Compare and contrast Congress and Parliament as representative bodies

Chris J

In both the US and the UK all voters would like to believe that they are being represented in Congress and Parliament. However both have their own weaknesses and strengths when it comes to representing the public and when it comes to effectiveness both can be seen as ineffective in places and maybe more effective in others.

One place that both Congress and Parliament can be seen as failing to be representative bodies is in the make up of their individual houses. In Congress and Parliament there’s a lack of women, racial minorities and young people. In the case of under represented women, there are only 128 women out of 647 members in the House of Commons and in the House of Representatives there’s only 70 women and 365 men. For both to be as effective as possible the make up of these houses should reflect the country as best as possible. So having fallen way short of 50%, which is a round estimate of the percentage of women in both countries, then Congress and Parliament aren’t being as effective representative bodies as they could be. This is just one example of a group that are under represented in Congress and Parliament as both are dominated by old, white, upper class males. To become more representative of their voters this would have to change. Parliament have began these changes with Tony Blair in 1999 cutting the number of hereditary peers, who were seen as out of touch with the needs of a modern, multi-cultural Britain and were mainly old, white, upper class men, down to 92. In comparison with Congress, Parliament can be seen as making more changes to try and become a more effective representative body.

In regards to the House of Lords and the Senate, many believe that the Senate is more representative than the HOL. It’s easy to see why people would think this as each senator is elected by a state because of who they are and what they represent. Each senator has to campaign and win the support of the public. Members of the House of Lords are exempt from this as they’re simply chosen by the Prime Minister, have inherited the position in the case of hereditary peers or hold a high position in the Anglican Church. So in a way, Senators are more representative as they are representing those who elected them and are more effective as they will work hard to show their voters that they deserve to be re-elected.

However it could also be argued that the House of Lords is more representative as the Lords are unelected and are therefore free from public pressure and they are free to do what’s right rather than do what’s popular. They are also free to represent the interests of minority groups and are able to deal with unpopular issues from which MPs may steer clear of. As they are not elected they aren’t assigned to a constituency so the public can go to any Lord and aren’t just restricted to, in comparison with the Senate, two Senators. However even with all this the HOL might still be viewed as an ineffective representative body because of the restrictions placed upon them. They can’t touch financial legislation and can only block a piece of legislation for a year. In comparison because of the separation of powers, the Senate and House of representatives are able to kill off a bill and even over ride the Presidents veto of Bills. They were able to do this to Bush on 4 occasions including the Food Conservation and Energy Bill in 2008. So Congress are able to pass legislation on behalf of their voters even if the President is against it, making them more effective than the House of Lords as a representative body.

In the US one of the main influences in the way a Congressman will vote is his financial backers. Many Congressmen rely on financial backers to help fund their election campaign, so they may seek to please their financial backers rather than their constituents making them less effective as representatives of their constituents. In the UK however financial backers have a very weak influence on individual MPs, as donations are made to the parties instead. This is due to the strict rules in place regarding declaration of donations, which seemingly leaves MP’s in a more effective position to represent their constituents in voting on legislation. The public vote for an MP because of the party their in, so when an MP votes with their party on a certain piece of legislation they’re effectively representing their voters.

Its easy to see that both Parliament and Congress find it hard to balance their effectiveness as representative bodies as both have their flaws and in different areas each is more representative than the other.
The UK and US legislatures are very different as representative bodies. The ways in which each are elected are similar and both use a representative democracy in operation. But the way in which each treats its electorate couldn’t be more different.

Representing constituents
The way in which each represents its constituents are similar in some ways, for instance both act as an ombudsman, they sort out problems for their constituents. In the UK problems can be raised in the house through debate and in congress through a speech. In the UK MP’s are voted for every 4 years and if in the House of Lords then there are no elections. This gives them time to spend in London making law and not worrying about the next election. However for a congressman elections are run every 2 years and therefore election campaigns must start almost straight away after being elected. Because of this less time is spent making law and more is spent trying to please ‘the folks back home’. One way of doing this is by using pork barrel politics, this means they can ‘smooze’ with the president vote along with a policy which he wants passed and in favour he will grant the congressman something in return.

Lobby groups/interest groups
Both congressmen and MP’s can be influenced by these interest groups. Although in America they are much more substantial in the way a congressman acts. This is because the may grant the congressman money so he feels obliged to vote for policies which they are supporting or introduce a bill to try and help them in their struggle for whatever it may be. In the UK MP’s are ‘obliged’ to vote with the party no matter whether they agree or not, this is done by using a whip system. This is the party using a ‘carrot and stick’ to help pressure the MP into voting with the party, therefore outside pressure will make little difference to an MP.

Party obligation
In the UK political parties play a huge role in parliament, partisanship is very strong in the UK unlike in the US where although there are party obligations the actually party loyalties are weak. In parliament government can block whatever bills they don’t like from outside there own party and pass laws almost without exception, as the government is made up of the biggest party. Party discipline in the UK legislature is exceedingly high even with the rising levels of backbench independence. This is because of the party whip system. the whip will threaten the MP’s or persuade them with the chance of promotion within the party to get them to vote along party lines. The parties in the US hold much less importance when it comes to bill making. In the US legislature there is no whip system and congressman cannot be bribed with promotion to the government as they are separate institutions. Congressmen are elected for who they are and not what party they stand for, unlike MP’s. this gives them more freedom to vote how they like and how is best for there constituents.

