

**Altruism in Congress:**  
**Allowing for an Alternative to**  
**The Single-minded Seekers of Reelection**

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**Abstract**

The majority of recent congressional scholarship assumes members of Congress are self-interested and investigates them accordingly, treating individual member's non-self-interested actions as aberrations. While scholars openly acknowledge the inaccuracy in treating all members of Congress as being principally self-serving, the field has failed to correct meaningfully this inaccurate portrayal. This seems to be in part due to a significant doubt in the ability of current research methods to identify accurately sincere altruism in members of Congress.

While this paper will not prove that altruism exists in Congress, it will contribute to the development of a methodological tool for detecting altruism in Congress. This paper will first define "political altruism" by blending concepts, theories, and findings from traditional and evolutionary biology regarding altruism with those from philosophy and psychology. Then, the paper will reconceptualize members of Congress as organisms living in the congressional "ecosystem." With these two new concepts as a foundation, this paper will conclude by constructing a framework and simple metric for detecting altruism in Congress by identifying altruistic behavior and "altruistic legislator" types. Thus, this paper will complete an essential initial step towards creating a research tool trusted to study empirically a sentiment as elusive as "altruism."

Altruism in Congress:  
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[Note: This paper is comprised of working sections of my PhD dissertation, a much larger project in which I will design new framework/method for detecting and measuring empirically altruism in members of Congress.]

Anecdotally, the typical response to the casual suggestion that members of the modern Congress can be altruistic is one filled with confusion and doubt. This is not surprising, as the American public “believe[s] members of Congress could be using their power for the good of the country, but instead use it for their own self-interested advantage” (Hibbing and Theiss-Morse 1995, 62). What *is* surprising, however, is the response one typically receives when making similar suggestions to political scientists. Those in the discipline consistently hold higher opinions of Congress than do average Americans,<sup>1</sup> yet seem less willing to accept that members of Congress can act altruistically. Instead, political scientists tend to be deeply skeptical, if not outright dismissive, of the notion that members may act in such an other-directed manner.

These anecdotal experiences with political scientists’ reactions to the idea of altruism in Congress begin to make more sense when one looks at how the field considers and investigates members of Congress. Mainstream social science literature on Congress offers little systematic assessment of the altruistic individual as a type of legislator. Rather, congressional scholars, echoing rational choice conceptions of utility maximization, assume that members of Congress are narrowly self-interested and investigate them accordingly, only examining a legislator’s apparently other-directed actions as rare and highly contingent on specific circumstances. While individual political scientists have offered insights about altruistic legislators and how to approach studying a sentiment as seemingly elusive as “altruism” (Barber 1967; Fenno 1973;

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<sup>1</sup> See Indiana University’s Center on Congress national public opinion polls at <http://congress.indiana.edu/surveys-congress>.

Fenno 1978; Fenno 2007; Canon 1990; Lascher, Kelman, and Kane 1993; Bessette 1994; Hall 1996; Burden 2007), their contributions to the discussion on altruistic legislators have been piecemeal and largely inadvertent.<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, even as scholars openly acknowledge inaccuracy in their representation of all members of Congress as being principally self-serving, the field overall still bases its work on the assumption that legislators will, unquestionably, prioritize their own narrowly understood interests over the interests of others. As a result, scholars and citizens are left with an incomplete and, I would argue, incorrect understanding of the realities of the institution and those who operate within it.

To fully understand members of Congress, and congressional action overall, the field must take seriously the legislator who prioritizes the interests of others over individual self-interest. In order to do so, researchers must have both a framework that allows – but does not require – members of Congress to be motivated by altruism and a method to reliably and accurately detect and measure occurrences of altruism in Congress. Such a framework and method can provide researchers with the opportunity to expand the understanding of altruism, Congress, and its members. This paper will complete an initial step towards this goal by proposing a preliminary framework and theoretical metric for investigating altruism in Congress based on various concepts and methods used by traditional and evolutionary biologists in their respective studies of altruism.

### Conceptualizations of Altruism

It appears that those who study altruism share in at least one research obstacle: Defining their key concept. Most researchers struggle to find a consensus within and across fields

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<sup>2</sup> See Appendix A for a literature review that discusses how political science studies have somewhat allowed for but not seriously studied altruism in members of Congress. This literature review will be part of the introductory chapter of my dissertation.

regarding the definition of “altruism.” “Altruism,” as a word, is associated with multiple clusters of concepts (Dixon 2008, 4), which powerfully suggests that there most likely is no perfect universal definition of the term. In fact, some argue that altruism has one distinct moral meaning used in everyday situations and a different, more technical meaning that is used in evolutionary biology discussions (See Dawkins 1989, 4; Sober and Wilson 1998, 6-8; Sober 2002; Dawkins 2006, 214-22). In its attempt to blend insights and methods from multiple fields in order to study human political actors, the present research begins with a working conceptualization of “political altruism” that reflects the definitions, descriptions, insights, and findings from various philosophical and research endeavors. There is an expectation that the concept will gain further clarification and illumination as this definition is applied to actual occurrences of altruism. For the moment, however, the conceptualizations of altruism below are a refined and coherent presentation of “what we mean when we say ‘altruism’” – fulfilling what Feinberg argues should be the “true goal of conceptual analysis” (Feinberg 1973, 2) – and provide the foundation necessary for proposing a preliminary framework and theoretical metric for investigating altruism in Congress.

