency context, is of course, only an example.

The second large lesson of observation also derives from a basic condition of the research mode. Because you are an outsider in every encounter, and because of

the accompanying problems of access, observation is always episodic, never continuous. Your research is, by nature, drop-in-drop-out-drop-in again research. Your observations get made at irregular intervals and at numerous points in time. You are driven by that condition to an extra appreciation of time. You see not only "this person in this context," but "this person at this time." Attention to time leads, in turn, to an emphasis on the changes that take place over time. Contexts change. And observations made "at this time" will likely differ from those made "last time" or "next time." Finally, any set of serial observations produces a special sensitivity to the sequential aspects of change. Your observation "this time" is embedded in a sequence of "other times." Much of what is important about time and change can be captured in the study of sequences. Some observed sequences exhibit regularities; they seem to have a causal logic to them. They are the most easily and advantageously studied. But random sequences can be observed and studied, too. In sum, the observation of politicians brings with it a sharpened sensitivity to *sequence* as a variable in political analysis.

Observation in the constituency also drives home the importance of sequence. My first encounter with each senator took place in the middle of an election campaign. To observe a campaign is to observe constant change. Contributions, poll results, organizational arrangements, staff, schedules, opposition activities, expectations, media treatment, the candidate's mind—all these ingredients change. The campaign you see in January is not the same campaign you see in the summer, or after Labor Day, or on November 1. Indeed, the campaign you see on the day you arrive is often not the campaign you see on the day you leave. And that is exactly the way the campaigners themselves perceive it. They talk to you about the campaign in the language of time, and

of change and of sequence. They speak of stages and phases, of rhythms and flows, of plans and turning points, of gains and losses, of momentum and pace, of beginning games and end games. Campaigns, for all their improvisation, exhibit a good deal of sequential regularity. At the internal planning levels, there is a sequence involving anticipation, organization, and implementation. At the external, public reaction level there is a sequence involving credibility, expectations, and momentum. These sequences can be studied; and so can the random shocks that often alter them. Again, the campaign sequence is only a convenient example.

If, then, the activity of observing politicians has any "value added," it begins with the special sensitivity observation brings to context and to sequence. Politics is a contextual activity and a sequential activity. Students of politics must be students of context and of sequence. Students of American legislative politics need no reminders of the importance of context or sequence—much less of the importance of constituencies and campaigns. To some degree, then, the large lessons to be drawn from observation will simply reinforce ongoing research, and my remarks will add to the chorus. That is fine. For I do not wish to add to the number of variables we treat; I only wish to argue for the richest possible understanding of some we already recognize as central. Here I would like to push a little. For it does not follow from the recognition that context and sequence are important that they will be given due weight in our research. And it is precisely in the matter of due weight that the observational perspective can be most helpful.

Consider the constituency as context. Its importance for legislative politics is taken to be fundamental and indisputable. One would be hard-put to find a study in the entire field that does not include some mention of the constituency.

Yet one would be equally hard-put to find a single constituency anywhere in the United States whose complexity in terms of "this politician in this context" and "at this time" has been analyzed by a political scientist. We love our constituencies, but we do not study them—not up close, in detail, and over time. Can we be satisfied that we know enough about the process by which politicians get recruited and then accumulate (or dissipate) name recognition, reputation, and trust, bit by bit, in multiple intraconstituency contexts over time, when we have yet to study that process for any legislator?

The same can be said for campaigns as sequence. We generalize about them often. But one would be hard-put to find any legislator's campaign for which its yearly, monthly, weekly, even daily sequences have been analyzed up close, in detail, and over time. Can we be satisfied that we know enough about the ways in which strategic options open up and close down over the course of the campaign, or about the kinds of choices that lead a campaign down one path rather than another, or about the choice points at which such branching decisions get made, when we have yet to follow a single campaign from start to finish? With so little closely detailed investigation of so common a context as the constituency and so common a sequence as a campaign, it seems unlikely that we have yet given these variables the close, hard study they deserve.

