

Cristin Espinoza

Mayhew Comparison

March 11, 2015

### Reading vs. Seeing

Federal and state government are often looked at as separate entities but upon combining what I experienced with what I read, I have discovered that these forms of government actually have a few striking similarities. Being an intern for the state capitol has opened my eyes to all these similarities between state government officials and those of the federal government, which Mayhew primarily discusses in his book, *The Electoral Connection*. The structure of the book allows for readers to get the most out of the information being presented, being that it is divided into two sections. Talking about something as complicated as the government can be quite strenuous, but the sections were useful in helping me understand the information. Mayhew made some observations in this book that seek to unveil the motives and workings of elected officials in the federal government. Some of these workings apply to the state government, as well. In the first section of the book Mayhew makes a case for the electoral connections with topics that include both Mayhew's interpretation of legislators being in a constant state of campaign and the recognition of inside legislator tactics and incumbent advantages. The extent to what I read on these subjects allows me to compare in a way I did not expect. Legislators and their aides are always brainstorming ways that can give them an upper hand in appealing to constituents and trying to stay in their good graces. In the second part of his book, Mayhew focuses a considerable amount on the federal government's weak party system. I do not believe is as big of an issue now, as far as what I have seen in the state

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government thus far. It's important to note, though, that a lot of time has passed since the writing of this book. I speculate that Mayhew may have a different opinion about the weak party system now. I will do my best to compare the difference between what he writes and what I have seen, rather than criticizing his findings. Overall, *The Electoral Connection* allows for a clear understanding and ability to pick out what's important as means to compare what I believe goes on now. In many ways, tactics and results have not changed much, even though our conceptualization has drastically shifted.

Mayhew begins the first section of his book with an interpretation of how legislators are in a constant state of campaign and it translates well to what I have seen since being at the capitol. The goals (to get reelected, influence, and make good public policy) seem to be a well thought out interpretation by most legislators. If legislators can be successful at one of these, there seems to be a circle that begins to form. Once a legislator is elected, they have the chance to make good public policy, if their constituents are happy, they'll get reelected (hypothetically). Although, I think the influence piece is somewhat of a caveat of achieving reelection and good public policy. Simply, if a legislator achieves reelection through making good public policy, the influence is a given. As in the case with the representative that I work under, he was elected, made great public policy according to his constituents, and was effectually reelected. At one point, Mayhew calls legislators "professional politicians" (50) because they are pro's at quickly learning the ropes and doing all that is needed to attain what they actually want-reelection. This is especially visible in state politics. Even from my first day, the other interns and I were taught to

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constantly strive to create a positive impression of the legislator we work for, for our legislator's constituents. I learned in an intern meeting that there are stable and unstable seats in the chambers that are heavily monitored due to the fact that Democrats barely hold a majority in the house. These unstable seats have been defined to me as seats that other people want, and that could be attained in the next session. Essentially, it all depends on how hard the person in that position works (along side aides and interns) to maintain as much stability as possible. Representative Buckner's seat, for example, is unstable. He sits as chairman on the House education committee and has a lot of impact on the way in which it is run. Other members want this opportunity for various reasons. Although he has not decided whether he wants to run for this position again, it is up to us to make sure he remains in the best position possible, if he does. This means endless amounts of thank you letters, tributes, and searching for events in his district that mean something, rather, is "note worthy". It also means keeping his social media and website up to date in a way that sheds a positive image on what he is doing for his constituents. While most of those tasks fall on his aid, Sally, and myself, he is responsible for speaking at Town Hall once a month, attending events, and giving speeches when it is in his best interest to. It has been said by Mayhew that politician's won't mobilize unless someone important is watching (116), this may mean something different in terms of federal government, but for local government this falls back a lot on constituents. It is not uncommon for Representative Buckner to decline an event if it either: a) Doesn't concern his district, or b) his constituents more than likely won't be in attendance. To him and his aide, it has been voiced that there really is no

