Chapter 7

THE POLITICS OF ADOPTING TELEVISIONED SESSIONS

Why do legislators adopt television coverage? The legislators themselves have proposed several reasons, during the debates over televised sessions. Some U.S. Representatives and Senators viewed the public's "right to know" about its government as reason enough to support coverage. Others, as we quoted in Chapter 1, expressed concern over the loss of visibility in the upper chamber versus the lower chamber. The other side of this question, obviously, is why do some legislators vote to bar cameras from legislative sessions? Again, if we listen to the legislators, we hear concerns expressed for voters. John Anderson said that the House TV system represented, "...one more incumbent protection device at the taxpayer's expense." To listen to some politicians would lead us to believe that they have the good of the legislative process at heart. Senator Russell Long and others have voiced concern over TV's effects on legislative business. They expect politicians to grandstand and slowdown legislative business.

Public choice analysis is wary of uncritically accepting the rhetoric of politicians. Instead, public choice applies a simple but fundamental assumption to the behavior of politicians: legislators choose alternatives to maximize their personal objectives. This is the basic assumption made by economists about the behavior of individuals in other behavioral contexts. As in all of economics, these governmental agents face constraints on their behavior. With the constraints in mind, legislators weigh the personal costs and benefits of pending legislation. The case of televised legislatures should be no exception. To the extent that legislators anticipate the effects of coverage on their vote production, their support for coverage will be altered. The earlier chapters estimated the impact of televised sessions on elections. In this chapter we look at how the election effects and other influences change support for and dissent on televised sessions. In effect, we want to go beyond the rhetoric and consider the self-interest motivations that lie behind televised sessions.

The next section discusses the factors that operate on the self-interest of legislators in their decision to adopt television coverage. Two sets of factors...
are discussed: those that have similar effects on all legislators in a chamber, and those that have differential effects on legislators within a chamber. In the third section we set up an empirical model of support for televised sessions. The model is tested with data drawn from the July 1986 U.S. Senate vote, in which the senators voted to allow cameras inside the chamber on a permanent basis. The findings confirm that the senators are, indeed, concerned about the personal benefits and costs of coverage. The fourth section offers some concluding remarks.

Political Influences on Legislators

Two sets of influences on the decision to televise legislatures can be distinguished: 1) the factors that affect the chamber more or less as a whole, and 2) the factors that have different effects on legislators within the same chamber.¹ The relative importance and visibility of one legislative chamber to another is a factor that impacts the entire chamber. Legislators, whether state or national, are often candidates for other and higher offices. The legislative chamber serves as a training ground for these legislators. State representatives and senators become governors and U.S. Representatives. U.S. Representatives become U.S. Senators. U.S. Senators become President. These types of career movements fill the biographies of politicians in the U.S. Legislators also move from legislative chambers to bureaucratic and cabinet appointments in state and national government.

Television exposure that benefits one chamber relative to the other increases the mobility of the legislators in the benefited chambers. Televised sessions are one means by which the members of a chamber can increase their exposure and influence relative to the other chamber. The U.S. House is a case in point. The names of Gingrich and Walker became household names due to the C-SPAN coverage of the U.S. House. Before televised sessions they would have been two relatively unknown members of the minority party. The 1986 Senate resolutions on televised sessions (S.Res.2, S.Res.28, S.Res.29) were pushed mainly as measures to restore the visibility of the Senate. The opportunity to increase exposure relative to the other chamber supplies one incentive in favor of coverage.

Another factor that operates on a chamber more or less as a whole is the increased visibility relative to the executive branch. The executive branch has used television coverage to its advantage for a long time. This is especially true at the national level. Television news conferences, televised addresses, and constant news coverage of day to day activities of presidents have contributed to an increase in the power of the presidency relative to Congress. The public simply has had greater access to the views and proposals of presidents than it has had of