From an observational perspective, then, there remains plenty of room for some finely grained, finely calibrated studies of context and of sequence. The observational mode is well suited to such studies. And, indeed, that is the direction in which the close personal observation of politicians will inevitably take us. It is a direction in which we could usefully go. In generalizing about the actions and interpretations of our politicians, we must specify, with the greatest care, the condi-

1986 Observation, Context, and Sequence

tions under which each generalization holds. Context and sequence are two such conditions. Perhaps we can draw precise specifications of these conditions without undertaking fairly microscopic analyses of them. But I doubt it.

I would extend the argument to the other master context in which all legislative politicians work. That is the capital city, where the central activity is governing. Students of legislative politics have given a great deal of attention to the activity of governing and to its sequential patterns, fixed as they are by the formal rules of the legislative process. Here, in our case studies of "how a bill becomes a law," can be found the most numerous examples of scholarly observation. And they have been of enormous value to us. But I should like to push a little here, too. A careful detailing of the perceptions, interpretations, and actions of legislative politicians, developed from the closest possible vantage point, and undertaken with a special sensitivity to context and sequence, can yet improve our understanding of what politicians do in the legislature and why. I shall try to support this argument for "value added" with an extended example.

Ronald Reagan's first foreign policy dispute with the Senate arose over his proposed sale of AWACS planes to Saudi Arabia in the fall of 1981. As governing sequences go, the AWACS controversy was well bounded. By law, the arms sale proposal—the largest in U.S. history—had to be submitted to Congress, where it became subject to a congressional veto if majorities of both houses voted, within 30 days, to disapprove it. The president formally submitted it on October 1 and it was voted on—up or down—by the Senate on October 28. As governing sequences go, also, the AWACS controversy was well publicized. Media interest grew exponentially as the sequence came to its end in the Senate. The House had already voted overwhelmingly to dis-

approve the sale; the president's prestige and power were thought to be hanging in the balance; the outcome was unpredictable almost until the vote itself. When the vote occurred, every senator was in his or her seat, and every senator voted. It was, thus, a sequence that was easy to follow; and it was a vote about which every senator would have something to say.

Since each of my senators was involved—if only to cast a vote—I talked with them and their staffs about what they saw, what they did, and why. If we think about them in terms of context and sequence, they cluster in three groupings, each group deciding in a different context and at a different point in time. I call them the early deciders, the active players, and the late deciders. I shall discuss two senators from each grouping. And, with deep apologies (to you not them) I shall designate them by letter.

Two early deciders, both Democrats, were opposed to the sale. They saw themselves, quite simply, as supporters of Israel and of its position. Accordingly, both committed themselves to that position months before the vote took place. "Basically," said the foreign policy staffer for Senator A, "we were going along with the Israeli position from the beginning. . . . We signed everything that came along. . . . Whatever the argument was, we signed on." Because he was a member of the committee of jurisdiction, Senator A was attentive to the issue from its inception. As soon as the administration floated the idea in February, he joined seven committee colleagues in signing a letter to the president expressing "serious" and "deep" concern about the idea and asking the administration to consult with the committee before taking action. In June he signed a letter circulated by Senator Robert Packwood asking the president not to submit the sale to Congress. And in September he signed Senator Packwood's official resolution of

disapproval, on which the eventual vote would be taken.

Viewed from a distance and in the abstract, Senator A expressed an early, strong policy preference and he voted it. Nothing about his behavior seems problematical. But up close and in context there are complexities of choice to be observed. Despite his normal activism on foreign policy issues, he made a deliberate decision not to extend his influence beyond the acts of signing and voting in this case. "It was not something we focused on," said his foreign policy aide, "We weren't involved. . . . We never took an active part in it. The most active we ever got was the senator's statement in committee when the vote came up there. . . . I wouldn't rank it as one of the biggies we've handled." Senator A did not focus on AWACS because he was preoccupied with other matters at that time. And we are reminded that a strong policy preference does not translate automatically into an equal measure of attention or of involvement.

