

## CONGRESSIONAL METACONTINGENCIES

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**ABSTRACT:** Behavior analysis, aided by the concept of the *metacontingency*, is widening its scope to include the consideration of entire societies and cultural practices. Examples of the behavioral analysis of societies and cultural practices are provided, with an emphasis on metacontingencies favoring the reelection of incumbents in the U.S. Congress. Fundamental transcultural phenomena are posited that may serve as a framework for future analyses.

It seems unarguable that, other things being equal, theories of wider scope are to be preferred over theories of more limited scope. Behavior analysis is now in the process of widening its scope to include entire societies and cultural practices (Lamal, 1991a). Bevan (1991) has recently lamented the practice of contemporary psychologists who focus only on small, highly specialized questions and who are unable to see the forest because of the trees. Bevan also maintains that it has been a long time since psychologists have been concerned with world views or "grand explanatory schemes" (1991, p. 476). As we hope will be demonstrated in this article, such a characterization does not apply to contemporary behavior analysis.

Only ten years after publishing *The Behavior of Organisms* (1938), B. F. Skinner gave evidence of his concern with culture, with the publication of *Walden Two* (1948). Skinner's interest in societies and cultural practices continued for the rest of his life (e.g., 1953, 1961, 1969, 1971, 1974, 1981, 1984, 1986). The societies and cultural practices that Skinner wrote about, however, were either fictional or ones in the abstract. Others have participated in this venture (e.g., Fraley, 1988; Malagodi, 1986; Malott, 1988; Rakos, 1988). Also a few studies of historical (Kunkel, 1985) and contemporary societies or cultural practices (Kunkel, 1986; Lamal, 1984, 1991b, 1991d; Rakos, 1988, 1991; Zifferblatt & Hendricks, 1974) have appeared. The future development of the behavioral analysis of societies and cultural practices may be greatly aided -- in fact, may critically depend on -- Glenn's concept of the *metacontingency* (Glenn, 1986, 1988). "Metacontingencies are contin-

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genetic relations between cultural practices and outcomes of those practices" (Glenn, 1991, p. 62). Furthermore, "metacontingencies are functional relations at the cultural level of analysis whose existence derives from but is not equivalent to behavioral contingencies" (Glenn, 1991, p. 62). A metacontingency is thus not just a set of individual contingencies of different persons. Rather a metacontingency consists of interlocking individual contingencies, all of which involve the same consequence(s). The notion of the metacontingency may enable us to effectively account for the behavior of large groups of individuals in certain situations.

Many cultural practices are comprised of metacontingencies. These cultural practices exhibit variations and selection analogous to evolutionary variation and selection.

In the case of cultural practices, the selection agent is the outcome (aggregate effects) produced by the practice (the interlocking behavioral contingencies). The variation is provided by permutations in the behavior of individuals participating in the practice (Glenn, 1991, pp. 62-63).

In this article we try to describe a metacontingency which we believe controls much of the behavior of most of the members of the U.S. Congress. This is the metacontingency involving reelection. The interlocking individual contingencies in this metacontingency are those consisting of behaviors and consequences of those behaviors, of Congress members, members of political action committees (PACs) and lobbyists, and voters. These interlocking contingencies involve the same consequence, namely, reelection of Congressional incumbents.

### EXAMPLES OF BEHAVIORAL ANALYSIS OF SOCIETIES AND CULTURAL PRACTICES

There is a number of recent examples of cultural practices and societies that have been the subject of behavioral analysis. These include socialism in Eastern Europe (Rakos, 1991) and the Soviet Union (Lamal, 1991b, 1991d), organizational behavior analysis in both the private and public sectors (Redmon & Agnew, 1991; Redmon & Wilk, 1991), behavioral analysis of higher education (Greenspoon, 1991), clinical practice (Edwards, 1991), preventive medical services (Hovell, Kaplan, & Hovell, 1991), and correctional settings (Ellis, 1991). Not all of the authors who addressed these examples used the concept or construct of metacontingency, but the construct is applicable to all of them nonetheless (e.g., Ellis, 1991).

Other disciplines may present concepts and data that will be useful; behavior analysts do not have a monopoly on valuable insights and useful data. Behavioral economics and behavioral analysis of societies and cultural practices might well have much to offer each other. The same may be true of cultural anthropology, particularly cultural materialism (Harris, 1979, 1985).