### *Psychological/Philosophical*

Altruism is a self-sacrificing, other-regarding *sentiment*. The first formal English definition of “altruism” appeared in 1884 in the first publication of the *New English Dictionary*, which became the *Oxford English Dictionary* in 1894, as “Devotion to the welfare of others, regard for others, as a principle of action; opposed to egoism or selfishness” (Dixon 2008, 19-22). This secular and sentiment-focused definition aligns closely with what Auguste Comte – the French thinker who coined the word – believed it to mean (Dixon 2008, 4).

While egoism and altruism are not exact opposites,<sup>3</sup> the two can be understood as rival passions operating within the human psyche. In fact, Comte conceptualized altruism and egoism as warring sentiments (Comte 1858 and 1875-7), with Comte referring to altruism's difficult battle to dominate egoism within one's psyche as "the great problem of human life" (Comte quoted in Dixon 2008, 52). Adam Smith also saw this struggle within humans, arguing in his *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* that the "perfection of human nature" comes from restraining selfish affections and indulging in the benevolent ones (Smith 1982, I.i.5.5).

When victorious in this battle with egoism, altruism may serve as *motivation for behavior* in which an individual promotes another's interest over his or her own. Behavior resulting from such motivation is altruistic when actors choose to help others benefit even while knowing that doing so will most likely prevent them from benefiting personally. Thus, there are two dimensions to altruistic behavior: the actor is motivated to serve the interests of others over his or her personal interest, and, second, the actor willingly accepts the self-sacrifice required to do so. The accepting of potential sacrifice is an important requirement of altruistic behavior because the sacrifice necessarily places the interests of another ahead of the interests of the individual acting altruistically. Altruistic behavior may be action or inaction, depending on the circumstances surrounding the behavior.

Who ultimately benefits from altruistic behavior – the actor or another – does not indicate whether the behavior was motivated by altruism. Humans often fail to achieve the goals that

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<sup>3</sup> The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines "egoism" as "Regard to one's own interest, as the supreme guiding principle of action; systematic selfishness" and "selfishness" as "The condition or quality of being selfish; selfish disposition or behaviour; regard for one's own interest or happiness to the disregard of the well-being of others." Therefore, egoism and selfishness each are defined as reflecting the individual whose actions and attitudes are self-centered and self-serving regardless of how those actions affect others. While neither egoism nor selfishness requires an individual to consider the interests of others, altruism is defined by such consideration, thereby rendering neither the exact opposite of altruism.

motivate their actions, but such failure does not change their original intent. Behavior motivated by altruism is motivated by altruism, regardless of the consequences of such behavior. Accordingly, behavior that fulfills both dimensions of altruistic behavior is considered altruistic behavior, even if it does not lead to “the good” or ends up not actually benefiting others. Altruistic behavior that ultimately hurts others is unfortunate and possibly tragic, but it is altruistic nonetheless.

In the same vein, altruism is not always “good.” Although the theoretical concept of altruism is often exalted as the ultimate good or the definitive virtue, altruism can cause pain, burden, and harm (Grant 2011). Thus, this research does not need to define “good” in order to discuss or explore “altruism” because the two are not synonymous, the existence of one does not depend on the other, and the degree to which the two are related is contingent on the specific occurrence of altruism.

The motivation for engaging in altruistic behavior is not the “good feelings” that may accompany such behavior. The “good feelings” and subsequent happiness that may result from acting altruistically are a “happy accident.” Post (2007) refers to these feelings as an “indirect effect” of the altruistic behavior, arguing that such a “secondary effect does not constitute motivational selfishness” (3). Moreover, most people’s happiness does not entail making personal sacrifices to fulfilling an intrinsic need to further the interests of others (See Hill’s 1993 discussion of Kant’s *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, 9). Rather, an individual has a “natural preference ...for his own happiness above other people” (Smith 1982, II.ii.3.2).

It can therefore be expected that an altruistic individual is not always overly pleased with or welcoming of his or her altruism. The self-sacrifice involved in altruism, altruistic behavior, and being an altruistic individual is difficult because it is at odds with what individuals perceive

as their own interests. The fact that it is commonplace to see altruistic behavior, yet, at the same time, these commonplace actions are celebrated as “great acts” (Flescher and Worthen 2007, 5-6) suggests the somewhat universal recognition that it is difficult to engage in the self-sacrificing an individual must be prepared to assume when performing altruistic acts. The willingness to sacrifice required of altruistic behavior can be done unhappily or with non-vengeful resentment, as long as the individual voluntarily sacrifices for the benefit of others.