The timing of Senator A's signature on the formal resolution of disapproval necessitated yet another decision. "We were undecided about signing," explained his staffer, "till late in the summer. Packwood was looking for sponsors even before the hearings were held in committee. [The committee chairman] wanted the members to hold off until they heard the arguments in the committee. We did—until Packwood had gotten into the 40s somewhere, looking for the magic 50 signatures. We didn't want to get in too late, since we had no doubt we'd get in eventually. I remember we discussed it riding in the car. The Senator said 'I don't want to be a Johnny-come-lately.' So we jumped in." And Senator A became number 47 out of the eventual 50 cosponsors. The content of his decision was never in doubt. But the timing of his decision was calculated so as to make certain he would receive full credit for that deci-

sion. He believed he would have lost credit with other supporters of Israel if a 50-car pro-Israel train had left the station without him. Whatever the strength or the content of his policy preferences, therefore, he still had to decide how and when those preferences should be publicly expressed. Decisions about how to vote are separable from decisions about attentiveness, decisions about involvement, and decisions about timing. We have devoted far more energy researching the first kind of decision than the other three. Observation could stimulate a useful corrective.

Senator B also committed early and did not change. Like Senator A, he contributed no more to the process or the outcome than to sign and to vote. Senator B became attentive to the AWACS issue not because of his committee, but because of an early spring trip to the Middle East. "Not long after my trip," he said, "someone at home asked me what I thought about AWACS. I said I was against it." Like Senator A, he interpreted the issue as one of support for Israel; and he made his decision in those terms. In his post-trip interview in April with his state's largest paper he said, "This vote could be the most important vote this session, next to the economy. It's a symbolic vote. Where do you stand, with the Arabs or the Jews?"

He was quick to sign both the June Packwood letter and the September Packwood resolution of disapproval. "I was one of the early signers of the Packwood letter," he explained. "I thought that since I had declared a position on the issue, I would become very conspicuous if I did not become a part of the Packwood group." It was the fact of his early commitment more than his policy preference that motivated these actions. And it continued to do so. "I can't say I didn't have second thoughts about it. . . . I never had that anti-Saudi feeling that Packwood had. I'm not sure why I committed so

1986 Observation, Context, and Sequence

early. But once I did, I felt I should stay to the end." Near the end, the president invited Senator B to the White House for a chat. He went. "They must have thought they saw a soft underbelly," he said, "that they would say, 'Senator, you've just got to support the president.' One of the deficits a politician can get is to be known as a flip-flopper. So I said to myself, You'll just have to ride this one out." Which he did. "I told the president that I would shed no tears if he won, but that I could not change."

Once again, at a distance and in the abstract, Senator B's behavior is quite straightforward. He expressed a policy preference early and strongly, and he voted it. But observation up close and in sequence reveals something more complex. The strength of his commitment bore little relationship to the strength of his policy preference. And his vote can be explained more by the timing of his commitment than by the substance of it. He committed early; and that act constrained every subsequent interpretation and action. He deemed constancy of commitment to be crucial to his success as a politician. And he interpreted the two Packwood initiatives and the presidential chat as situations in which that connection was being tested. The cases of Senators A and B suggest that the more carefully we study sequence, the more carefully we shall have to study timing. If we are to explain outcomes, who decides when may be as important to know as who decides what. We have devoted more energy to studying policy positioning in space than to studying policy sequencing in time. To our rich comprehension of the politics of left, right, and center, we can usefully add an equally rich comprehension of the politics of early, later, and late. Here, too, observation can stimulate a useful corrective.

The cases of A and B suggest, also, that we must think of any politician's goals as mixed, and subject to change. As contexts

change and as sequences unfold, the relative importance of goals may change. Senator A's policy goal came to be tempered by that of political success. And Senator B's policy goal gradually gave way to one of political success. Both senators were cultivating professional reputations at home and in Washington. Each acted so as to protect that reputation—A so as not to be known as a "Johnny-come-lately," B so as not to be known as a "flip-flopper." These interpretations and actions suggest the supreme importance politicians attach to their reputations. They suggest, too, that the cultivation and protection of favorable reputations involve favorable balances of credit and blame. They suggest, finally, that timing, within a sequence of activity, can be a key determinant of credit and blame. The pursuit of favorable reputations and favorable credit/blame balances can usually be studied by observation.

