

Reforming Congress Project
Sunwater Institute
Interview with Congressman David Price

CHERVENAK: Congressman Price, thank you so much for joining us.

PRICE: Thank you very much. Glad to be with you.

CHERVENAK: Why don't we start with your background? You're pretty unique in Congress for having studied political science prior to your arrival, but if you wouldn't mind introducing yourself and your background, and then we can move on from there.

PRICE: Sure. I grew up in a small town, Erwin, Tennessee in eastern Tennessee, and grew up in a very nurturing family and community but not exactly in the crossroads of national affairs, and that changed pretty fast for me when I went off to college. Went to Mars Hill Junior College up in the mountains the first two years but came to Chapel Hill to the University of North Carolina in the middle of the Civil Rights movement as the sit-ins were sweeping across the South, and I really was influenced by that.

Those were very formative years, what went on inside and outside the classroom and the broadening of views for me and many in my generation of our political and religious and social outlooks. And I went from Carolina to Yale to a divinity school and graduate school and political science. Had some thoughts of a political career somewhere, somehow, but I think that ought to dictate my career choice, and so I got a PhD in political science and back in this region where I'd had my undergraduate years. I said this time it was eight miles away at Duke University, which seemed somewhat incredible given the rivalry, but there I was, and so I taught political science and helped start what's now the Terry Sanford Institute of Public Policy at Duke. But I did at that point, coming back to this area and getting involved locally, I did begin to think more about a political career and, or possibly running for something, someday.

Anyway, long story short, I was recruited by Jim Hunt, the governor at that time, to be executive director of the state party and then to come and chair the state party full time, take a year's leave and do that in 1984 when he and Jesse Helms squared off in that monumental Senate race. So that was a crucible of sorts. I really got a world of political experience and exposure in that and decided at that point we were just flat on our back. We lost not only that race, we lost three Congressional seats, lost the governorship. I decided, you know maybe, maybe I should run myself. Maybe I could do about as well as some of these folks I've been trying to help. And so that was '86, and we did a pretty nice turnaround.

Terry Sanford got elected to the US Senate that year. We took back two of the three Congressional seats, including the one in the fourth Congressional district. So I've had a career in Congress that dates from then. It's hard for me to believe that I got there in the first place or that I've lasted this long. I did have an election loss in '94 with the Gingrich revolution but managed to make a pretty quick comeback in the next election, and I've been there ever since.

My role in the House has been, ever since my third term, has been on the Appropriations Committee. I chose that committee quite deliberately and have been a chairman there of the Homeland Security subcommittee, and I'm currently chairman of the one I have most wanted to share all along, the Transportation and Housing subcommittee. I've also developed interest and expertise in foreign policy. The longer I've been there, the more I've indulged that interest, and that has been very rewarding. I founded or initiated and now chair the House Democracy Partnership, which is a bipartisan commission, which engages peer-to-peer with the parliaments in developing democracies to try to build capacity. We're building capacity all around. We're learning from each other.

So those are my two leadership positions, and I am now on my way to retirement. 14 months to go, and my hope is to leave that work, the Housing and Transportation work, and the international parliamentary strengthening work, to leave those stronger than I found them.

CHERVENAK: Fantastic. So can you talk a little bit about your district, you know what are the, what did it look like when you started and what does it look like now in terms of the breakdown and what's important to it and how you view it?

PRICE: The district started out, first of all, as much more expansive in terms of geography. The counties that I ran in initially were five whole counties spread across central North Carolina all the way from Asheboro to Louisburg with Raleigh and Wake County, the capitol county, in between. Those counties now would be two and a half Congressional districts, and actually the district contracted almost immediately in the next census, 1990 census, to three counties, and then it's been, it had various configurations since then. It has partly been the result of population growth. It's also been the result of pretty extreme gerrymandering, especially the last ten years, which has given the fourth district three formations in the course of ten years simply because these Republicans in the legislature keep drawing the district in unconstitutional ways, and it keeps getting thrown back to them, and they do it again, so it's not a good system.

But anyway, the fourth district has been basically triangle based. We call it the research triangle area, and it has been centered on the communities of Chapel Hill, Durham, Cary, and Raleigh for all of that time. The racial composition of the district has been around 20 to 25 percent depending on, Black, depending on how the district is drawn. The Latino portion of the district has increased maybe tenfold. It is really now approaching 11, 12 percent of the district. There's a good deal of ethnic diversity in terms of Indian Americans, Chinese American, South Asians, and so I've seen that change. I've seen that we always had a substantial African-American population, but now it's much more a diverse district.