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### THE METACONTINGENCY OF REELECTION

We are addressing the seeming paradox that incumbents in Congress are consistently and overwhelmingly reelected (Ehrenhalt, 1991), but that polls also consistently indicate that U.S. voters hold Congress in low esteem. We believe that the answer to this apparent paradox is to be found in behavior principles. At the same time, however, we acknowledge the contributions of those who are not behavior analysts. Political scientists (and others, e.g., Domhoff, 1978) have studied Congress for a long time; we have found that some of their insights and data are very helpful. This is an instance of the practice of borrowing from other disciplines, as behavior analysts address cultural practices (Lamal, 1991c).

Using the construct of the metacontingency, we consider that the consequence relevant to most of the behavior of members of Congress is reelection. That is, the predominant behavior patterns of the members are those that will result in their reelection. Although incumbents clearly have a variety of goals, reelection is the prerequisite to achieving many of them.

The consequence of reelection subsumes contingencies that account for the voting behavior of incumbents. Voting patterns of individual members can, in many cases, be accurately predicted because they continue voting patterns that have previously been positively and negatively reinforced. Incumbents' voting patterns are not necessarily consistent with, and may even run counter to, the views of the majority of their constituents who vote, except in the case of "hot button" issues (Bernstein, 1989). One reason that incumbents can "get away" with this mismatch is that the "information costs" (as economists put it) are too high for most voters, for most issues. That is, the cost of finding out the voting record of one's Senators or House member is too high for most voters.

Organized (special interest) groups, however, are willing to pay the information costs, particularly for information about votes that affect them. It is thus not surprising to find that the voting patterns of incumbents are consistent with the views of some organized groups.

The control exercised by organized groups over incumbents' voting is related, at least in part, to the sharp increase in campaign expenditures over the last 15 years. A little over \$72 million was spent on House and Senate campaigns in 1974. By 1986 the total had climbed to over \$114 million (Ornstein, Mann, & Malbin, 1991). The emergence and proliferation of political action committees (PACs) has had a profound effect on campaign contributions. In 1974 there were 608 PACs that contributed \$8.5 million to campaigns. By 1987 the number of PACs had risen to 4,157 and they contributed \$132.2 million to 1986 campaigns (Smith, 1988).

Both those who vote to reelect members of Congress as well as the organized groups that support them are no doubt powerful sources of reinforcement for incumbents. Such voters and such organized groups may reinforce incumbents' voting patterns that are beneficial for localized groups and organized groups, by

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reelecting them. But, those voting patterns may well be detrimental to the nation as a whole. Thus, political scientists distinguish between *particularized benefits* for delimited groups, and *universalism*, or a concern with the country as a whole. Voting for the former by incumbents is more likely to be followed by the reinforcer of reelection.

An additional benefit that accrues to incumbents' supporters, including organized groups, is that repeatedly reelecting those incumbents increases those incumbents' power or control. This is because they are more likely to obtain the chairs of powerful and influential committees and subcommittees. Thus, corporate PACs do not limit their contributions to Republican candidates, and labor unions do not limit their contributions to Democratic candidates. Rather, PAC contributions are made, to a great extent, on the basis of the control exercised by the individual Congress member, regardless of political party membership. Committee and subcommittee chairs are frequent recipients of PAC contributions. It is a situation in which certain behaviors of both the incumbents, as well as their organized supporters, have powerful consequences.

In some instances PAC contributions may function as establishing operations that may be invoked on future votes on issues of particular importance to the PAC. Michael (1982) proposed the term establishing operation (EO) to refer to operations that increase the effectiveness of some object or event as reinforcement and evokes behavior that has in the past been followed by that object or event. Being provided campaign funds (and perhaps other funds as well) by a PAC or some other special interest group may increase the reinforcement value of the money on the one hand and increase the likelihood that such behavior -- that is, voting for or against legislation favored or opposed by the PAC or special interest group -- will be evoked on future occasions. Thus, legislation supported by the PAC or special interest group will probably be supported and voted for by the member of Congress. It is highly unlikely that a PAC or special interest would continue providing financial support to a member of Congress who does not support its legislation.

Closely related to the PAC is the lobbyist. There are some democratic countries (e.g., Great Britain) where lobbying is prohibited. In the United States lobbyists have acquired considerable control because they can affect the distribution of sizable amounts of money, especially campaign funds, because they are frequently tied directly or indirectly to a PAC. In addition to providing money, lobbyists are often able to mount extensive mail and phone campaigns addressed to specific members of Congress to prompt relevant behavior. According to Smith (1988), the postmaster of the House of Representatives reported that then-Speaker Tip O'Neill received 15-18 million pieces of mail in one day in 1985, most due to a write-in campaign. The power of such campaigns to affect the votes of members of Congress is clearly reflected in the campaign mounted by wealthy elderly against the Catastrophic Health Care legislation. The campaign was so intense that Congress voted to repeal the legislation before it had a real opportunity to take effect.