Senators C and D, two active players, interpreted and acted very differently from Senators A and B. First, they deliberately decided to exert an influence on the outcome beyond their signatures and votes. Second, while both thought of themselves as staunch supporters of Israel, neither interpreted the issue in simple "for or against Israel" terms. Third, because they wanted to maintain negotiating flexibility, they did not commit themselves until much later than A or B. Fourth, by postponing their commitments, they became active in an altered context. In the spring there was much position taking, as with A and B, but no negotiating. In the late summer and early fall, Washington wisdom held that the Senate would disapprove the sale; and that expectation created a context in which the administration had incentives to negotiate—which they did, first with Senator C, later with Senator D.

Senator C, a Democrat, focused on AWACS because, as a member of the committee of jurisdiction, he had long

been involved in the problem of arms sales. He possessed a widely acknowledged expertise and commanded much collegial respect in that field. He had developed strong policy preferences. During most of his involvement, these policy goals guided his actions. His pivotal concern was that the AWACS technology not fall into unfriendly hands. His solution was to have the planes flown by joint U.S.-Saudi Arabian crews, and he worked to negotiate a change along these lines prior to the administration's formal submittal. His proposals attracted the support of other senators.

He described his influence in the language of sequence:

I was involved in it all the way through, but my maximum involvement came early. I was light years ahead of anyone in the Senate when AWACS came up. . . . From the beginning, I understood what the problem was and I had strong views about it. I believed that wherever that plane went—that very sophisticated piece of technology—our people should go too. I'd say 25 to 28 senators came to me early on to ask for my views. I sat down with each of them for half an hour and talked to them in detail. At this time, I think I had quite a bit of influence on a lot of people's thinking.

His influence came from his ability to redefine the issue and, for a time, to persuade others to focus on his definition of the issue—in this case, the willingness of the Saudis to accept joint Saudi-U.S. crews on the planes. In mid-September Senator C participated, for a few days, in intensive conversations with Senate leaders, with administration officials and Saudi representatives. At one point he thought he had brokered, at a meeting in his office, an agreement on joint crewing. But the Saudi government said it would not accept any such arrangement; the administration decided not to push the Saudis, and two days later the proposed sale was formally submitted to the Senate unchanged. "We had an agreement we thought would save the world," said Senator C, "but it turned to worms over-

night." And the context of negotiation changed accordingly.

Senator C quickly broke off his negotiating relationship with the White House—largely on the grounds that the Saudi-U.S. actions had rendered his policy goals unattainable. The administration asked him to continue negotiating. But with the demise of his most preferred policy, another personal goal entered his calculation. Senator C wanted to be president of the United States. He feared that any future negotiations would be conducted on the administration's terms, and that he might be "set up" by them to get none of the credit and much of the blame if the sale went through—blame from American Jews that no Democratic hopeful could withstand. As in the earlier cases, changing contexts changed the mix of goals; and strategic calculations were heavily weighted with expectations concerning credit and blame.

When Senator C broke off negotiations, other negotiators entered the picture. Senator D was one of them. And he saw the world very differently from Senator C. Senator D was a Republican. He was a first-year senator. He had no recognized expertise. He had never visited the Middle East. He was not a member of the committee of jurisdiction. He did not have strong policy preferences. But he had a high priority goal. "I want to be known as an effective senator," he said. To that end, he wanted to start, as he put it, "getting involved in the issues, taking some initiatives, doing the work and getting things accomplished." And he had a lot of energy. AWACS became his proving ground. "[It] took more time than anything else I did this year," he said later. He focused on AWACS partly because "I've always been interested in foreign policy," but mostly because "I like the president and I want him to succeed. This is the president's first foreign policy vote. We don't want him to lose it." A Reagan loyalist, with no presidential

1986 Observation, Context, and Sequence

ambitions of his own, he was not constrained to negotiate at arm's length like Senator C. And he plunged in.

