CHAPTER 1

The Argument in Brief

My argument rests on the proposition that the behavior and institutional capacity of Congress is shaped by the thought processes of its members. This generalization is a staple of the congressional literature, but few analysts in recent years have been able to examine in depth the thinking of legislators in Washington.[1] Lawmakers are frequently too busy to bother with lengthy interviews. Yet there is no better way to understand their thinking than to probe it with members directly. This book analyzes the congressional response to the "deficit decade" of the 1980s through a depiction of thought processes articulated by the lawmakers themselves.

Thoughts produce actions, but how are thoughts influenced? Legislators act upon conscious conclusions when deciding how to vote on bills. The knowledge of another actor's preferences and willingness to accede to them is a direct influence upon their voting choices. A lawmaker may respond favorably to a plea from important constituency interests or to the persuasion of a popular president of his or her party, for example. But behavior is also shaped by structuring the available knowledge or alternatives. Fiscal committees first lay the contours of the issue at hand. The House leadership then can manipulate floor procedures to encourage a desired outcome by barring consideration of a popular alternative. Staff and professional analysts as well as the "political stratum" of elite opinion-makers in Washington and the national media may define for legislators the problem to be solved and appropriate means for solving it.[2] This influence is more indirect in that legislators are not necessarily aware of the actions taken to shape their choices, nor do they always take a detached and critical view of the Washington "conventional wisdom" surrounding the votes they must cast. Understanding congressional thinking requires recognition of the influences that legislators do not see as well.

One topic that has occupied congressional thoughts far more than in previous decades is the budget. Large deficits and the political difficulties trailing in their wake often consumed the legislative agenda. In some sessions during the 1980s, over half of the roll-call votes in both the House and the Senate related to the budget.[3] That fiscal matters dominated the congressional agenda during this time testifies to the importance of budget thinking to institutional behavior. Students of Congress have increased their scrutiny of the budget process correspondingly. Most of these works concerned themselves with explaining how the process operated or the relationships between process and fiscal policy results.[4]

The focus here is a bit different. I explore the policy and political thinking of legislators about budget questions in order to better understand why Congress would undertake major policy departures in 1981 but fail to cope adequately with their consequences in subsequent years. No claim is made to broader explanation of congressional behavior, but this work has its share of implications for decision-making beyond the fiscal policy arena. This chapter introduces a framework for understanding how legislators approach budget issues, presenting general themes that are empirically documented in greater detail later in the book.

First, what are "budget issues"? A broad definition would include most of the consequential legislation Congress passes—budget resolutions, reconciliation, authorization, and appropriation bills. Though all such measures receive attention here, the primary focus concerns budget resolutions and reconciliation bills, because they can set parameters for more specific spending decisions.[5] Resolutions set targets for spending in each of eighteen "functions" or policy categories within the federal budget and specify a minimum level of revenues. Reconciliation bills contain changes in authorization and appropriations levels to enforce the discipline of the resolution. For this reason, John Gilmour terms them a "centerpiece" of the budget process.[6] Aggregative decisions of this sort make possible sweeping fiscal changes, allowing the budget process to serve as a mechanism for Congress to work its will in fiscal policy.

The 1980s witnessed the decline of resolutions and reconciliation as effective disciplines on congressional spending.[7] After an impressive demonstration of these measures' ability to constrain authorizations and appropriations in 1981, Congress began to delay resolutions and reconciliation because it could not decide what to do about fiscal policy in the face of large deficits. The legislature was forced to abandon the "big picture" and scrap instead over the specifics of spending with a recalcitrant White House. The parts of budgeting overwhelmed the problem as a whole. Why did this happen? An explanation will benefit from a thorough study of legislative thinking during this period. A framework of policy thinking on budget issues is identifiable.

All members of the House and Senate, with varying degrees of analytical sophistication, approach budget issues from a perspective encompassing three elements: (1) long-standing conceptions of the proper "role of government" in the economy, involving an "economic ideology" about the appropriate degree of government action in the allocation of public goods, distribution of economic rewards, and stabilization of macroeconomic cycles[8]; (2) a "practical theory" of how the economy works, both nationally and in their constituencies, and how it will perform in the future; and (3) a political estimation of the direction and intensity of the preferences of those who have important effects upon the attainment of member goals—constituents, party leaders, interest groups, colleagues, and the president. Legislators' goals motivate them to work through this framework to a decision on budget measures. Goals are defined here as three: satisfying constituents, making good public policy, and attaining influence within Washington.[9] Members' substantive fiscal convictions, deriving from ideology and practical theories, are an important part of the process of political estimation because they define "good policy."