Similarly, an individual does not necessarily need to have compassion or sympathy for others in order to act altruistically. Hill (1993, 1, fn 1) notes that one will often act to benefit others because one believes it is the correct way to act. In such situations, altruism serves as a *principle for action*, motivating individuals to sacrifice their own interests in order to further others’ interests because it is “the right thing to do.” Frequently, those identified as highly altruistic explain that they acted altruistically because the situation called for such action (Hallie 1979, Oliner and Oliner 1988, Monroe, Barton, and Klingemann 1990, Monroe 1996). When asked about their altruistic behavior, they frequently responded with answers such as “What else could I do?” (Monroe, Barton, and Klingemann 1990) and stated that anyone would have done what they did (Oliner and Oliner 1988, Monroe 1996). It is clear that altruism is operating as a principle for action in these situations, creating a *duty* to act altruistically. Accordingly, those for whom altruism serves as a principle of action will be expected to behave altruistically. This is because duty persists across all situations, regardless of how the individual feels about the particulars of the circumstance (Hill 1993, 18).



## *Biological*

The psychological/philosophical understandings of altruism mostly hinge on an individual's *motivation* for acting, considering behavior and consequences as secondary features of altruism, if considered at all. Altruism within the various biological fields, conversely, focuses exclusively on behavior and consequences of behavior.<sup>4</sup>

Most definitions of altruism within various biological fields agree that altruism is a social behavior that increases the fitness of another (the recipient of the benefit) while reducing the fitness of the individual participating in the behavior (the actor). Beyond this basic agreement, no real consensus exists. This is at least partially due to the fact that not all researchers agree on how to measure impact on fitness – *e.g.* immediate v. lifelong impacts of fitness, direct v. indirect fitness, absolute v. relative fitness – which, in turn, makes difficult the process of agreeing on which behaviors constitute altruism (West, Griffin, and Gardner 2007).

Recognizing a need for consistency of concepts and terminology, West, Griffin, and Gardner (2007) wrote a mini-review article aimed at clearing up the “semantic confusion” in the evolutionary science fields surrounding the social behaviors of altruism, cooperation, selfishness, and the like. Here they define altruism as “a behavior which is costly to the actor and beneficial to the recipient...costs and benefits are defined on the basis of the lifetime direct fitness consequences of a behavior” (416). Within the evolutionary sciences, an individual's fitness is typically defined as the individual's number of adult offspring (Hamilton 1964a); however fitness is also sometimes understood as an individual's capacity to transmit genes to future generations (Masters 1989). Thus, altruism is a *behavior* which reduces the actor's lifetime

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<sup>4</sup> See Hamilton 1964a & 1964b for one of the formative conceptualizations of social behavior.

ability to contribute to the genepool of all future generations while increasing the ability of the recipient to make such a contribution.

The emphasis on contributing genes to future generations in the definition of fitness is understandable for the evolutionary sciences. The evolutionary science fields do not focus on the survival of an individual organism or a specific population, but rather study the survival of certain physical traits, systems, or behaviors from generation to generation to generation (Hamilton 1964a). Darwin's "natural selection" does not explain an individual organism surviving, but rather explains why certain traits or behaviors were selected to survive into subsequent generations. Because genes are the vehicles for transmitting an individual's traits and behaviors from one generation to the next, the survival of the gene in the genepool is survival of the individual-level trait, system, or behavior being studied (Swenson, Wilson, and Elias 2000). Therefore, although individuals too must survive long enough and well enough to pass on their genes, evolutionary biology does not measure an individual's fitness according to its ability to survive as an individual, living organism. Rather, an individual's fitness is understood as its capacity to aid in the survival of the trait, system, or behavior being studied. Individuals aid in such survival by passing on their genes.

Given this understanding of fitness, biological altruism can now be much more simply defined as a *behavior* which is costly to the actor and beneficial to the recipient in terms of lifetime direct fitness. Again, the costs and benefits of the individuals involved determines whether or not behavior is altruistic, not the motivation for behavior. Researchers within the biology and evolutionary sciences fields define other behaviors and distinguish them from altruism following the same criteria: A behavior which benefits both the actor and the recipient is

“mutual benefit,”<sup>5</sup> a behavior which benefits the actor but is costly to the recipient is “selfishness,” and a behavior which is costly to both the recipient and the actor is “spite” (West, Griffin, and Gardner 2007). Often this typology is depicted with the following table:

		<b>Recipient</b>	
		<b>Beneficial</b>	<b>Costly</b>
<b>Actor</b>	<b>Costly</b>	<u><b>Altruism</b></u> Costly to Actor Beneficial to Recipient	<u><b>Spite</b></u> Costly to Actor Costly to Recipient
	<b>Beneficial</b>	<u><b>Mutual Benefit</b></u> Beneficial to Actor Beneficial to Recipient	<u><b>Selfishness</b></u> Beneficial to Actor Costly to Recipient

*Political*

“Political altruism” is not a term used frequently in political science literature or most current research on politics. In fact, when beginning this project, a simple search of “political altruism” in a research database yielded zero results and the question, “Did you mean political nepotism?” Conversely, the concepts of selfishness and mutual benefit serve as the explanatory factors in much of the political science literature that examines collective behavior through a rational choice theoretical lens (Tilly 2001, 28). Similarly, some political science institutionalists have argued that seemingly altruistic behavior is actually the results of selfishness and mutual

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<sup>5</sup> Often behavior which benefits both the actor and the recipient is called “cooperation.” However, as West, Griffin, and Gardner (2007) highlight, the term cooperation has been used inconsistently in the evolutionary biology literature. Some researchers use cooperation to describe behavior that benefits the actor and the recipient in terms of direct fitness, some use the term to describe behavior that benefits the recipient without assessing its impact on the actor, and some use cooperation to describe behavior that is costly to the actor’s direct fitness but beneficial to the actor in another way (418). In order to keep definitions of key concepts as clear as possible, this research will use the term “mutual benefit” in lieu of “cooperation” when discussing behavior that benefits both the actor and recipient.

benefit coupled with particular societal, organization, and institutional arrangements (Tilly 2001; e.g. Greif 1994, Ostrom 1998).

