


 facultyprofile

Diana Evans

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By Jim H. Smith

In the partisan and often uncompromising world of politics, perhaps nothing is rarer, and therefore more valuable, than a balanced perspective. For that, let us turn our attention to Professor Diana Evans, who knows a thing or two about the workings of government in America.

An expert on interest groups and political action committees (PACs) and the role they play in congressional decision-making, Evans has published extensively in such journals as *Political Research Quarterly*, *Journal of Politics*, and the *American Journal of Political Science*. Her new book, *Greasing the Wheels: Using Pork Barrel Projects to Build Majority Coalitions in Congress*, is an investigation of a practice at once widely despised and at the same time nearly essential to success in American politics.

Published by Cambridge University Press,

Greasing the Wheels is filled with the kinds of accounts that are the building blocks of widespread public contempt of the political process: stories of political figures routinely “gaming” the system. Last year the Legislative Studies Section of the American Political Science Association bestowed upon *Greasing the Wheels* the prestigious Richard F. Fenno, Jr. Prize, affirming it as 2004’s best book in legislative studies.

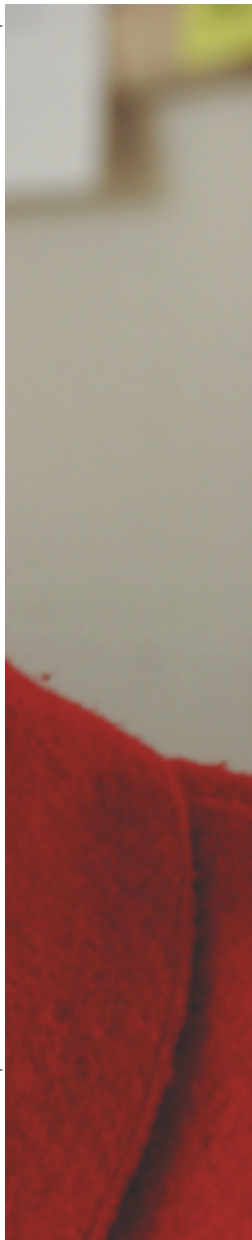
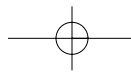
On top of those credentials, Evans has taught political science at Trinity since 1979. That means, among other things, that for more than two decades she has made her home in a state whose well-worn political paths, in the past few seasons, have sometimes been so littered with the wreckage of corruption as to make them nearly impassable.

Since it would be hard to find anyone who doesn’t harbor some doubts about

that state of government in our nation, surely someone with such wide-ranging credentials as Professor Evans can give us some insight into what’s wrong with politics. Her answer: a shortage of moderation.

“Corruption is nothing new,” says Evans. “We’ve always had political corruption. In fact, it was probably much worse 75 or 100 years ago. Certainly we should be concerned about it, but it’s not the political problem that should concern us most. What’s having the most negative impact on politics right now is polarization. We’re seeing more and more extremism within the parties—an increasing move to the outer edges, on both sides of the aisle. Part of that picture is an increasing disappearance of moderates.”

This trend, she says, does not mirror a comparable trend among the American people. While some segments of the pub-



PHOTOGRAPH BY NICK LACY

lic certainly represent the extremes of the political dialogue, she's quick to note that "As a whole, the public remains fairly moderate. So the question is one that is articulated colloquially on a daily basis all over America: 'Why isn't Congress representing our views?'"

It's a question, she says, that is at the core of understanding how politicians represent or fail to represent their constituents. And it's a question she often poses for her students.

Questions only political science can answer

Evans is not the product of a political family, but when she was growing up in the South, her parents encouraged her to be interested in politics and government. "We regularly discussed important issues in our home," she says.

By the time she enrolled at the University of North Carolina, she was wholly ready for the activism and intellectual ferment of the 1960s. "Students were passionately participating in political debate," she recalls, "and I found it very stimulating."

She began college thinking she wanted to go on to law school, but that changed when she signed up for an honors seminar that immersed her in literature from the 1950s about authoritarian personalities. As she became engaged in understanding the host of factors that contributed to the rise of the Nazi government in Germany—and cultural parallels that created a milieu ripe for the emergence of the McCarthy era in our own country—"I found the research process incredibly exciting," she says. More important, she "became riveted by questions that political science could answer."

And her academic fate was sealed. By 1972, she had completed her B.A. and master's degrees at the University of New Mexico. Eight

years later, she had earned her Ph.D. from the University of Rochester where fate brought her under the guidance of Professor Richard Fenno, the man after whom the prize she won last year was named.

Describing Fenno as "one of the founding fathers of modern congressional scholarship," Evans says, "He was a wonderful mentor and teacher, wholly inspiring." It was Fenno, she says, who helped her hone both her view of political science and what would become her teaching style.

Pork barreling gets things done

Extremism and the current trend toward polarized philosophies thrive on alienation and lack of information. To the degree that the public, no matter how moderate, feels no connection to the political process, zealots can be expected to seize power and employ it to their own ends.

For students and the general public alike, Evans says, understanding politics and assuming the "ownership" of it that is every American's birthright requires taking the time to understand its complexities. There are always simple answers to complex questions. "The correct answers are much harder to discern," she says. "It's those answers that I want students to seek."

In the introduction to *Greasing the Wheels*, for instance, she sets the stage for her exploration of what scholars call "distributive politics" by recounting a revealing anecdote about former U. S. Representative Dan Rostenkowski, whose congressional horse trading often involved "buying" approval for legislation he supported by packing it with "pork."

The Rostenkowski story seems to exemplify precisely the point of view of many Americans who disdain a Congress that seems remote and out of touch with middle-class realities. However, writes Evans, "The irony is this: Pork barreling,

despite its much maligned status, gets things done. To be sure, it is a practice that succeeds at a cost, but it is a cost that many political leaders are willing to pay in order to enact the broader public policies they favor." Whether the results are consistent with the preferences of the public is another question.

In her classes, Evans asks students to be very circumspect when they consider questions such as: What is the impact of PAC contributions on how members of Congress will vote?

"It's easy to look at a simple table of figures about which members of Congress took donations from which organizations, compare those findings with the legislators' records, and jump to simplistic conclusions about cause and effect," she says. "But consider this: Many organizations make donations to legislators whose voting records suggest that they agree with the organizations' goals. When you take the time and use the tools of social science to really research it, you often discover that the impact of money on legislative decisions is much less dramatic than you might imagine." Money has greater effects in other, less obvious ways.

Absent the tools to effectively evaluate competing political claims, ordinary citizens often fall back upon simplistic reasoning, says Evans. It is precisely why so many politicians make appeals to emotion and prejudice in their campaigns.

"I'm encouraged that many states are reintroducing civics as part of required public school curricula," she says. Recognizing that many of her students will not embark upon political careers, Evans says that she still feels a responsibility to help them become better informed citizens. And, she adds, "If I do nothing else, I want to teach students the fundamental operations of government and its relevance to their lives."