This "political economy" of legislators encompasses the direct influences upon legislative behavior. As lawmakers confront budget matters, various components of this mental framework become controlling upon behavior, as is noted later in this chapter and in the next. Direct influences on voting operate much as John Kingdon suggested in his earlier work on voting decisions.[10] Indirect influences become important to the extent that they manipulate aspects of members' political economy. For example, the tremulousness of economic analysts and Washington elites over deficits drives lawmakers to worry about stabilization. Committees take the allocative and distributive beliefs of members into account when shaping budget bills. Party leaders do the same when scheduling alternatives for floor vote.

What follows is a schematic overview of legislators' political economy. The framework derives from interviews with 113 Representatives and Senators conducted from 1985 to 1987, and a survey in 1986 of 67 Senate and 253 House legislative assistants concerning their legislators' budget voting and fiscal views.[11] Chapter 2 examines the substantive differences in congressional political economy in more depth.

In discussing political economy, it is first necessary to recall a hoary commonplace about our national legislators. The introductory student of Congress is often told that the institution is representative in both the good and bad senses of that word; that it has its share of saints, sinners, cerebrals, and dolts. So it is with fiscal policy. Some legislators can address this policy area with the sophistication of a professional economist (such as Senator Phil Gramm of Texas and Representative Jim Moody of Wisconsin), while others are hard pressed to articulate views beyond those found in the most banal of partisan discussions. The average legislator occupies a position somewhere between these extremes, that of the educated layperson in fiscal debate. Representatives and Senators are usually quick to indicate the limits of their knowledge ("I'm no economist," many say, usually with an accompanying "Thank God!") and to explain how they arrive at decisions within these limits. Lawmakers' political economy on budget issues is defined by such limits.

ECONOMIC IDEOLOGY

Any ideological construct has a constraining function. It serves to guide an individual in linking "beliefs, whether beliefs about facts or values, and attitudes, defined as predispositions to act in certain ways toward certain sets of objects or events, with behavior."[12] The economic ideology of legislators reveals much about the course of congressional policy decisions in the 1980s. Talk with members in their offices or in cloakrooms, read the floor debates on budget resolutions and reconciliation bills, and the contours of ideology become apparent. Members continually address the three elements of fiscal policy identified some time ago by Richard Musgrave: allocation, distribution, and stabilization.[13] The particular problems within each of these elements varies across time and among individuals, but fiscal thinking in the institution receives its structure from these ideas.

Allocation is the provision of "public" or "social" goods by the government—that is, the provision of goods that cannot be provided by the market due to a variety of market failures (such as imperfect information or externalities).[14] Though members, according to James Moody (D-Wis.), an economist, "do not know what these terms mean in the abstract, they do understand them when you explain them, and realize that they deal with these problems all the time." The annual congressional debate about spending priorities in a budget resolution is concerned centrally with matters of allocation. The perennial argument about "guns and butter" involves which public goods deserve allocation and in what amounts. More for defense? For environmental protection? For public works?

A related allocational issue in Congress concerns the overall size of the government in the economy. This is the definition of "allocation" incorporated by Weatherford and McDonnell in their concept of economic ideology.[15] Conservative Democrats and Republicans were likely to be preoccupied with whether the national government consumes too large a share of the Gross National Product. Ronald Reagan brought to the budget battles of the 1980s the strong conviction that the size of government was far too large: "When government starts to take more than 25 percent of the economy, that's when the trouble starts. Well, we zoomed above that a long time ago. That's how we got in this economic mess. We can't solve it with more tax and spend."[16] More liberal Democrats did not view this number as a totem, but focused instead, in the words of Representative Major Owens (D-N.Y.), upon "programs and the need to help people, not some meaningless percentage."

