

“Vote your district first.” Why was this advice given by Speaker Sam Rayburn to his party colleagues in the House of Representatives?

Rayburn was telling his fellow Democratic Representatives that the interests of their constituency were in the interests of themselves, and their party. This might seem straightforward; the primary responsibility of a Representative is just that – to think of his district's interests. However, there are two important issues behind this: the importance of future elections in maintaining control of the chamber, and therefore determining policy and weak political parties (compared to other democracies).

To be re-elected, a Congressman must court the voters in his district. Most members of Congress serve for a number of terms, showing that Congressmen are very good at massaging their reputation in their district. There are a number of different methods of gaining popularity and approval in one's own district, but the one under discussion is taking your local interests into account when voting on the chamber floor.

While re-election is clearly in the interests of individual Congressmen, the Speaker of the House encouraged them to put re-election before the party policy so that the party would hopefully maintain majority control of the House. The party with the majority membership appoints the Speaker and has enough votes to control the legislative agenda. Although defections from the party line on constituency grounds may impact the vote on the particular Bill, the party has a better chance of controlling the legislative agenda in the next session. As Speaker of the House, Rayburn was the most influential and senior Democrat in the House of Representatives, and he could best serve his party (and, as Democrats believe) his country by not allowing Republicans the power to legislate.

One cannot imagine Rayburn's sentiment being echoed in a Westminster whip's office. In the United Kingdom, all Members of Parliament rely on the party organisation to re-select them for their seats (unless they are well enough known to consider running as an Independent). Every

party has powerful whips in the House of Commons to ensure all the party's members support the party's position. Constituency concerns are still important, but the party has more central coercive control over its members than in the United States. Party loyalty is one factor in giving out junior ministerial positions in Government.

In the United States, by contrast, would-be congressmen finance and run their own campaigns. Since primary elections are open, they rely on support from their district party membership, not from the national committee. While whips do exist in Congress, they have fewer carrots and sticks than in the United Kingdom. This quotation of Rayburn, then, shows firstly the importance of constituency interests, and secondly that political parties are not always powerful enough to coerce their representatives to adopt the party line. However, the data analysis of the American Conservative Union¹ suggests that most representatives will vote with their party-members on most issues.

¹ ACU Vice Chairman's Summary of Congress in 2006 , available online at <http://conservative.org/archive2/vicechairsummary.asp> (accessed 9th Jan 2008)