"When I first read about AWACS," he said, "I was lukewarm toward it. . . . But I sat here thinking. There must be some way to get this through. . . . I even went so far as to call my friend George Will, and I asked him, 'George, how do we get the president out of this mess?' " The question at issue was being reinterpreted for yet a third time—from "Are you for or against Israel?" to "How can we get the Saudis to make concessions?" to "How do we get the president out of this mess?" For my senators, at least, this sequence of interpretations ran parallel to a sequence of action.

Senator D went to majority leader Howard Baker and offered to sound out the uncommitted freshman Republicans on Senator C's joint crewing idea. Senator D himself favored some variant on that idea, and he became Baker's liaison with half a dozen freshmen. When the joint crewing notion "turned to worms," Senator D and his first-year colleagues put forward the idea of an informal letter from the president promising adequate safeguards for the technology—a so-called "letter of certification." Senator D drafted that letter, and others in his group worked it over. Five days after the president sent up his proposal, the freshman group met with James Baker in Senator D's office. "We told Baker," he said, "that this was what we needed if we were to go along, that otherwise we would vote against the sale." The negotiation produced "95% agreement" on the letter. And the letter, said Senator D, "became the mechanism for winning over doubting senators. Each one would read it, change it a little bit, and put his Hancock on it somewhere." The letter, as signed by the president, enabled Senator D to make a firm commitment and go home to explain it in mid-October. He thinks the letter provided a necessary rationale for three

others in his group. So, Senator D got involved and had an impact on the outcome. It was not large, but it was timely and tangible—and it moved him a measurable distance toward his personal reputational goal.

Legislative outcomes, we know, are invariably negotiated outcomes. This brief and episodic observation of a negotiating sequence suggests that negotiations are, like campaigns, a constantly moving stream. The context in which Senator C's early negotiating efforts took place was not the same context in which Senator D's later negotiating efforts took place. With the passage of time comes contextual change. And with contextual change come new negotiators pursuing different goals, redefining the issue at hand, altering the decision context for others, and, altogether, shaping new coalitional possibilities. For purposes of coalition building, the United States Senate of late September was simply not the same United States Senate that existed in mid-October. That sense of constant motion ought to superintend all our studies of governing. It is a sense that can be sharpened and shaped by observation.

Also the goals of Senators C and D remind us that for every politician, all governing sequences, like all campaign sequences, are embedded within a yet more encompassing sequence. That is the individual's career sequence. Whenever you observe a politician, he or she is at some stage in a career that stretches back in time and reaches forward in time. His behavior can be interpreted from the perspective of the career path that brought him to where he is, and of the career path he expects will take him where he wants to go. In the case of C and D, their long-run aspirations help us understand their short-run interpretations and actions on AWACS: Senator C's desire to be president; Senator D's desire to be an effective senator. Career aspirations, career building, and career sequences are highlighted

by observation and can usefully be studied by observation.

Senators E and F, two late deciders, were among the very last members to make a final decision. Senator E decided the night before the vote. Senator F decided the afternoon of the vote. Like the two early deciders, they had no extra involvement in the process; like the early deciders, they signed both Packwood initiatives. But unlike the early deciders, E and F changed their position and voted for the sale. They did so in yet another decision context at yet another stage in the decision-making sequence. In late October, President Reagan and the presidentially oriented media entered the picture, and together they reinterpreted the issue at hand. An issue revolving about the various conditions of the sale gave way to one concerning the president's ability to conduct foreign policy. As Senator B, reflecting on his presidential chat, put it, "The substantive issue was lost sight of. The question became, 'Are you for or against the President?'" In this latest of interpretive contexts, Republican Senators E and F reconsidered their earlier decision.