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The increase in lobbyists has paralleled the great increase in campaign finances and PACs. In 1961 there were only 365 lobbyists registered with Congress. By the middle of 1987 there were 23,011 lobbyists registered with the Secretary of the Senate (Smith, 1988). It seems unrealistic to assume that lobbyists do not affect the voting behavior of members of Congress. It is highly unlikely that industries and other groups would spend large sums of money in support of Congress members, if those monies were ineffective in controlling important aspects of those members' voting behavior.

Incumbents are especially adept in the use of verbal stimuli to control the voting behavior of their electorate. Members of the House may be in a better position to make more use of verbal stimuli than Senators because the population of a House district is usually smaller, and in some states much smaller, than the entire state's population, which constitutes the constituency of a Senator.

One student of Congress has described three categories of verbal behavior in which all incumbents engage: advertising, credit claiming, and position taking. *Advertising* involves, "any effort to disseminate one's name among constituents in such a fashion as to create a favorable image but in messages having little or no issue content" (Mayhew, 1974, p. 49). Simply being known, "name recognition," is beneficial. It is noteworthy that there was much talk after the Persian Gulf War about Generals Powell and Schwartzkopf as candidates for political office. Neither man's political views were known to the public. Despite their possible political naiveté, these men were considered to be excellent candidates for political office and there were reports that both parties were interested in having them on their tickets in 1992.

Among congressional incumbents there are standard means for becoming (and staying) well known. These include extensive use of the mail franking privilege and paid trips back to the state or district. These advertising activities are accomplished primarily at taxpayer expense -- one of the important benefits of incumbency.

A second category of verbal behavior important to incumbents is *position taking*. Position taking means making a public statement on anything that is likely to be of interest to one's constituency, including organized groups. Position taking may take the form of voting, but often it does not. One can view with alarm, deplore, applaud, and so on, without ever having to vote about the matters one is deploring or applauding. Outside of roll call voting, the incumbent is usually able to tailor his or her position to the audience at hand.

Often, however, incumbents must weigh carefully the verbal behavior they emit about various issues. If the incumbent is addressing a heterogeneous audience, that is, one composed of voters on various sides of an issue, the incumbent as candidate must attempt to emit the verbal behavior that will control the voting behavior of the majority of the electorate.

Positions or lack of positions on issues may not be the only means by which a member of Congress may control the voting behavior of his or her constituents.

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There are some members of Congress who rarely, if ever, sponsor any legislation despite spending years in Congress. They frequently have meager voting records and vote primarily on noncontroversial issues. Yet they get themselves elected term after term. What is reinforced is doing a good job of *constituent service*.

If a constituent has a problem with a government agency, the constituent contacts the member's office (the one in Washington or one of the Senator's or House member's offices in the state or district). The member -- or more often a staff member -- then intervenes with the government agency to provide a satisfactory resolution of the problem. When the member of Congress is running for reelection, a commonly used sound-bite is one in which a constituent describes how the member helped the constituent solve a problem.

A third category of incumbent's verbal behavior is *credit claiming*. In behavioral terms credit claiming consists of having the government provide reinforcers to constituents at one's behest; or at least convincing others that one was responsible for their provision. The primary way to claim credit is to traffic in "particularized governmental benefits" (Mayhew, 1974, p. 53). An example of this stratagem, par excellence, is Senator Robert Byrd of West Virginia. Since 1989 Senator Byrd has funneled more than \$1.06 billion in federal spending to his state. As Senator Byrd said in a ceremony in West Virginia, "I'm trying to get the money as fast as the state can keep up with it" (Fram, 1991). Senator Byrd, it should be noted, is chairman of the Senate Appropriations Committee. The member of Congress who increases his/her chances of being reelected may have created EOs for the voting behavior of their constituents. That is, the member of Congress provides reinforcement in both the metacontingencies and contingencies of the constituents by getting more and more federal funds into the district or state for projects beneficial to the constituents as well as the "favors" done for individual constituents. This situation could lead to the constituents' voting for the incumbent whenever he/she is up for reelection.

Another important category of particularized benefits is jobs for constituents. Members of Congress are well aware that an effective source of control over the voting behavior of constituents is the member's behavior that brings jobs to the district or state; or perhaps one or more of a myriad of particularized benefits: a hospital, a dam, harbor improvements, tax breaks for local industries, protection of local industries through import quotas. The list of potential particularized benefits is doubtless very long for virtually every state and district.<sup>1</sup>

In addition to obtaining jobs, maintaining federal jobs in a state or district is also important. It is not too surprising that a leader (Representative Arme of Texas) in pushing for the closing of military bases in the United States is a representative who has no bases in his district. It is also not too surprising that Congress allowed the Department of Defense to take the lead in this matter and that an independent commission (Base Closure and Realignment Commission), not Congress, recommended to the President which bases should be closed.