A second element of economic ideology is the long-controversial issue of redistribution, or, as labeled by Musgrave and Musgrave, distribution: "The adjustment of the distribution of income and wealth to assure conformance with what society considers a fair or just distribution."[17] Democrats in the 1980s made this their theme when they decried the lack of "fairness" in the fiscal approach of the Reagan and Bush administrations. This conviction dovetailed nicely with the political imperative of supporting programs that had the approval of their supporting electoral coalitions back home. In other words, redistributive programs—Social Security foremost among them—constituted a line of battle on which Democrats usually held firm. Republicans after the Reagan rout in 1981 were forced to rhetorically "me too" on this matter. Even the White House in the midst of the 1981 budget battle had to claim that the "safety net" of programs for the "truly needy" would be kept intact. Democrats built strong defensive fortifications on this front. Ideology and politics demanded it.

One avenue of Republican attack that produced some Democratic defections involved the issue of "incentives." Southern Democrats, particularly the members of the Conservative Democratic Forum in the House, resembled Republicans in wanting more incentives in tax and welfare programs. Representative Marvin Leath (D-Tex.), an important budget leader for more conservative Democrats in the 1980s, endorsed a flat tax and fellow budget warrior Charles Stenholm (D-Tex.) argued that his party must become more "incentive- and opportunity-oriented." The problem of reconciling the differing attitudes within the Democratic party on allocation and distribution in the face of a popular conservative president produced partisan calamity for Democratic congressional leaders in the early 1980s.[18]

The stable basis of economic ideology in Congress concerns allocation and distribution. These are legislators' core ideological beliefs because they concern particular programs, the substantive building blocks of the legislative process. As a voting record is established, constituents come to identify lawmakers with an allocative and distributive program philosophy. Personally and politically, these two dimensions of ideology anchor most members' fiscal attitudes. Legislators know their colleagues' allocative and distributive views well and can identify them readily.

The most abstruse and variable concern of economic ideology for legislators is that of economic stabilization, "the use of budget policy as a means of providing high employment, a reasonable level of price stability, and an appropriate rate of economic growth."[19] Musgrave's definition suggests active fiscal intervention by government to smooth short-term fluctuations in the economy. Though most Democrats have no problem endorsing such efforts, more conservative legislators object to this sort of budget strategy. They hold, consistent with a minimalist allocation view, that short-term stabilization by government cannot be successful; that limited government is necessary for a vibrant market economy.

But this is an argument over strategy; over what long-term approach to stabilization is best to pursue. Most budget votes in contrast concern tactical—short-term—stabilization questions. Regardless of their theoretical declarations about how to manage the economy, both liberal and conservative legislators cast votes believing that discretionary stabilization policy does matter to them politically. Determining how fiscal choices might alter conditions in the nation and therefore back home is one way to safeguard the economic base of one's district, a prime imperative for lawmakers.[20] The vast majority in Congress in practice treat the budget as a valuable stabilization tool, regardless of their allocative beliefs. The prevalence of this "tactical stabilization consensus" is born of a need to keep the economy thriving and a belief that congressional fiscal decisions make a difference in this.

While this consensus seems a tidy concept, the 1980s produced nothing but confusion about the macroeconomic effects of deficits. Economists and the "political stratum" blamed deficits for inflation, the high dollar, high interest rates, the trade deficits, low market confidence, among other evils. White and Wildavksy note that "while public discourse so often claimed national interest in avoiding the evident evils of deficits, most assertions about how the economy works, including assertions about the deficit, proved inaccurate."[21] Given this cacophony, what was a legislator to do? Most believed some sort of deficit reduction was necessary, but consensus on a number became the big challenge each year. Gramm-Rudman-Hollings reduced the difficulty of the deficit target only slightly, once it became clear Congress would not adhere seriously to the law's targets. Ultimately, the economy provided the answer. No big drop, so no big action by Congress. Such was the practical extent of the congressional stabilization consensus during the 1980s.

