



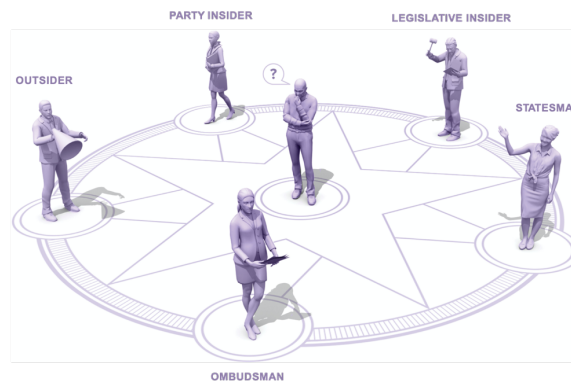
December 22, 2020

Congressional Freshmen: Choosing a Persona

Experienced members of Congress say that the key to being a new member is picking an overall strategy that plays to your strengths and weaknesses.

Based on conversations with veteran members and former congressional staff, the congressional management guide *Setting Course* suggests that there are five basic roles that members can adopt. Most members “major” in one role and “minor” in another — by focusing on just one or two roles, new members can start developing expertise and earn the respect of their more experienced colleagues.

Five major roles for members of Congress



PARTY INSIDER

GOALS Promote party ideology and gain party stature

TOOLS Party leadership, rules and process committees, national media, alliances with state and local officials

PERSONALITY Electorally focused, organized, ability to “spin” media

EXAMPLES Reps. Cheri Bustos (D-Ill.) and Greg Walden (R-Ore.)

LEGISLATIVE INSIDER

GOALS Pass legislation and gain committee stature

TOOLS Committee structure, coordination with leadership, alliances with industry interest groups

PERSONALITY Diplomatic, strategic, wonky, interpersonal skills

EXAMPLES Sen. Rob Portman (R-Ohio) Rep. Adam Smith (D-Wash.)

OMBUDSMAN

GOALS Serving district and gaining local visibility

TOOLS Federal grants, committees relevant to district, regional caucuses, local media

PERSONALITY Non-ideological, practical, electorally at-risk

EXAMPLES Sen. Joni Ernst (R-Iowa) Rep. Raúl Grijalva (D-Ariz.)

STATESMAN

GOALS Principled policy stands without alienating insiders

TOOLS National media, alliances with legislative and party insiders, committee structure

PERSONALITY “Big picture” ideas, media skills, averse to insider politics

EXAMPLES Rep. Josh Gottheimer (D-N.J.)

OUTSIDER

GOALS Influence process with bold criticism and honesty

TOOLS National media, ideological caucuses, alliances with advocacy groups and protest movements

PERSONALITY Independent, outspoken, excellent media skills

EXAMPLES Sen. Bernie Sanders (I-Vt.)



Committing to a particular role can help new members make key early decisions. For example, if a new member wishes to adopt the “ombudsman” role and specialize in steering projects and funds back to their home district, they might seek to join the Appropriations Committee so they can have a direct hand in writing key spending bills.

While members often adopt elements of multiple roles, not all roles are compatible with one another. For example, a member adopting the role of an “outsider” prone to publicly criticizing Congress, its leadership and even their colleagues would struggle to also take on the role of a “legislative insider” who must carefully strike deals and compromises with those same colleagues.

On the other hand, roles can sometimes be complementary. A member who wants to attract national media attention in the “statesman” role might worry about the effect that attention has on their standing back home. By minoring in the “ombudsman” role, the member can reinforce their popularity back home — but this dual specialization relies on the fact that “statesmen” avoid directly antagonizing leadership and colleagues whose cooperation is necessary for an “ombudsman” to succeed.

Source: Congressional Management Foundation, “Setting course: A congressional management guide”