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Members of Congress with defense contractors in their state or district work hard to maintain military contracts. They even frequently insist on contracts for military equipment that the military does not even want. But they can be sure that if they do not save the military contracts, their opponent in the next election will tell the voters that he or she will be able to obtain such contracts. At the same time, large defense contractors spread their work (and thus jobs) over many states, thus ensuring broad-based congressional support for maintaining them.

It is readily apparent that there are many sources of control over the behavior of members of Congress. An increasingly important source of control is the mass media, especially television. The control exercised by the media differs somewhat from the other sources of control we have discussed. The media provide a member of Congress an opportunity for emitting verbal behavior that may strongly influence the voters. If a member of Congress is invited to participate in a national TV program, it enables him or her to point out to voters that he or she must be important to be on national TV. According to Hedrick Smith (1988), expanded media opportunities, especially TV, have enabled relatively obscure members of Congress to receive public exposure not previously available. Moreover, it may provide a low-ranking committee member greater control over the voting behavior of the committee members than the control exercised by the chair.

Among students of Congress there is consensus that the control over members exercised by the political party leadership has been significantly eroded; that in fact, there is very little if any party control (e.g., Ehrenhalt, 1991). One reason for this diminished control is the expanded media coverage (free advertising) available to members of Congress. Individual members can effectively defy the party leadership if they have the media environment in which to develop their own positions on issues. Furthermore, as one student of Congress put it: "Party leaders take the position that the first duty is to get reelected and encourage members to 'vote the district first,' which they happily do" (Jacobson, 1983, p. 31).

So we conclude that Congress consists almost entirely of individuals behaving under the control of a metacontingency of reelection. The members' behaviors of advertising, credit claiming, position taking, providing particular benefits and serving constituents, among others, are all directed to the end of reelection. These metacontingencies involve Congress members and their electorates; certain of incumbents' behaviors are reinforced by votes. Other contingencies enable incumbents to finance their (usually costly) reelection campaigns to help garner the necessary votes. These finances are provided by PACs and their lobbyists, usually contingent upon the relevant voting behavior and/or power of the incumbent. These two interlocking sets of contingencies involving incumbents and voters and incumbents and PACs constitute a powerful metacontingency that has as its common consequence the reelection of Congressional incumbents. Thus it is that most people have little or no use for Congress but consistently reelect their own Senators and Representative.

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### CONCLUSION

There seem to be certain fundamental transcultural phenomena that may serve as a framework for the behavioral analysis of societies and cultural practices. Consideration of those phenomena may be particularly important to the extent that normative concerns become part of this extension.

One of the transcultural phenomena is the quest by individuals or groups for the establishment or maintenance of contingencies that favor them but that may conflict with the well-being of their culture. An example is provided by Ehrenhalt's (1991) assessment of the U.S. House and Senate budget committees:

There is no culture of self-sacrifice, no set of customs through which members agree to deny their own constituents something in order to make some headway against the national deficit problem (p. 246).

Another of the transcultural phenomena is the power of relatively immediate consequences to often reinforce behaviors that may have long-term deleterious effects for the society in which they are operative. For example, constituents' votes for or against members of Congress, are usually distant consequences, but funds provided by lobbyists may often follow certain of members' behaviors much more immediately.

A third transcultural phenomenon of concern is the reliance of governments on the use of aversive control, with all of the undesirable side effects of such control (Sidman, 1989). Aversive control also characterizes important features of Congress. Members' votes on particular bills may be intended to avoid the aversive consequences that would follow from voting the other way. This is particularly the case when well-organized and financed groups (particularly single-issue groups) support or oppose a particular bill.

We have offered a description of an important metacontingency that is one characteristic of contemporary U.S. society. We believe that this metacontingency resolves the paradox that U.S. voters hold Congress in low esteem, but at the same time members of Congress are consistently reelected. Other metacontingencies of our society remain to be described. We recognize the importance of prediction and control of behavioral phenomena. Their importance should not, however, obscure the importance of description. Attempts to predict and control will not be very successful if the phenomena to be predicted and controlled have not been adequately described. Remember Charles Darwin.

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### NOTES

Academic research projects and facilities expressly exempted from the usual peer review process are often sponsored by Congressional committee members for the benefit of their constituencies (Marshall, 1991).