Legislators have a clear sense of a "political business cycle"[22] linking the results of economic events and electoral outcomes. This leads them, regardless of their professed economic ideology, to view decisions about fiscal policy in terms of immediate macroeconomic impacts. Broader discussions of stabilization strategy do not figure prominently in legislative life. Such topics require members to think big, while their everyday legislative routines mandate that they focus upon specific parts of the fiscal whole. Unlike allocation and distribution, stabilization deals primarily with the budget as an aggregate, not as a collection of specific programs involving particular committee jurisdictions and constituent clients. Given their committee and electoral concerns, legislators tend to be more program- than aggregate-oriented about budgeting.[23] The "gut" issues of budgeting do not concern esoterica such as Keynesian versus monetarist interpretations of fiscal policy. Rather they involve the conflict resulting when allocation and distribution preferences do not comport with the simple tactical imperative of deficit reduction. As Jim Moody (D-Wis.) put it: "At the core of the deficit issue are gut-wrenching political decisions. Only rudimentary ideas about our general fiscal direction are necessary to solve it."

Inevitably in budgeting, tensions develop between particular elements of a legislator's economic ideology, forcing members to contemplate the consistency of their stabilization, distribution, and allocation goals. New deficit reduction imperatives caused conflict between stabilization desires and both the allocational and distributional ends of lawmakers. The discomfort for legislators grew more acute because the electoral and substantive justifications for program concerns clashed with a signal problem for the "political stratum"—the overall deficit. These cross pressures explain much of the congressional muddle as the deficits grew during the first half of the decade.[24]

PRACTICAL THEORIES

Authority over fiscal policy requires that legislators comprehend the reasons for economic events. A particular budget must be considered in terms of its immediate cyclical impact, and this necessitates understanding what is transpiring in the economy. Congressional decisions turn upon the quality of economic prognostication. What will economic conditions be during the year when this budget is in place? Answers rest upon legislators' premises concerning the nature and origin of current economic conditions.

A steady stream of information flows to members about the economy.[25] What would motivate a legislator to clarify one's theories? All shared the need to be able to prepare a brief explanation for constituent consumption. Specialists on the fiscal committees (Ways and Means, Finance, Appropriations, and Budget) had to follow the economy more carefully to be on top of their jobs. But even they could rely heavily on staff for analysis, beyond whatever explanations would suffice for constituent consumption. Ultimately, the only members who monitor the economy analytically are those who bring adequate intellectual equipment with them when they are sworn into office. Representative Willis Gradison (R-Ohio), one such member (Harvard MBA), commented that "you really have to rely upon your intellectual capital once you get here. You just don't have time to learn that many new concepts and mental approaches. If you don't come here with the intellectual resources, you usually have to rely on others to furnish them for you."

The economy back home is the focus of the most extensively contemplated "practical theory" in the minds of lawmakers. Members have a detailed exposure to district conditions and an occupational motivation to track them that simply outstrips their concern and knowledge about national trends. This is not to say that they are ignorant about national conditions, or that their simplifications concerning them are inappropriate for the decisions they must make. During a decade when most of the conventional wisdom about deficits turned out to be wrong, knowledge of the economy did not necessarily help legislators to do the right thing.

The substance of budget debates encompasses economic predictions alongside ideological argumentation that primarily concerns questions of program priorities: How much for defense, Medicare, environmental protection, the poor? Representative Ralph Regula (R-Ohio) explained the emphasis on program spending: "Because we have a micro, micro, micro focus in Congress. We are used to dealing with programs. That's what we work with. The big picture dissolves into a budget of smaller concerns." Regula supplies an important explanation for the decline of "big picture" aggregative measures like resolutions and reconciliation during the course of the decade. As the economy perked along, program defense intensified, making deficit politics intractable. Gramm-Rudman-Hollings was born out of the frustration resulting from just this tendency.[26]

POLITICAL INFLUENCES

Given that complex voting situations occur frequently in congressional budgeting, what role do other sorts of influences—such as the political pressures of constituents, president, and interest groups—play in choices on the floor? They are a staple of much political science research on congressional voting,[27] and represent the foundation of a model of behavior accepted by many students of the legislature, identified by Arthur Maass as "partisan mutual adjustment."[28] In this framework, Congress is understood as primarily performing the function of aggregating "particular interests" and "coordinating through partisan mutual adjustment the opinions that have been articulated by others in support of their particular interests."[29] This conception directs attention away from the substantive concerns of legislators in order to generalize about the process by which decisions are made.

A complete picture of Congress and budget-making in the 1980s requires acknowledgment that legislators do evidence serious concern with the "common good."[30] The question regarding budget decision-making is, when? Most of the remainder of this book is devoted to an answer. I begin by considering how policy is important when legislators vote on the budget.

