

Politics & Policy

# So Long to Richard Fenno, a Giant of Political Science

Few scholars did more to improve our understanding of representative democracy – or of politicians themselves.

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By [Jonathan Bernstein](#)

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More complicated than it seems. *Photographer: Sarah Silbiger/Bloomberg*

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The great political scientist [Richard F. Fenno Jr.](#) has died at age 93. Fenno was one of the most important students of Congress, and of the concept of representation.

I only met him briefly, but as I counted yesterday, I've read at least 11 of his books, from his classic study "[Congressmen in Committees](#)" to "[Home Style](#)" to "[The Making of a Senator](#):"

Dan Quayle” to “Going Home: Black Representatives and Their Constituents.” There aren’t many authors who reward reading more than two or three of their books; that I was still learning from him after each of those (and still intend to go back and read the rest) is pretty amazing. I can’t do justice to his importance as a scholar, but I’ll try to at least write a few words about how I understood his work.

Fenno learned about Congress by watching over the shoulders of lawmakers, in Washington and in their states and districts. While he certainly had a lot to say about how the House and Senate worked as institutions, his great subject was representation. For Fenno, representation was an active process that happened very much on a human scale, even in an age of mass media and even in states with millions of people. The senators he studied – Quayle, Ohio’s John Glenn, New Mexico’s Pete Domenici, Pennsylvania’s Arlen Specter, North Dakota’s Mark Andrews – seemed to always be negotiating with their constituents, even though in some ways that “negotiation” couldn’t always have been literal.

More broadly, Fenno’s politicians were real people with complex motivations that differed from one to the other. Yes, the incentive to get re-elected was always there. But it was more central for some than for others, with many seeking to affect public policy, amass personal influence or pursue other objectives. He could and did sort and simplify, but his politicians themselves were always complicated, the way that people are.

Fenno was a theorist of representation who refused to put his theory into words, or at least that’s how I read him. The closest (as far as I’m aware) he came to explicitly laying out his core idea of the subject was in his introduction to a book about Domenici. Regular readers will know that I quote or refer to this all the time (from “The Emergence of A Senate Leader”) about a politician’s career cycle:

...the anticipation of activity at the following stage will affect activity in the preceding state. Most important, we would expect that activity at the governing stage will be affected by the results of the previous election and by the anticipation of the next election. ... [I]t is the legislator’s postelection interpretation of his or her election experience that mediates the transition from campaigning to governing and, thus, affects governing activity. And it is the legislator’s anticipation of the need to explain his or her governing activity to the home constituency that mediates the transition from governing to campaigning and, in that manner, affects governing activity.

That quote is unfair to Fenno in a sense. What he really aimed for wasn't to sum up his conclusions, but to lay out the evidence in all its messiness, so that the reader could learn how all of this "mediating" worked for politicians with all sorts of representative relationships and all sorts of constituencies. His qualitative data gathering alone was a massive achievement. The careful, illuminating analysis in his narratives brilliantly turned that data into knowledge: Specific findings about politicians, and theoretical findings about how U.S. democracy, and I think any modern democracy, really works.

I write about representation a lot, and about political incentives all the time. To the extent that I get it right, Richard Fenno is responsible for a whole lot of it.

1. The latest survey of experts on [democracy in the U.S. is here from the Bright Line Watch](#). Important.
2. Kathleen R. McNamara and Matthias Matthijs at the Monkey Cage on [Europe and the pandemic](#).
3. M. Anthony Mills and Robert Cook-Deegan on [Congress's diminished capacity in a crisis](#).
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