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point in going to something if no one is going to care that he attended. The time and energy is only worth it, it seems, if there is a trading of a “valued good” that follows (i.e. increased constituent support). Something similar shows up in his activeness in committees, also. Representative Buckner serves as a member of the house judiciary committee and, as previously mentioned, as chairman of the house education committee. It is interesting to see him in both committees because he is much more active in the judiciary than he is in education. I attribute this to what Mayhew refers to as making pleasing judgmental statements versus making pleasing things happen (62). As mentioned earlier, he is in an unstable position being house education chairman and that could explain why he doesn't say as much in these committees. Supporting any certain bill that could upset his constituents would be dangerous to his next campaign, if there is one. In judiciary committee however, he is 'simply' just a member. He doesn't have *as much* to lose by speaking up about issues that bother him or voicing his opinion on things he wants done. This is reflected in the bills he writes also. Bills for education are focused on places that a majority of his constituents, and most others, would likely support while his judiciary bills are much more issue oriented and controversial. He's making things happen over there, though, while in education it seems he's being less proactive, to ensure his unstable seat is gaining as much stability as possible. The constant cycle of campaign is very apparent in state politics, just as Mayhew suggested for federal governmental affairs.

While campaigning is prevalent for all candidates running for office, those holding incumbent seats really give way to another important Mayhew topic- the incumbent

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advantage. Incumbents are more and more often using inside tactics to get ahead in any way possible in order to gain ground against candidates who are not currently holding office. There are a few things that can really affect someone that currently holds office from winning an incumbency, like an anti-incumbency factor. This occurs often times when a potential candidate for incumbency proves himself unworthy of tenure. But, for the purposes of this paper, I would like to expand on the fact that statistically, incumbents are being reelected approximately 80% of the time<sup>1</sup>, which is astronomically high. As defined on page 39 of Mayhew's book, there is an expected incumbent advantage, which assumes that the person with the most knowledge of what will satisfy the constituents most (usually the incumbent) will often end up outweighing the opponent. After being in office for at least one term it is highly likely that they will have a better grasp on what their constituents like and don't like, which is helpful when deciding a platform to run on. Relationships with members already in office can also assist members in further increasing their chances at being reelected. There is also a lot of support to be had on the "inside" that helps contribute to the high percentage mentioned previously. Although there isn't as big of a hierarchy system as Mayhew talks about, members from the inside can advocate for them in a big way. These members have influence and therefore can be really great at getting a candidate's name out there, and they definitely use it to their advantage when they can. Support from other representatives can do a lot of good for someone running for office and it's a widespread fact within the doors of the Colorado State Capitol. Mayhew makes a

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<sup>1</sup> "The Power of Incumbency - Boundless Open Textbook." *Boundless*. Web. 3 Mar. 2015.

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statement similar to what I will explain, he says that there is this strong sense of support for legislators supporting each other on bills simply because they serve on the same committee as the bill that is being passed (90-91). I was a bit skeptical about this point until I watched it happen in committee. Back in February I was able to sit in on the House Judiciary Committee, where there were three bills up for first reading. One of the bills was from Representative Fields, who serves on the Judiciary Committee presently. The other two bills were from representatives that resided in different committees. I watched as the first bill went up; it was from one of the other two representatives. The debate for this bill was heavy, drawn-out, and got voted down. The next bill was from Representative Fields and she made her case as the previous representative had done, but almost immediately following the representatives passed her bill unanimously. Then the third bill went down much like the first. This was quite a coincidence as I had just read about this tactic a few days before. It seemed as if just because she was a member of their committee they automatically gave her more trust, and little argument, than compared with the other two. Even if it is not the true intention, it was a little odd that they just passed the bill through no questions asked- it is on its way to the Senate now.