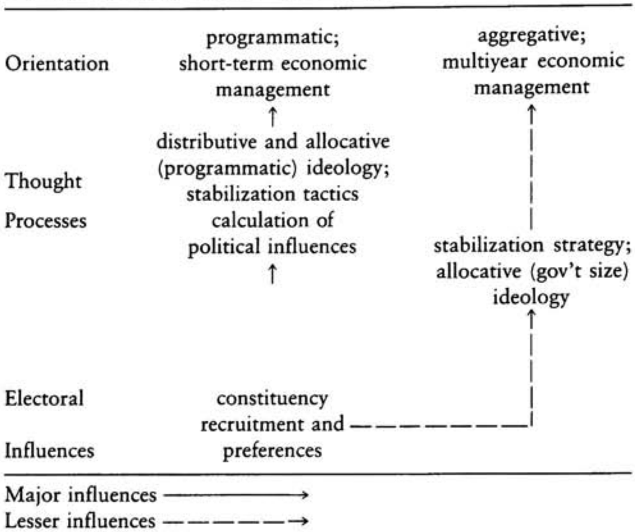
Admittedly the sort of pure politics of partisan mutual adjustment occurs at times in budget voting, but policy concerns are central both in explaining budget voting and understanding the onset of the deficit problem.[31] The task then is to fit "partisan mutual adjustment" into the context of budget decision-making. Political influences do affect both the weighting and substance of ideology and practical theories in budget resolution and reconciliation votes. On the "philosophical votes"—budget resolutions—their influence tends to be indirect; a lawmaker's general ideological orientation tends to control the choice. In more program-specific reconciliation and appropriations voting, though, political influences tend to have more pronounced effects upon decisions.

Perhaps the best way to examine the political influences on resolution, reconciliation, and appropriations voting is to consider them in terms of John Kingdon's formulation of the "field of forces" in the mind of a legislator deciding how to vote.[32] The most important force in this "field" on resolution votes is that of personal convictions, as will be noted more fully in the next chapter.[33] Fully 95 percent of the nonspecialist legislators I interviewed about their resolution vote in 1986 mentioned that personal convictions were highly important in helping them to make up their minds.[34] These convictions include both economic ideology and practical theories about the economy.[35]

When are particular interests most likely to succeed in finding a receptive audience among legislators? Reconciliation and appropriations bills are the venue for lawmakers to service these needs.[36] Members commonly distinguished between the overall vote that is involved in a budget resolution and the "real teeth of the budget process," as Senator William Proxmire (D-Wis.) put it, the reconciliation bill.[37] After 1981 the teeth lost much of their bite. Reconciliation was used only to increase revenues or reduce entitlement spending to reduce the deficit at the margin. The 1990 deficit reduction compromise, which at long last promised more than marginal reductions in red ink, likewise relied mainly on entitlement cuts and tax increases. Allen Schick notes that for most of the 1980s, reconciliation bills were vehicles for all sorts of extraneous program-related legislation.[38] In reconciliation and appropriations bills, according to Rep. Bill Richardson, (D-N. Mex.): "the whole situation is more political. You deal with issues of spending that are not dealt with elsewhere and you get your shots at saving your programs. I tend to look at it more in terms of narrow self-interest." Other legislators mentioned them as opportunities to "help out your programs," "to do some good for your own priorities," and the like.

Certain durable relationships between legislator attitudes and political influences are evident throughout the tumult of budgeting in the 1980s. Figure 1.1 introduces these relationships, with elaboration in depth to follow in the next chapter. Legislators have ideological and political reasons for supporting particular programs, leading them to emphasize some parts of the budget over others. Much of this motivation is rooted in their constituency,

FIGURE 1.1 Electoral Influences upon Congressional Fiscal Thinking



producing a strong and consistent pull in given programmatic directions. Stabilization tactics—attempts to manage the economy for prosperity and electoral reward in the short term—also are influenced strongly by the fear of electoral reprisal back home. Concern with the fiscal situation as a whole, in contrast, involves more long-term stabilization strategies and, to a lesser extent, "macroallocation" (size of government), as well as practical theories about the course of the economy. Constituency recruitment plays a less prominent role in the formulation of strategic stabilization theories. Legislative views on these matters can be shaped much more by the "political stratum"—Washington policy circles and the national media—that reflects their opinions.