When political altruism does appear in the literature, its conceptualization is typically unsatisfying. Researchers either define political altruism as some form of political mutual benefit – thereby removing a serious treatment of altruism from their study – or they apply understandings of psychological altruism in such a narrow context that their concept cannot be used in projects studying behavior in alternative settings. For example, Bhaduri and Barbier (2008b) assert that economically irrational transboundary water sharing can be explained by political altruism, but then describe such acts of political altruism as being based on a shared expectation of and willingness for a good political relationship in the future. In a different work Bhaduri and Barbier define political altruism as “a countries’ willingness to care about the welfare of others” (2008a, 30, fn 3), but then state that even countries behaving altruistically care more about their own benefits than the benefits of others. They explain, “The upstream country would never sacrifice an amount of water to the downstream country that could make the upstream country short of water (2008a, 30, fn 4). The expectation of future benefits or the prioritizing of one’s interests over that of others renders these behaviors examples of mutual benefit or selfishness, not altruism. Conversely, both Passy (2001) and Thalhammer (2001) have embraced the notion that altruism can exist within the political realm, but their respective definitions of political altruism are somewhat useless outside of their immediate area of study. Passy, studying solidarity movements, requires that political altruism be a collective behavior (2001, 6-7), while Thalhammer restricts her discussion of political altruism and political altruists to political activists (Thalhammer 2001). Consequentially, we are left with no conceptualization of political altruism that be used meaningfully in broader contexts.

Other scholars have broached political altruism when using psychological altruism – as opposed to biological or political altruism – in their various political research. A fair amount of these political psychology studies seek to understand how different personality types or traits can effect various forms of political behavior (e.g. Fowler and Kam 2007 investigate the impact of egoism, social identity, or altruism motivate political participation). Other works, such as Oliner (1991) apply the insights and findings of psychological/social studies of altruism to the political world. Here Oliner uses his work investigating altruism among those who saved Jewish people from Nazi Europe to propose a plan for increasing global peace. However well these projects may serve their respective research objectives, they fail to construct a concept unique to the political realm.

Consequently, I will define political altruism, recognizing that the definition must speak to both the political and the altruism components of this concept in a meaningful way. Broadly speaking, politics can be understood as the rules and processes which determine how societies manage their conflicts regarding overlapping and opposing interests. Thus, something is political when it is related to the societal rules, processes, or systems for managing clashing interests. The idea of social interaction and relationships is implicit in this definition, as is the understanding of different interests winning or losing according to how conflict is managed. Accordingly, political decisions benefit certain individuals or groups and are costly to other individuals or groups.

When conceptualizing altruism within the political arena, therefore, one needs to consider social relationships, costs, and benefits. Although costs and benefits will be defined within the context of the situation under immediate study, the relationship between actor and recipient (those impacted by behavior) can be defined more generally, according to a scheme that analyzes the costs and benefits of behavior very similarly to the one commonly used in evolutionary

biology. Masters constructs such an explanatory device with his research into social biology in his work that argues for the use of natural science insights to more adeptly understand politics and the state (1989, 155-7). He takes care here to state that this scheme comes from work in evolutionary biology, and, consequentially, these social relationships are based entirely on outcome of behavior, not actor motivation (157).

According to Masters' explanatory scheme, when an actor sacrifices his/her fitness to help another, the recipient should be understood as a nonkin individual because sacrifices that help close kin actually increase the actor's total fitness.<sup>6</sup> Put differently, behavior which may cost the actor in the short term, but which increases his fitness in the long term, should not be identified as "altruism." Rather, behavior which entails short term sacrifices, but which actually increases the actor's long term fitness, should be understood as selfish. When both the actor and the recipient benefit from the behavior, they are understood to be allies, and enemies are actors and recipients who both suffer from the actor's behavior. Finally, Master's identifies the relationship between actor and recipient in which the actor is acting selfishly as "kin." While I believe he identifies this relationship as "kin" because it reflects the long-term benefit an actor experiences when sacrificing for his/her kin, I find this label somewhat confusing. Accordingly, I will call this relationship "unequal associate." The following diagram shows these relationships applied to evolutionary biology's scheme for describing social behavior:

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<sup>6</sup> See Hamilton 1964a and 1964b for explication according to his "inclusive fitness" theory.