Being that Mayhew's book focuses primarily on the federal government from decades ago, there are undoubtedly certain topics discussed throughout that are a bit outdated. The whole back section of the book discusses the looming threat of a slow decline in the congressional party system (105), but I would say the government is inherently stronger in terms of party affiliation and more divided than it was when he wrote this. In

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fact, the alternative he offers rings true today that “parties rather than lone politicians are the prime mover in electoral politics”. This is an important aspect of politics today in that party affiliation is really affecting how much gets done, in both federal and state politics. This is represented really well in Colorado state politics. This past November the Colorado legislature experienced an election that unbalanced Congress. I never realized how extremely difficult it was to get things done when this phenomenon happens, until I began interning at the Capitol. Unbalanced chambers make passing legislation astronomically more difficult due to each party continually shooting down bills, often times because they aren’t within their party lines. Unfortunately, this does not go unnoticed by the members of Congress, at least not from what I’ve seen in the House. The last Friday in February was a busy day at the capitol. There were a lot of bills heading into their second and third readings, even over to the Senate for some. One of the House Democrats asked Representative Buckner to sponsor his bill and, upon convincing him, his next words were, “now it’s off to die in the Senate.” It’s unfortunate that this is the attribution our legislators have about policies they believe in. What truly is the purpose of running for representative when there is no intention of compromise simply due to the fact that someone doesn’t affiliate with the same party? Is it so abstract to think that members of an opposing party *actually* have substantial ideas that would benefit the whole? So often we hear, as I mentioned earlier, that it’s the fiscal note that draws support back, but it doesn’t change the fact that so many things cost money, and we shouldn’t automatically shut down good public policy because of it. Representatives are much more apt to spend money on a bill of the

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same party than on a bill of an opposing party for shallow reasons. In doing this, elected officials are not doing what they were elected to do. They were elected to influence, and make good public policy, which cannot get done if everything is being killed when it gets to the next chamber. Basically, Congress is just not as adamant about passing bills as when there are different majorities in the Senate and the House. People are abiding by party lines more than ever and it's creating a lot of disagreement within the Colorado State Capitol, as it does in the federal government as well (just think of homeland security funding). This is quite the change from what Mayhew was watching unfold in a much more persistent hierarchy system back in the day. This system has declined immensely and thus leaves more room for representatives to voice what they believe in terms of party lines versus adhering to what the person above them did just to get ahead.

What I have read and what I have seen since interning for Representative Buckner has made for a few interesting revelations. I always assumed that the capitol was a bunch of busy people constantly in motion and trying to do all that they can to ensure that things are running smoothly, but that isn't always, or often, the case. I'm actually shocked by how many bills get "indefinitely postponed", which I have since learned means that the bill is killed until *at least* the next legislative session. There aren't many bills to keep track of through the Senate because even if they make it there, chances are not favorable that it's going to make it passed the first reading. While the representatives seem less busy than expected, the aids and interns are quite the opposite. The amount of thank you letters, tributes, and congratulatory letters that get sent out as means to make our representative



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look good in the eyes of his constituents, has turned in to a full blown competition. And not between the representatives either, it's solely the interns and aids. I had always thought that representatives wrote their letters to people, I have since learned that they purely are there for the signature; extra points are deserved if they actually take the time to read them. Mayhew's book does a fantastic job at explaining just how important the little things are, even compared with the big ones. We may not always see the constant campaign cycle as relevant to their lives, especially when there is constant feuding between big issues like political party division, but it is there and it is important. Since reading this book and seeing all the similarities between it and state governments even though the primary focus of the book is federal governments, I would like to know what someone from the inside thinks about the way Mayhew's book adheres to the situation from a more present perspective. It's interesting to see so many similarities and get to experience first hand exactly what is encompassed in the books entirety. On some levels though, I wish it wasn't true. The inefficiency of government in Colorado is not going to be improved when political parties are constantly unwilling to see eye to eye and continue to remain in a constant state of campaign. From the inside out, it is not the most sufficient way to get things done. It is simply the way to fly under the radar until the next election and keep hidden tactics hidden. It seems to me that legislators attribute their success to never stepping on anyone's toes (that matter).