

Privileges of Rank

New Congressman Finds Campaigning Is Easier Now That He's in Office

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Newspaper Column and Frank Keep Name Before Public; U.S. Pays for Trips Home

A Favor for a Bridegroom

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WASHINGTON — For 30-year-old David Obey, youngest member of the 91st Congress, the reelection campaign won't begin officially for almost a year, but he's already wielding a campaign weapon that convinces him his chances are excellent.

"An almost intimidating advantage" is how the Wisconsin Democrat happily describes the franking privilege that enables a Congressman to shower constituents with mail at no cost to him. A steady stream of "nonpolitical" newsletters and other communications, showing the folks back home that the office holder is always thinking of them, is one of the best ways for an incumbent to increase his popularity, Capitol Hill politicians agree.

The frank is the most important of an array of Congressional perquisites that give an incumbent a head start even before his challengers take the field. Other advantages range from a big supply of free Government publications (such as baby-care pamphlets for new mothers) to cut-rate radio and television programs produced in Capitol Hill studios. And an incumbent stands to make friends by sponsoring legislation favorable to back-home interests and by helping constituents in their dealings with the Government.

Day-by-day politicking is generally more rewarding to a House member than to a Senator, who must cope with a diverse state-wide constituency. Kenneth Harding, executive director of the House Democratic Campaign Committee, contends:

"There's no reason a House member should ever lose, after a term or two, if he's using the tools."

While an incumbent can be undone by a strong trend against his entire party, the 1968 election results demonstrated why most politicians agree with Mr. Harding's observation. Only nine incumbent House members who sought reelection were defeated, and four of those were beaten by other incumbents in contests resulting from redistricting.



Rep. David Obey

Thus, off-year parties are seeking to maximize the advantages their incumbents enjoy. The House Republican Campaign Committee is giving \$3,500 this year to each of 30 Representatives from "marginal" districts, which were won narrowly in 1968, and \$2,000 each to the 158 other GOP Congressmen. For the first time, the counterpart Democratic committee is offering similar off-year assistance, though it could scrape up only \$1,000 for each of the 245 Democrats in the House (there are two vacancies.)

Volume of Franked Mail

"The off year is the time for maximum effective campaigning by such means as newsletters," says Oklahoma Rep. Ed Edmondson, assistant chairman of the Democratic Campaign Committee. "During the actual campaign, the voter is flooded with literature, and it loses its impact."

The parties help pay for printing this literature. Such aid is small change, however, next to the value of the postal frank. The Post Office anticipates that the 535 Senators and Congressmen will dispatch more than 200 million pieces of franked mail in the next 12 months, some 30 million more than in the fiscal year recently ended. The cost to the taxpayer is likely to soar well above \$10 million, a \$2 million increase.

Franked mail is required to be "nonpolitical," but the most partisan document is deemed frankable if it's inserted in the Congressional Record first. Last December the Post Office Department stopped trying to enforce restrictions on the frank after a number of nasty and inconclusive disputes. Now each member of Congress polices himself.

One reason for the rising mail flood is the growing popularity of questionnaires to constituents. Rep. Obey, for example, recently mailed a query to all 152,000 households in Wisconsin's seventh district, soliciting opinions on 18 issues ranging from Social Security benefit increases to the antiballistic missile.

Friendly Feelings

Such a survey not only helps a Congressman perform his job but also helps him keep that job. The politicians think people develop friendly feelings toward a Congressman when he seeks their opinions, even if they disagree with the way the lawmaker finally votes on the issues he inquires about. Furthermore, a questionnaire may simply help people remember a Congressman's name.

Thus, freshman Rep. Obey (rhymes with "Toby") chose a questionnaire as his first mass communication because it's a "good way to introduce myself to the district." A former state legislator, he was chosen in a special April election to fill the seat held for 16 years by Republican Melvin Laird, who resigned to become Secretary of Defense. The narrow Obey victory was especially galling to the GOP because the Democrat is quite liberal by contrast with Mr. Laird. So Mr. Obey knows the Republicans plan a strong campaign against him next year, and gaining steady exposure becomes particularly important.

Incumbency gives Mr. Obey many free or low-cost opportunities to keep his name before the public. In his rural Wisconsin district, where a Congressman is more visible than in a metropolitan area, Mr. Obey has easy access to the media. All the daily newspapers and about half the weeklies are willing to publish a weekly column on topical issues under his byline. Several radio stations air as a public ser-

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vice the five-minute discussion of issues he tapes each week at a Congressional studio.

For spot news play, introduction of bills fulfilling campaign promises, such as one calling for higher Social Security benefits, usually gets good press coverage. On a particularly hot topic, such as tax revision, Mr. Obey goes to the House television studio to film a one-minute statement (supporting revision, opposing the 10% surtax) and ships it to the six TV stations broadcasting in his district.

Mr. Obey isn't fuzzing his liberalism on national issues as he attempts to broaden his constituency. On the contrary, he believes that taking a clear-cut stand on controversial issues is appreciated even by those who disagree. As an officeholder, however, he also has many opportunities to demonstrate concern with non-partisan problems of wide interest at home.

Mr. Obey rises regularly on the House floor to make a speech demanding increased Federal appropriations for water-pollution control equipment; not incidentally, obtaining such aid is a pressing problem for many small communities in his district. Membership on the Public Works Committee, which handles pollution-control matters, gives Mr. Obey a bit of direct influence here. The freshman hardly possesses the leverage to extract extra projects for his district, but he's making contacts that may be useful when municipal officials need help in dealing with the Federal bureaucracy.

Helping ordinary constituents solve prob-

lems with the Government is perhaps the most politically rewarding work of all. Mr. Obey places high priority on this "casework," and when someone back home writes for help—in obtaining Social Security benefits, for example—Mr. Obey or an aide frequently responds by telephone. Such profitable personal contact is made possible by a generous allotment of telephone and telegraph service provided each Congressman at no cost to him. And the result can be a gratitude that no money could buy.

Not long ago, for example, Mr. Obey was contacted by a frantic soldier who had orders to leave for Vietnam two days before his long-planned wedding. The Congressman fixed it so that soldier could stay home a week longer. Now Mr. Obey likes to think that story is being told over and over by bride and groom, their families and friends.

Mr. Obey flies back to Wisconsin three weekends out of four; one trip a month comes out of the Federal budget, and the others cost him about \$125 each. But it's money well spent for an ambitious politician. The Congressman has no trouble finding a service club or similar forum for speechmaking, and radio-TV stations usually ask to interview him.

Even in Washington, Mr. Obey spends much time greeting visiting constituents. Almost every group winds up standing on the Capitol steps with the Congressman for a photograph—a practice so popular that each party keeps a photographer on the payroll; Mr. Obey can buy the pictures for his constituents at bargain rates. He also gets a cut-rate price on flags that have flown over the Capitol, which are in great demand by schools. And he is waiting impatiently for the Agriculture Department to deliver his free allotment of 400 handsomely bound Agriculture Yearbooks (list price: \$3.50). They make excellent gifts to farmers, Mr. Obey says.