		<b>Recipient</b>	
		<b>Beneficial</b>	<b>Costly</b>
		<u><b>Altruism</b></u>	<u><b>Spite</b></u>
	<b>Costly</b>	<b>Costly to Actor</b> <b>Beneficial to Recipient</b>	<b>Costly to Actor</b> <b>Costly to Recipient</b>
<b>Actor</b>		<b>Relationship: Nonkin</b>	<b>Relationship: Enemy</b>
		<u><b>Mutual Benefit</b></u>	<u><b>Selfishness</b></u>
	<b>Beneficial</b>	<b>Beneficial to Actor</b> <b>Beneficial to Recipient</b>	<b>Beneficial to Actor</b> <b>Costly to Recipient</b>
		<b>Relationship: Ally</b>	<b>Relationship: Unequal Associate</b>

In order for these relationships to be useful when conceptualizing political altruism and other political behavior, the element of motivation for behavior must be incorporated. Because this researcher studies human actors, holding social relationships with other humans, operating within a human society, its key concept must include the definitive feature of humans – an individual’s psychology. To ignore or assume away motivation for behavior would remove from political altruism one of its most significant factors. Thus, conceptualizing political altruism entails blending the key component of psychological altruism – motivation or intent – with this explanatory scheme for relationship and behavior. Accordingly, political altruism is a motivation for behavior in which the political actor willingly sacrifices his/her benefits in order to benefit the recipient, with the actor having no expectation that the sacrifice will eventually increase his/her personal fitness. Such behavior most likely occurs between political actors whose fitness is not closely related or intertwined with respect to the particular behavior (a.k.a. nonkin).

Finally, the costs and benefits to fitness used to assess political altruism are related to an individual's ability to survive in the political realm. Here, surviving means continuing to exist as a meaningful political actor, with higher fitness helping the individual overcome whatever s/he faces in the effort to survive. Therefore, behavior that increases the amount of influence an individual wields or behavior that provides other types of support for the individual's political existence should be considered as resulting in an increase in fitness level. Additionally, threats to survival and impact to fitness felt by specific political events and behavior will vary according to the political role of the individual. For example, a political activist will face different obstacles in his/her effort to stay influential than the president, and a member of Congress must get reelected in order to survive while a political appointee must prove their competence and expertise to the incoming political appointer. Furthermore, some operating within the political realm have ambition to move into different positions in a different political environment than that which they currently hold. If a US Senator becomes President of the United States, one should not argue that the US Senator did not "survive" because he no longer exists within the Senate environment. Accordingly, the context of the situation being examined must serve as a foundation for the application of these related understandings of fitness and survival.

### The Congressional Ecosystem

As constructed in this research, the political altruism concept is a blend of psychological/philosophical altruism, biological altruism, and political realities facing individuals operating in a political environment. To construct a framework for studying political altruism in Congress, the congressional environment should be reconceptualized along the same lines. Thus, the congressional milieu will be conceptualized as an ecosystem, a word first used by Alfred George Taney in his 1935 publication in the scientific magazine *Ecology* (Golley



1993, 8). Taney intended this concept to be a holistic system comprised of living organisms, the physical environment comprised of non-living elements in which the organisms exist, and the complex interactions that take place amongst and between the two as organisms fight to survive (Golley 1993,8). The congressional ecosystem concept will be developed accordingly.

### *Survival and Fitness in the Ecosystem*

For a member of Congress, continuing to exist means getting reelected. Therefore, a member's survival requires that s/he gets reelected, fitness relates to his/her capacity to get reelected, and the costs and benefits resulting from behavior are effects on his/her capacity to get reelected.<sup>7</sup>

### *Living Organisms*

The environment members of Congress face is comprised of three main types of "living organisms": other members of Congress, non-member political actors, and constituents. Because members of Congress are the focal subject of this research, each member is the central individual in the congressional ecosystem. Therefore, constituents, other members of Congress, and non-member political actors will be defined as they relate to the individual member.

First, all members of Congress are a single species. Although the natural sciences have multiple definitions for species (Templeton 1992, 160-4), as an ecological concept, a species has some sort of "genetic, evolutionary, and ecological cohesiveness or boundness" (Brown 1995, 27). Thus, a species is a unit which interacts with other species as a unit in their shared environment (Mayr 1992, 17). This does not mean that individual members of a species do not

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<sup>7</sup> If individual members of Congress choose not to run for reelection, then this framework would most likely fail to lend insight into their altruistic or selfish behavior because their perceived costs and benefits to fitness would be different than those proposed here. However, using a different definition of survival when studying such members may prove a fruitful method for identifying different, additional manifestations of altruism and selfishness in Congress.

interact with individual members of other species. Rather, this describes the presence and influence of the species on the ecosystem as holistic unit. Many of Congress' constitutional duties require the First Branch to act as a unit, and its ability or inability to do so impacts the ecosystem. For example, in order to create a new law, both chambers must approve a bill containing identical language, and to remove high government officials from office, the House of Representatives impeaches the official while the Senate decides whether or not to remove the official (*US Constitution*).