Country representation
Both congressmen and MP’s have to represent their country. They are expected to be part of the proceedings in the house, regularly attending, voicing opinion and casting votes. However both houses don’t really represent the country. The average age in the UK for an MP is about 50, and in the USA about 57, this is not a shadow of how the average age of the countries are showing. In both congress and parliament there is a huge under representation of women, only about 12% in the USA and only 18% in UK considering that is should be about 50/50. ethnic minorities are the last group that are vastly under represented with only 6% in the UK despite the “official” 7.2% of the country being of ethnic minority. And the USA is worse, the country is made up of 32% ethnic minority, represented by only 25% in congress, however, these are only the official readings, both countries have, in fact, a massive influx of illegal immigrants which aren’t represented.
Compare and contrast Congress and Parliament as representative bodies [25]

Brett

In both America and the UK, they operate a system of representative democracy but the true question is as to whether they are really essentially representative of the people, as Abraham Lincoln once said “a democracy is of the people, by the people and for the people”. Elected representatives have a variety of different responsibilities. They have loyalties which often conflict and different members will reach differing conclusions about where their morning duties lie. They have an obligation to the people, to their constituents, to the pressure groups which they may represent and to themselves.

In America, House and Senate members place a high premium on representing the interests of their constituents and with good reasons. Firstly the constitution states that they must be residents of the state they represent. So this gives them a good understanding of what the “folks back home” are saying and what they want. Secondly, a number of states go further by insisting through the “locally” rule that House members reside in the congressional district that they represent. Thirdly the House or Senate members do not just reside in the state or district, but that they will have been born, raised and educated and will have worked there. Fourth, House members are especially careful about constituents’ views because they will have to face the electors every two years. However in the UK, many MPs listen to their constituents but mainly make decisions in which will coincide with Party policy. Due to Congressmen being elected every 2 years they will only spent a short time on legislative work and the rest on their remaining time in office, will be spent campaigning so that they will be able to get reelected for that constituency. In the UK, MPs do not have to born in the Constituency they represent, raised there, educated or have worked there. For example Jim Wells MLA for South Down was raised in Moira and now represents Newcastle etc.

In the UK there is a less of population in which you have to represent in your own Constituency than in America. However in America, representatives’ have more staff, on average with around 14-36 assistants, compared to 5-10 in the UK. Therefore ability to deal effectively with enquiries is better in America. Delivering can also be more effective in the US unfortunately due to “Pork Barrel” politics in bringing home the pork or bacon (gaining concession for he districts “folks back home”). They can do this by ensuring a certain vote in the interest of the president in return for certain “favours”. In the UK MP’s cannot have the same influence on executive expenditure as they have little to offer as they have little influence over executive decisions.

In the UK political parties have a huge influence on the Parliament. In the House of Commons, the government programme of legislation is supported - almost without exception - by every member of the governing party and opposed by most members of the opposition parties. Despite the rise of backbench independence during the last three decades, most votes in the House of Commons show exceedingly high levels of party discipline, due to the highly powerful “whip System”. Non-attendance permission can be given by the Whip, but a serious reason is needed. Whips will often bribe their party members with promotion and the chance to get on a certain committee they will also use to “Carrot and Stick approach”. On the other hand they will also threaten their MPs with demotion and even expulsion if they do not obey the whips. Indeed, in the 1993 battles to keep the Conservative Party in line with the over ratification of the Maastricht Treaty, the whips were said to have used a variety of “dirty tricks”, including revelations of extra-marital affairs, to bring the most stubborn into line. This would therefore suggest that MPs in the UK are not representative of their constituents but simply doing what their party wants.

In the USA however, parties hold very little importance, there is no whip system. The clout of party leaders is nothing like that of those in the House of Commons. Congressmen are elected very much on who they are and on their own campaign. Often the voters are not even aware of what party a particular candidate belongs to. In 1995, Republican Senator Mark Hatfield annoyed his party colleagues by voting against a constitutional amendment to require a balanced budget - his “no” vote meant the vote was lost. Republicans threatened to remove him from his chairmanship of the powerful Senate Appropriations Committee. He was summoned to appear before a meeting of Republican Senators, who would vote on whether to unseat him from the chair. As the meeting broke up, an unrepentant Senator Hatfield emerged, went straight to the waiting press and announced with a broad smile: “Hello, I’m chairman Hatfield.” Since each individual congressman is free from party influence they are free to represent the wishes of their constituents.

In the USA the influence of financial backers is huge, so in this sense they seek to please their financial backers rather than their constituents. Huge donations will be made to the candidates that are running for congress...when elected they may feel as if they have to carry out the demands of these financial backers... “Money is the mothers milk of American politics.” Oil companies played a huge part in Bush’s election 2000 leading to allegations that perhaps the “war on terror” Iraqi invasion was in hope of gaining control of oil supplies. In the UK however financial backers have a very weak influence on individual MPs, donations are made to the parties instead. This is perhaps due to the strict rules in place regarding declaration of donations however recent past PM Tony Blair was accused of being involved in the scandal “cash for honours” in which it appeared those who had donated substantial amounts of money gained the honours of lordship in the House of Lords. Peter Hain recently had to resign after been found to have unofficially accepted donations.

In Conclusion I believe Congressmen are more representative of their constituents. As they want to do what’s best for the “folks back home.” However I believe that MP’s can possible get more done as they will be in power for longer as congressmen face election every 2 years.