Notes on:
Fenno on the House Appropriations Committee:
Or How to Construct a Nash Equilibrium
Without Really Trying¹

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1. Introduction

Fenno’s classic paper, "The Appropriations Committee as a Political System" (1962), focuses on the institutional-norm(ative) foundations of committee success. The fundamental idea is that of committee integration, the degree to which committee members cooperate so as to capture the gains from trade. Cooperation requires procedures and norms for successful bargaining, first within committee then before the whole chamber. Fenno’s analysis goes beyond describing the problem and its solution; he also provides an explanation of this phenomenon as the product of a complex equilibrium system. In what follows we first describe the problem to be solved, and then in section III, demonstrate that Fenno provides an analysis of why this is an equilibrium.

¹ And, while using the language of political sociology.
2. Definition of the problem: Committee Integration

Fenno defines integration "as the degree to which a committee is able to minimize conflict among its roles and its subgroups by heading off or resolving the conflicts that arise."\(^1\) Furthermore, the "acid test of [a committee's] internal integration is its capacity to make collective decisions without flying apart in the process." [149]

The motivation for devising a system of successful integration is that it allows members to capture the gains from trade: they are more successful in promoting their own interests if they succeed at integration. For an individual members of Congress, this means going along even if he didn't support the measure. The reason is that integration promises the expectation that next time it will be his turn, so that on average, individuals are better off by going along than under a system of fighting and fragmentation.

Gains from trade exist, hence each member values going along this time to the extent that she believes she has a real chance of getting her way next time. This norm of behavior – going along – allows all to be better off in comparison if they fought it out in committee and then on the House floor. "Disagreement cannot, of course be eliminated from the committee. But the committee has accepted a method for ventilating it which produces a minimum of internal disruption. And members believe that the greater their internal unity, the greater the likelihood that their recommendations will pass the House." [153, emphasis added]

\(^{1}\) This definition is immediately preceded by another, "the degree to which there is a working together or.. mutual support among its roles and subgroups".
3. Behavioral Elements of Integration (i.e., of the Equilibrium)

Two kinds of subgroups are important for understanding integration: relations among subcommittees and relations between the majority and minority. The following describes observed behavior in equilibrium. Norms are the specific patterns of behavior induced by the equilibrium.

(a) Subcommittees. Three norms support integration and cooperation among subcommittees. All are phenomena associated with (and which help support) a complex equilibrium.

• (i) Specialization. Members are expected to stick to the affairs of their own subcommittees.²

• (ii) Reciprocity. When a subcommittee brings its matters before the full committee, it is expected that members of other subcommittees defer and support. Fenno quotes from various members: "`It's a matter of "you respect my work and I'll respect yours."' `It's frowned upon if you offer an amendment in the full committee if you aren't on the subcommittee.'" [151]

• (iii) Subcommittee Unity. Subcommittee members are expected to support the subcommittee's recommendation in the full committee even if they disagreed in the subcommittee. Similarly, members of the committee are expected to support the committee's measure when it comes to the floor, again, even if they fought it in committee. [151; 152] Without unity, "members warn each other that if they go to the floor in disarray they will be `rolled,' `jumped,' or `run over' by the membership."

(b) Majority/minority relations. The major norm underpinning majority/minority relations is minimal partisanship. [153] This norm also emphasizes the minimization of

² See great quote from one subc chm about the response from members of another subc if he attempted to participate. This is a description of an equilibrium. [150]
overt conflict through bargaining. "It is a measure of committee integration and the low degree of partisanship that considerable reciprocity obtains between these roles." [156] "Reciprocity of roles.. promotes continued integration." [157]

4. Fenno’s Analysis of the Equilibrium

Fenno goes beyond simple description to argue that the system of Appropriation Committee norms is an equilibrium: given that this is a description of everyone else's behavior, it is optimal for an individual congressman to conform.