This being said, the different chambers of Congress should be considered different populations or groups of the same species. Populations are groups of individuals who are of the same species, but which are geographically or otherwise separate from each other. Populations operating in different regions/environments may appear slightly different from each other or exhibit slightly different behavior, depending on the specific differences between their respective environments (Brown 1995, 137-155). The differences between the two chambers of Congress are well noted (e.g. Oleszek 2011, 26-31), with Woodrow Wilson recognizing that the “House and Senate are naturally unlike” (Wilson 1911, 87.) The chambers have different internal distributions of power, often clash over specific policies, and face very different electoral realities (Oleszek 2011, 28-33). While Senators have an easier time getting media coverage (Oleszek 2011, 29), House members have a higher rate of incumbency reelection (Oleszek 2011, 33). Thus, the chambers should be considered distinct populations of the same species.

Furthermore, members of Congress who belong to the same political party should be understood as kin. Biological kin are individuals who are related genetically, with closer kin sharing more of the same genes than distant kin. Therefore, biological kin are understood to have an indirect impact on each other's fitness – the higher the fitness of all kin, the higher the

chances the shared genetic material will survive in subsequent generations (Hamilton 1964a).<sup>8</sup> Although members of Congress who share a political party typically are not genetically related to each other, there is a sense of collective survival or inclusive fitness among them. As Cox and McCubbins (1993) explain, members of a political party contribute to and are affected by their party label as a brand. Finally, members of the same party within a single chamber should be considered closer kin than members of the same party residing in different chambers.

Other non-member political actors should be considered members of other species, sorting individual political actors into distinct species according to their common presence in the ecosystem. For instance, members of the bureaucracy may be considered one species and different blocks of interest groups may be considered a different species. Although these other species of political actors most likely can be divided into different populations, such delineation is not currently necessary due to the individual member of Congress being the focal subject of this research.

Finally, constituents can be thought of as host organisms. Although host organisms are also a different species, they should be conceptualized as a distinctive “other” because of the unique effect they have on member’s survival. At the most basic level, a member’s survival depends entirely on the constituents, similarly to how a parasite depends entirely on its host for survival. While many different political realities impact a member’s capacity to get reelected, the constituents have the final say at the ballot box. Just because members are dependent on their host organism, members should not necessarily be assumed to always be behaving selfishly toward constituents. Rather, host-parasite relationships are often symbiotic, with the two

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<sup>8</sup> This is the crux of “kin selection theory” (Maynard Smith 1964) and “inclusive fitness” (Hamilton 1964a and 1964b), two theories which have dominated evolutionary biology’s attempts to explain altruism.

organisms engaging in behavior that is beneficial to both of their fitness levels (Trivers 1971, Thrall et al. 2006). This seems especially likely when the two organisms have an expectation of reciprocal beneficial behavior in the future (Trivers 1971).

### *Physical Environment*

The various non-living elements of the ecosystem's physical environment influence how and if certain behaviors impact fitness, which, in turn, impacts an organism's behavior (Hess 2010, 36-7). From an ecology standpoint, non-living elements include things like climate and water PH levels as well as natural disasters or other events that may "shock" the ecosystem's existing balance. Within the congressional ecosystem, key non-living elements include the organization/power arrangement of the political party within the chamber, the committee system, and stochastic events.

The two main organizational structures and power arrangements within Congress that influence whether certain behaviors increase or decrease a member's fitness are the political party organization and legislative committee system. Political scientists generally agree that members are keenly aware of the impact both committee and party organization can have on their individual and collective electoral survival, arguing that members strategically structure these arrangements in order to serve their common needs (Rohde 1991, Krehbiel 1991, Cox and McCubbins 1993, Wawro 2000, Schickler 2001). Rohde (1991) proposed one of the theories currently dominant in the congressional studies field regarding members purposefully structuring the power arrangement between party leaders and rank-and-file member of their own party, often referred to as "conditional party government" theory. Similarly, Krehbiel (1991) provided the "information model" to explain members' multiple collective choices regarding committee system power structure and organization.

Beyond the consequences to behavior intended by members with their strategic structuring of the ecosystem, both political party and committee system organization may have unintended effects on the impact certain member behavior has on fitness. Both Sinclair (2006) and Mann and Ornstein (2006) provide rich historical accounts of how reforms to these power arrangements/structures led to the polarization within Congress that now vastly influences member fitness and their perception of the behavior that will most likely help or harm their ability to survive reelection.

Finally, stochastic events shape the environment in which members must operate. These events should be understood as random, typically unforeseen, and potentially shocking to the entire ecosystem. Therefore, events which change long-standing relationships or cause surprising power realignments – both within Congress and between members of Congress and non-members – can be understood as stochastic events. Although large, historical events, such as the bombing of Pearl Harbor, will undoubtedly affect the congressional ecosystem, smaller events can also be considered stochastic. For example, the 2001 Enron Scandal is believed to have pushed members of Congress who took campaign contributions from the corporation to support the Bi-Partisan Campaign Reform Act in order to cleanse their respective images of any semblance of greed or corruption (Cigler 2004, Farrar-Myers and Dwyre 2008).

#### Altruistic Legislator: The Behavior & Type

Although political altruism is a motivation for behavior, the conceptualization of members of Congress operating as living organisms in the congressional ecosystem helps identify behavior that likely indicates an altruistic motive. Given this conceptualization, what

does altruistic behavior look like in the congressional ecosystem? What is the “altruistic legislator” type?