For Senator E, it was the media—aided by the president—which refocused his attention on AWACS. "The whole issue changed in the last week or 10 days," he said. "The media began to play it up as a question involving the president's ability to conduct foreign policy. . . . The media hyped the deal way out of proportion to what it really deserved. But the media hype made you reevaluate your vote. Had it not been for the media hype, the issue would have been strictly the arms sales. And I would have been very comfortable voting against AWACS." His policy preference never changed; it simply became irrelevant to a vote cast on institutional grounds. "It was," he said, "something I felt changing gradually. No one thing brought me to my conclusion." Not even a last minute chat with the president. "I

had a very pleasant conversation with the president. . . . At the end I said, 'Mr. President . . . I wish I could say I'm with you, but I can't. All I can say is, I'll keep thinking about it.'" The night before the vote he had a two-hour talk with "the political advisor in the family"—his wife. "We made a checklist—zip, zip, zip on one side, zip, zip, zip on the other side. She asked me 'Well, what do you think it adds up to?' And I said, 'It looks like I ought to support the president.'" And he went to the phone to tell Senator Packwood that he could no longer support the disapproval resolution.

Senator E's early commitment was not controlling for him, as it was for Senator B, because, unlike Senator B, he did not believe that his reputation was at stake. With his Senate colleagues, Senator E's reputation was undamaged because his change of position moved him back under the protective cover of his party's majority and of his party's leader. With his constituents, Senator E simply did not believe that his reputation depended on constancy of commitment. "The state media were very good to me," he said afterward. "With them I have established a reputation as someone who is independent, who does as he goddamned pleases, who can't be pushed around. That helps. It gives you room to cast a vote like this without people saying you've been had. It's not easy to climb down from your position and take another one in the full glare of national publicity. But the state media treated me like I knew what I was doing." While all politicians act so as to cultivate and protect their professional reputations, how they go about it depends not only on the reputation they want, but on what they think their reputation already is. That crucial matter of perception and interpretation can be studied by observation.

There are nearly as many reasons why senators pay attention to a problem as there are senators. It was committee

1986 Observation, Context, and Sequence

membership for A, a trip for B, expertise for C, a desire to help the president for D, the media for E. We need to know what these stimuli are if we are to understand the subsequent involvement, interpretation, and action of each individual politician. For Senator F, conversations with Israeli friends triggered his reevaluation. He thought long and hard about the problem, and the immense pressures he felt on the day of the debate were self-generated.

He had a strong attachment to Israel; but he gradually became convinced that Israel might be just as well off with the sale as without it. "The more I looked at it," he said, "the more I began to worry about what the situation would look like if the deal did *not* go through—the Saudis with their hurt pride, the British in there selling the Saudis the same weapons, Israel asking us for arms to control the Saudis, Israel blamed for the defeat of the sale, and a president who had his wings clipped in his first foreign policy effort. As bad as the sale was for Israel, I began to think the defeat of it might be worse." He found that most of his Israeli friends agreed with him. He did not reinterpret the question in institutional, "for or against the president" terms as E had done. Senator F's preferred policy changed because he took in more information relevant to his original question—the effect on Israel. His preference changed because his information had changed. Either way, through the imposition of a new issue or through the addition of information on the old issue, preferences can change as the governing sequence unfolds. Thus we are reminded that the sequence itself has an autonomous effect on the politicians involved in it. And it must be studied as such. Observation at close range is well suited to studying this impact of processes on outcomes.

On the eve of the vote, Senator F was leaning but undecided. "I stayed up all night before writing a pro-AWACS

speech. But I still was not certain how I was going to vote. . . . Up until 10 minutes before I gave my speech I honestly wasn't certain what I was going to do." His course of action was finally fixed by a confluence of context and of sequence. He found himself in a situation in which he could cast the deciding vote for the sale, and he consciously did so. "A little after noon," he said, "I went to Howard Baker and I asked him what his count was. He said, 'Forty-nine.' I asked, 'What about X?' He said, 'He won't talk to anyone.' I asked, 'How about Y?' He said, 'We can't get to him.'" "I was the only one they could count on," explained F. And he added, "If the sale was going through, and if I could be the fiftieth vote, then I could exert more leverage with the administration and be in a better position to help Israel. . . . Conversely, I didn't want some oil state senator to be the fiftieth vote." The sale went through, 52 to 48.