Socialization is the process by which an individual is taught the norms, the benefits that follow from the norms, and the sanctions that are imposed for violations. Apprenticeship is the period when newcomers learn about the equilibrium and old timers learn about the newcomers. [150] During this period, new members are socialized into the set of committee norms; and they build a reputation with respect to how well they follow the norms and as members who can be trusted. "The important function of apprenticeship is that it provides the necessary time during which socialization can go forward." "[T]eaching proceeds with the aid of punishments as well as rewards." [160] The reasons for socialization and apprenticeship is that newcomers pose a potential threat to committee integration – from "untutored perceptions, from ignorance of norms, or from dissatisfaction with the apprenticeship role".
To support the equilibrium, Committee norms and decisions provide a system of rewards and punishments. "Conformity to norms in specific situations is insured through the appropriate application, by the committee veterans, of rewards and punishments." [159]

(a) **Rewards.** For a "committee member serving his apprenticeship creditably, the passage of time holds the promise that he will inherent a position of influence" "At some later date, provided he continues to observe committee norms, he will be granted additional influence".\(^3\) [160] Finally, "influence... is compensation for the frustrations of apprenticeship." "Committee integration... rests on the fact that conformity to role expectations over time does guarantee to the young positive rewards – the very kind of rewards of power, prestige, and personal satisfaction which led most of them to seek committee membership in the first place." [160, emphasis added.]

(b) **Sanctions.** "Should a new member inadvertently or deliberately run afoul of committee norms during his apprenticeship, he will find himself confronted with negative sanctions ranging in subtlety from `jaundiced eyes' to a changed subcommittee assignment."\(^4\) [160-1]

Thus, as Fenno explains, "The serious threat" to committee integration posed by newcomers "is minimized, however, by the fact that the deviant newcomer does not possess sufficient resources to affect adversely the operation of the system."\(^5\) [162]

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\(^3\) These two sentences are surrounded by quotes from congressmen along with specific instances of rewards.

\(^4\) Fenno then gives several instances of sanctions, pp. 161-2.

\(^5\) This equilibrium is thus contingent on a newcomer acting alone. However, if there is a mechanism that allows cooperation among many newcomers, there may be an ability to defeat one norm by moving to another. This appears to be what happened with the Democratic Caucus in 1975.
Conversely, Fenno argues that "it is basic to committee integration that members who have the greatest power to change the system evidence the least disposition to do so." [163]

(c) A key ingredient supporting integration is repeat play and stability. Because the HAC is a highly valued committee, turnover is low and in particular, leadership is stable. "The committee does not suffer from the potentially disruptive consequences of rapid changeovers in its leadership group, nor of sudden impositions of new sets of norms governing internal committee behavior." [149] Also, regarding the minimal partisanship norm: "Reciprocity between chairmen and ranking minority members on the HAC is to some incalculable degree a function of the stability of membership" [157]. This feature is an important aspect of a repeat play equilibrium.

(d) Fenno makes mention of the selection criteria used to screen members for appointment to the committee. He emphasizes the criterion of "responsible" member, that is, a member whose behavior has been observed and who has developed a reputation to respecting equilibrium norms. This selection rule clearly induces a bias in favor of members who are likely to conform to existing rules and not attempt to upset the equilibrium.
5. Implications

Thus, Fenno’s article constructs a nash equilibrium in the following steps:
• (1) describes the patterns of behavior that support the equilibrium.
• (2) Explains the overall benefits to having these norms are (they allow members to capture the gains from trade).
• (3) Shows the individual benefits to a newcomer from following the norms, including the “frustrating” period of apprenticeship.
• (4) Shows the sanctions imposed for violating the norms.
• (5) Explains that the benefits from following the norms exceed the costs to newcomers.
• (6) Argues that the old-timers – the ones with the greatest ability to change the system – have the least incentive to do so.
• (7) Argues that stability (over many periods) is a necessary part of supporting the equilibrium.

The only elements missing from this to make it complete are (a) an actual specification of the game, including the strategy space. (b) Show how this solution depends on repeat play – i.e., be more explicit about the trigger strategies used to support the equilibrium. and (c) Show that old-timers have an incentive to exercise punishment when it is called for. (b) and (c) do not appear to be difficult. Once (a) is provided, the entire approach developed by Fenno can be formalized and proved rigorously.
Notes for revision:

Part of what we should try to accomplish here is: (1) Growing harmony between the two approaches (behavioral and positive theory); (2) That the best of the traditional analysis attempted to follow the same basic logic. (3) Show that Fenno has all the basic elements of a Nash Equilibrium and attempted to show it. (4) Missing is an argument that these norms are efficient; that is, among all the possible norms, these norms produce the most benefits.

References