*Altruistic Behavior*

Approaching Congress, its members, and other political actors as a complex and highly interdependent ecosystem allows researchers to approach members from two different angles when attempting to understand behavior. First, researchers can assess behavior according to the expected relationships rising from the pursuit of survival. Here again is the table that identifies social relationships according to evolutionary biology’s social behavior typology:

		<b>Recipient</b>	
		<b>Beneficial</b>	<b>Costly</b>
<b>Actor</b>	<b>Costly</b>	<u><b>Altruism</b></u>	<u><b>Spite</b></u>
		<b>Costly to Actor</b> <b>Beneficial to Recipient</b>	<b>Costly to Actor</b> <b>Costly to Recipient</b>
		<b>Relationship: Nonkin</b>	<b>Relationship: Enemy</b>
	<b>Beneficial</b>	<u><b>Mutual Benefit</b></u>	<u><b>Selfishness</b></u>
		<b>Beneficial to Actor</b> <b>Beneficial to Recipient</b>	<b>Beneficial to Actor</b> <b>Costly to Recipient</b>
		<b>Relationship: Ally</b>	<b>Relationship: Unequal Associate</b>

Following the above conceptualization of the congressional ecosystem, members of Congress are predisposed to hold certain relationships with other individuals. The more entangled a member’s survival is with another individual, the more likely a member seeking survival will act to achieve a mutual benefit. Thus, we expect most behavior between party members – kin, whose mutual survival is highly intertwined – to be mutually beneficial. Similarly, we would expect a member to behave selfishly when the cost is felt by an individual

whose survival is most likely not related to the member's survival, such as the "other species" bureaucrats. This does not mean that members will exhibit selfishness with other species and act to achieve a mutual benefit with kin. Rather, this explanatory scheme helps us identify the expected relationship between individuals, given the various roles they play in the ecosystem.

Once the expected relationships have been identified, one can start to look at other contextual realities specific to the behavior to gain further insight. Behaviors which are contrary to that which we expect warrant especially close scrutiny. For instance, if a Democratic senator worked closely with a Republican president on the president's key legislative issue, we would most likely examine their shared work more closely as mutually beneficial behavior would not be expected between organisms so distant in any relation. Accordingly, researchers should note this behavior as being potentially altruistic and investigate closely the various pressures and realities coming from elements in the physical environment as well as other relationships/individuals also operating in the ecosystem. Is this behavior occurring in the wake of a stochastic event? Will this behavior be helpful for all Democrats come next election? Does this help constituents, even though it hurts the senator's reelection fitness? By starting the assessment of behavior with expected relationships, we will be forced to explain self-interest where it seems unnatural as opposed to using assumed self-interest to explain behavior.

Finally, at times it may be difficult to decipher the costs and benefits to fitness associated with a member's behavior. However, researchers are relatively confident that members understand their time to be an extremely valuable, if not their most valuable, resource (Clapp 1963, 104-107). Therefore, how a member spends his/her time may provide insight into whose fitness the member intends on increasing. If a member constantly spends his/her time working on

a specific policy issue, than whoever benefits from that policy issue is most likely the intended beneficiary.

Given this, what does altruistic behavior look like in the congressional ecosystem? In general, altruistic behavior is behavior which negatively impacts the member's reelection survival while benefiting other individuals. Such behavior can take two main forms: (1) Behavior that benefits others and does not increase a member's fitness, but takes time away from other activities that s/he may otherwise be performing to increase fitness and (2) behavior that benefits others while decreasing a member's fitness.

The first form of altruistic behavior is often seen when constituents and other political actors are disinterested in the member's particular behavior. An example of such behavior is spending time as an active member of Congress' Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission. Members of the commission hold hearings, give floor speeches, meet with various congressional and executive staffers, and engage in other activities to "promote, defend and advocate internationally recognized human rights norms in a nonpartisan manner, both within and outside of Congress, as enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and other relevant human rights instruments" (Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission). Identifying a relationship here is difficult, as arguably promoting and defending international human rights benefits all individuals in the ecosystem equally. Yet, spending time to promote and defend international human rights most likely does not help a member get reelected in any meaningful way and certainly takes time that may be used to increase the member's reelection fitness. Thus, this behavior decreases a member's fitness in the name of promoting the human rights of all, and can, consequently be identified as altruistic.



The long struggle to pass the Bi-Partisan Campaign Reform Act (BCRA) illustrates nicely the second form of altruistic behavior. The sponsors of the bill – John McCain (R-AZ) and Russell Feingold (D-WI) in the Senate and Christopher Shays (R-CT) and Martin T. Meehan (D-MA) in the House – fought for the bill’s passage through three Congresses: the 105th, 106th and 107th (Farrar-Myers and Dwyre 2008, 28-86). Even though the bill eventually gained a majority support in both chambers (Corrado 2003, 29), the Republican Party leadership remained vehemently opposed to the bill (Dwyre and Farrar-Myers 2001, 39). Focusing on Representative Chris Shays (R-CT), we see a member defy the powerful House Republican Party leadership for three congressional sessions in order to pass BCRA (Farrar-Myers and Dwyre 2008), while the public was relatively ambivalent about the passage of the bill until the 107<sup>th</sup> Congress (Corrado 2003, Cigler 2004). Shays should have been naturally inclined to cooperate with his party, thereby behaving in a mutually beneficial way with his kin, but instead faced the environment of a powerful and fervently opposed House leadership. Thus, he decreased his fitness. Moreover, Shays did this to pass legislation in the interest of the nation, while his constituents remained mostly disinterested. Accordingly, his behavior can be identified as altruistic.