On his credit/blame balance sheet, Senator F got the worst of both worlds. Supporters of Israel assumed his was the decisive vote; and they blamed him for their loss. "I got more flak from that vote by far than any I have ever cast in the Senate," he said later. And supporters of AWACS gave him no credit for their victory. Three years afterward he said, "Do you know, the administration never thanked me for helping them on that vote, never gave me anything, never acknowledged that I helped them." So much for our abstract generalizations about the special benefits accruing to the latest deciding, pivotal voters. In the concrete, it seems, there are interpretive contingencies to be reckoned with. You are pivotal only if the distributors of credit and blame think you are, and politicians understand that condition. Thus, the allocation, as well as the creation, of credit and blame should be studied—and they can both be studied by observation.

It should not be thought that I have told *the* story of AWACS. Far from it. At best

I have told six little stories to feed into the larger story of AWACS. But the six stories suggest how complex *the* story of any large legislative decision must be, and how many different decision contexts and decision sequences are involved. They further suggest how much research room yet remains for the microscopic, observation-based analyses of the governing activity of legislative politicians. If, that is, such analyses have value. I have tried to make the case, by example, that they do.

The stories of decision making by six senators have been told to suggest that observation can be an aid to discovery, description, and theorizing. They have been told to further suggest that this "value added" flows from a heightened sensitivity to context and to sequence. In these briefest of discussions—about such analytic foci as attentiveness, involvement, and timing in decision making; or about changing interpretive contexts and changing contextual impacts on decision making; or about calculations concerning goals, reputations, and credit/blame balances; or about interpretive sequences, negotiating sequences, voting sequences, and career sequences—there is, I would argue, sufficient warrant for the claims of observation. These claims have been stated in incremental language, as befits the notion of "value added," to wit: "sensitize," "emphasize," "suggest," "remind," "correct," "stimulate," "aid," "improve," "highlight." But in research involving politicians, these modest claims may represent an indispensable increment of knowledge and understanding.

I shall close by raising two questions about observation. Do we need political scientists to do it? And if we do, are enough political scientists doing it?

As for the first question, there is a huge corps of journalists who observe politics every day. They do it very well. And we are already heavily dependent on what they tell us about our politicians. If we do

not do it, they will do it for us. But it is in the nature of their occupation that they have neither the training, nor the patience, nor the interest to conduct a dialogue with political science theorizers. Journalists are not conceptualizers or generalizers. They are more interested in episodes than regularities. Their observations are not driven by the questions of political science. Put it this way, if my remarks this evening are interchangeable with the remarks a journalist would have made to you, then I shall desist. If not, I shall argue that we cannot leave the field to the journalists, that we need political scientists to go take a first-hand look at our politicians and report back to us. And we need political scientists to keep doing it. For only we can persist in attaching observation to theory. Surely we cannot construct theories of politics on the basis of observation. But we might ask ourselves whether it is possible to construct theories of politics without observational perspectives—if, that is, we wish our theories to encompass the serious activity of our politicians.

As for the second question, I believe that not enough political scientists are presently engaged in observation. Unless I misread our journals, our graduate methods courses, and our reward structure in general, young political scientists have little incentive to expend time and energy observing politicians. Observation-based research is a rarity in the *American Political Science Review*. There are many reasons for this; and each of them may be valid in its own terms. But the question is a disciplinary one. How much value do we place on observation as a research mode? How much legitimacy do we wish to bestow on observation-based research? Have we tried our very best to teach observation and failed? Or have we made a standing decision against its claims of added value to us? We shall not answer these questions until we examine them with care. Per-

1986 Observation, Context, and Sequence

haps, sometime and somehow, that careful examination will take place within the political science profession. I hope so.

Note

This essay is the presidential address presented on August 29, 1985 at the 81st annual meeting of the

American Political Science Association in New Orleans. I owe a very large debt to many of my fellow political scientists, upon whose work I have drawn. But this essay, printed here exactly as it was delivered, was prepared as a public talk, so it does not include footnote references to the work of the very large number of political scientists to whom it is indebted.

Richard F. Fenno, Jr. is Kenan Professor of Political Science, University of Rochester, Rochester, NY 14627.