The story of the 1980s in congressional budgeting is, in terms of the diagram, that of the primacy of the programmatic over the aggregative orientation. More precisely, the cheerleaders for the aggregative orientation demanded improvement in the deficit, placing some overall constraint upon the usually central programmatic motivations of lawmakers. As the media and economists cried wolf, Congress felt it had to respond.[39] But as the economy persisted in growth after 1982, the real economic pressure for action was not so great. This permitted lawmakers to rationalize their inability to reduce the deficit, as will be explored in the following chapter. Only extreme economic duress or strong fiscal offensives by popular presidents—Reagan in 1981, Bush in 1990—could dislodge the primacy of programs.

MEMBER GOALS

The role of political influences in budget voting becomes clearer when they are related to lawmakers' goals. Richard Fenno discovered three goals among the members of Congress: making good public policy, satisfying constituents, and gaining intra-Washington influence.[40] Chapter 2 notes that most legislators named personal policy convictions as the major goal they pursued in voting on budget resolutions. But this general statement masks a series of calculations. Satisfying Fenno's three goals is not a mutually exclusive proposition; one can achieve much with one vote.

Most of the budget votes of the 1980s involved trying to avoid offending constituents by voting for the best available alternative. As Representative Doug Walgren (D-Pa.) put it: "So many of these votes are exercises in damage control. You don't like what you see and just have to look for the one that hurts you the least back home and that you personally can live with." Legislators had some room for maneuver because any single budget vote would not be of high salience to constituents. None of the legislators I spoke with, for example, indicated that their vote on the budget resolution in 1986 attracted significant interest in their constituencies. But a string of votes offensive to one's supporting electoral coalition programmatically or in the aggregate threatened electoral danger, as Kingdon found in 1970.[41]

Conflicts involving the constituency do occur, though. A legislator can be torn between supporting an overall budget measure and defending a particular part of the budget important back home. Composing a successful resolution, reconciliation, or appropriations bill became largely a matter of muting or avoiding enough of these tensions so as to gain the support of a majority of legislators. Reconciliation and appropriations politics involved this far more because they entailed actual cuts, not just overall targets. By the mid-1980s, majorities were cultivated through proposals that claimed to hit every important budget claimant "fairly." This strategy was a response to the preference members often heard from constituents to "take their fair share of cuts if others have to as well." The "fair share" received specific definition in reconciliation bills, leading to intense negotiations and more interest-based activity. The definition in practice seldom provided for equal sacrifice and by mid-decade, the scope of reconciliation bills had narrowed so that cuts affected only a few claimants. In fact, different primary victims suffered in different years. In 1981 the working poor and state and local governments due to budget cuts, in 1982 and 1984 business via revenue increases, and from 1986 to 1988 the military through real spending freezes. Each could be stigmatized either for wasteful spending or unnecessary tax favors. Only in 1990 did a large deficit reduction package pass that required considerable sacrifice from a large number of budget claimants.

The pursuit of intra-Washington influence is of small importance in budget voting. Why not use a budget vote to curry favor with other power centers, such as the party leadership and the president? Neither of them usually were all that effective as power centers in budget politics. From 1982 to 1989 the president usually performed a negative role of keeping certain items off the deficit reduction agenda. In 1990 George Bush's demands for unpopular deficit reduction measures caused many even in his own party to distance themselves from him. Party leaders throughout the decade had few rewards and punishments to employ with their followers. More importantly, few lawmakers viewed resolution and reconciliation votes as opportunities for horse-trading one's way to power within Congress. Instead, they commonly referred to them as "exercises in philosophy" and "serious attempts at deficit reduction," policy reasons indeed. Of course, a certain amount of bargaining occurs in the budget process, particularly on the specific provisions of reconciliation bills, and appropriations politics involved much dealing over programs. But this usually concerned policy and constituency goals, not a desire to please those prominent in Washington. Voting to satisfy D.C. luminaries may occur, but it is not at all common.[42]