Similarly, Senator Russ Feingold (D-WI) boldly ignored his party and constituency when he cast the sole Democratic vote against dismissing the impeachment case against President Bill Clinton before hearing all of the evidence (US Congress 1999). The expected behavior would be to side with his party (mutually beneficial behavior with kin) and listen to his constituents (mutual benefit or selfish behavior with host), but he did neither. Reflecting on that particular vote, Senator Feingold explained he was determined to keep politics out of his decision, with his oath to uphold the Constitution making him “mindful of the duty we bore to the American people, to the Constitution, and to history” (Feingold 2003, 2). He finished his reflection with, “I

have often thought that the very worst job in Washington, D.C. or Wisconsin was answering the phones in my office after I cast that vote” (Feingold 2003, 2). Feingold acted to benefit others while decreasing his fitness, thereby making his behavior altruistic.

### *The Altruistic Legislator*

Because members recognize that time is their most valuable resource, using this resource to help others at a cost to oneself is itself altruistic behavior. However, spending more time engaging in altruistic behavior than any other type of behavior establishes a pattern of altruistic behavior. Accordingly, an altruistic legislator is a member who spends more time engaging in altruistic behavior than any other type of behavior.

A member of Congress need not engage in altruistic behavior at all times in order to be understood as an altruistic legislator. However, because altruism seems to dominate egoism much more regularly in certain individuals than others (Flescher and Worthen 2007, 46-7), it seems that an inclination towards altruism is typical or normal for certain individuals. Comte noted this in his classification scheme when labeling the three altruism motors and the seven egoism motors as “Propensities, when active; feelings, when passive” (Comte 1875-7, i, opposite 594). As a *propensity*, altruism appears commonly in an individual as a typical attitude and regularly motivates the individual’s behavior, thereby making altruism a character trait of that individual. In fact, after roughly a decade of focused work and reflection on the subject, James Q. Wilson concluded that one of the two components of “good character” is “a willingness to take importantly into account the rights, needs, and feelings of others” (Wilson 1991, 5).

Finally, because political altruism requires that an actor be motivated to sacrifice their own fitness to benefit others, researchers should verify that altruistic *behavior* is in fact real *altruism*. This most likely entails some sort of interview or other corroborating process, which

should be explored and developed in future research. Although such authentication of altruism is required to confidently identify genuine altruism, researchers can begin to identify altruistic behavior with the framework and theoretical metric described in this research.

### Implications/Conclusion

The implications from this framework and theoretical metric are two-fold. First, the political environment members of Congress face is much more nuanced, complex, and compound than is portrayed by a large portion of the current scholarship on Congress. Members' world is not comprised of simple, linear relationships. Rather, members must navigate an environment comprised of countless, intertwined relationships, each of which has a nature contingent on the much broader and equally complicated congressional milieu of the minute. While there is a certain degree of stability within the congressional ecosystem, the system will also always be adapting to those working within it, with those working within it then adapting to the system. Furthermore, Congress and its members will always be vulnerable to the changes caused by stochastic events, and these changes may directly or indirectly influence the fitness effects associated with member behavior. By approaching Congress as an evolving ecosystem and members as individuals engaged in multiple levels of social behavior with various types of actors, this research aims at highlighting the complexity of serving in Congress as well as demonstrating that the complexity need not be assumed away in order to study seriously multiple types of member behavior.

Secondly, this research calls for us to return the "human" to members' "human nature." Many of the methods currently employed by congressional scholars insist that members make strategic calculations about behavior according to their self-interest, ordered preference, and known information. While members of Congress may make strategic decisions sometimes, they

do not make such decisions all the time. This does not make their decisions arbitrary or unreasonable, however. Gigerenzer (2007) demonstrates that humans frequently make intelligent, reasoned decision according to intuition or “gut feelings.” Members typically have reasons for what they do, and by examining their reasons – not their rationality – we can begin to expand our knowledge of Congress, its members, and its actions beyond that bounded by our current methodological and theoretical proclivities.

Finally, by using this research’s suggested framework and metric and putting the human back in members’ human nature, we may finally begin to identify altruism as it regularly exists in Congress. Sometimes human behavior is driven by calculated self-interest and sometimes, as is the case with altruism, behavior is inspired by the human tendency towards benevolence. E. O. Wilson calls the internal struggle between benevolence and selfishness felt by all humans our “human condition,” and asserts that this struggle is what makes us human (Wilson 2011). By allowing members’ to engage in social behavior that may be motivated by self-interest but also may be motivated by a desire to help others, the framework and metric proposed by this research allows for – but does not require – altruism in Congress.

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