THE INSTITUTIONAL ENVIRONMENT

This is not to say the Washington environment has no say in budget outcomes. The party leadership, fiscal committees, and conventional wisdom of Washington constitute three important but indirect influences from that environment. Party leaders throughout the 1980s influenced the composition of resolution, reconciliation, and appropriations bills in order to facilitate passage by their chamber. As one House leadership staffer indicated: "We can influence the framing of alternatives, more so on budget resolutions in the Budget committee than on reconciliation and appropriations, which come more from the committees themselves. But we can influence at the margin and also set up a rule to help our alternative to prevail. We do this a lot." In the Senate similar efforts are attempted, though the "informal nature of floor proceedings gets in our way somewhat," according to a Democratic leadership staffer. Budget, Appropriations, and tax committee members keep the floor in mind as well. Legislators from all such committees talked of "getting it passed" and "keeping your eye on the floor" when formulating bills. But the committees do compose the product, framing choice within the floor constraints they perceive. Legislators may claim to follow only convictions in floor voting, but committees do much necessary agenda-narrowing work of independent substantive importance to the bills voted upon on the floor. The specialists define the issue with some sense of the convictions of their nonspecialist peers in mind.

The Washington media and various economists could be counted upon throughout the decade to press the case for deficit reduction. Practically every economic evil was at one point blamed on deficits. The deficit also came to be viewed as a moral evil, as an example of a Congress that could not govern. As Democratic Representative Marvin Leath claimed: "We get hit over the head by this all the time. In the media. We are cowards and can't govern and the economy is going to go to hell. How can you not pay attention to all this?" Personal convictions, the fulcrum of budget voting, are so shaped.

If this sort of hectoring wasn't enough, four other reasons made budget votes high salience decisions for legislators. First, resolution, reconciliation, and appropriations votes directly concern one of the "great issues" of the time, that of chronically large deficits. The "macro" policy stakes are sizeable to most lawmakers. Second, budget issues are the subject of "high politics" between the legislative and executive branches.[43] The political arena for these issues is of grand scale. Third, decisions made on resolutions and reconciliation bills shape the range of choices available for lawmakers on their authorizing and appropriation committees. The consequences for their everyday worklives are substantial. Fourth, parts of the constituency may well question any budget vote. An explanation must be prepared for home consumption.

All this explains why budget issues seriously concern every member of Congress. It also indicates why the norm of specialization does not play a large role in the consideration of budget resolutions and reconciliation bills. The Budget committees are not viewed as founts of expertise and political influence. During much of their existence they have had to fight jurisdictional battles with both appropriations and authorizing committees.[44] Budget committee members may disseminate information to their colleagues, but seldom exercise political influence over them. As one Democratic representative stated: "Lord, a budget resolution isn't like some technical appropriations bill. On those you have to rely on the subcommittee members to explain what's in it, and maybe get a hint on how to vote. There are all sorts of sources of information on a budget resolution, and most of us have firm views on it that will guide our choices." Representative Jim Slattery (D-Kan.), a member of the Budget committee, put it this way: "We provide information and try to sell our proposal to our colleagues, but we don't direct anybody's voting. That's a matter of personal convictions."

This weak specialization norm, combined with the high salience of budget votes, produced a policy formulation process in the 1980s involving many effective participants and decision-making units. Resolution construction involved consultation with members of the majority party in the House and Senate, and the party leader role became one of "brokering" among the various perspectives involved in the process.[45] Authorizing committees, with the exception of 1981, wrote the specific language in reconciliation bills. Another set of players—the large Appropriations committees and their subcommittees—put together spending legislation in the form of particular appropriations bills or, more frequently later in the decade, composite "continuing resolutions." Because members voted their own convictions on the floor, alignments were volatile and outcomes unpredictable, producing difficulties for the budget process timetable. Much of the remainder of this book analyzes such troubles.

The political economy of legislators demonstrates the importance of parts over the whole; of programs over aggregates; of allocation and distribution over stabilization. From the minds of legislators come the limits of institutional capacity on fiscal matters. They are severe, as following chapters will illustrate, making the budget revolution of 1981 and the deficit reduction of 1990 seem all that more remarkable. A more thorough exploration of the substance of legislators' political economy in the next chapter will cultivate our appreciation of the extraordinary events discussed in chapter 3.