It is a district that has lots of people who have come here like myself because we want to live here. We aren't native born, we've been attracted here by what this district has to offer. It is a Democratic leaning district, it's partly because of the legislature packing lots of Democrats into the district for their own purposes, but the area overall is fairly progressive in its political inclinations. I've, I started out as being a targeted member having just a knock down, drag out

election every time, and of course I lost one of those, but over time the district has become more friendly, and the, my election margins haven't been quite as narrow, so it's now a mid-south district. I always thought of it that way, but now I really can say I think that the district is an exemplar of what you see in areas of the south like Austin, like Nashville. I mean we, like Atlanta, these areas that have attracted people from all over the world, really, and that have a brand of politics that still, you know, there's a kind of moderation, a kind of valuing of common sense and a kind of balanced approach to politics but still basically progressive and basically supportive of what I as a mainstream Democrat have tried to do.

CHERVENAK: So maybe we can move on to, then, your experience in Congress itself, and in terms of the time allocation. So you know, you've been in Congress for a long time now, and I'm wondering you know in the beginning versus today you know your daily grind, right, is it, what's the percentage breakdown between the work on the floor versus the committee versus home versus campaigning? Can you help us understand a little bit more about the real time breakdown of a member, you know, how it used to be and even how it is today, if that's changed at all?

PRICE: It's not changed a great deal for me over the time I've been there, and I've been there over 30 years, although I know compared to earlier years when members would move their families to Washington and stay there for the entire session, that's certainly not the case anymore, but that was pretty well changed by the time I arrived there in the late 80s, 1980s.

Well I never moved my family to Washington. My wife Lisa and I, my wife is, the first thing, one of the first things I'd say to anybody aspiring to this career is you don't want a reluctant spouse. It's very, very hard if you're constantly torn between the demands of home and the demands of your family and the demands of the job. There has to be a kind of cooperative supportive attitude, and my wife who, unlike myself who grew up in east Tennessee and underwent some pretty serious political changes, my wife grew up as a New Deal Democrat and has remained steadfast.

She's been fully supportive and, but we made a decision. We had pre-teen children at the time I was first elected. We made a conscious decision not to move to Washington, not to uproot them but to have, and of course the commute is pretty easy. I'm able to be here in three hours door to door, and that's what I've done. I've commuted, have an apartment on Capitol Hill. My wife says we still live like graduate students up there, and it's pretty much right, but never saw much reason to set up elaborate housekeeping in Washington and have kept my home here in Chapel Hill, North Carolina. Come home every weekend. I'd say the balance over the course of a year is about half and half, you know between the Congressional periods in the district and the long weekends that we spend here.

It's about an even balance. I have, of course, offices in both places with a roughly equal division of staff. The work in Washington is, as I've become a more senior member and in more leadership positions, it's more demanding and more absorbing. I spend a lot of time, and this is expected of appropriations members, let alone appropriations chairs, spend a lot of time going

over the federal budget line by line in Transportation and Housing and in organizing hearings and in writing the bill and in getting the bill through the committee and through the House in negotiating the final product. All of that takes a great deal of time.

I have a wonderful, professional staff. I have a wonderful personal staff that is supportive of these efforts. So the committee work and the House Democracy Partnership work, which involves a good deal of international travel, a lot of work with the ambassadors of these countries and visiting delegations from these countries and workshops that we put on, I have willingly taken that on the last 15 years, so that's also a major element. And I know the question that always occurs, the way you ask the question is well, don't you spend half your time campaigning? No, I don't. I never did. I never did. I did, of course, used to have to spend more time campaigning, but I'd say a couple of things about that. The first of all, a lot of the work you do in the district, it's not, it's not campaign work, but I don't know how you'd spend your time better really than holding town meetings and going to churches and visiting businesses and calling on community leaders and community groups.

I mean a lot of that just comes with the job, and I, and I, it's, I don't think of it as campaigning, but it does have, if it has a good political effect, then that's of course a plus. It doesn't, certainly doesn't detract from your presence in the district, it enhances it, so now if you have, if you have a swing district, you have a targeted district, then you are going to have to spend more time worrying about that, especially raising money for the next campaign. And in my early years I spent a good deal more time raising money, but I was never one of those who spent half of every day over making phone calls. I, maybe, that's just because I'm not a very good fundraiser, but I never thought that was necessary. I did have some pretty close shaves and I lost one election, so maybe I didn't do quite enough, but I wouldn't say that I was ever totally absorbed in the campaign part of the job, although maybe it's easy for me to say that now since I've had a more secure district in recent years.

CHERVENAK: So do you think, you know, this half-half is the kind of an ideal mix for the body? You know, where do you come down on the Congress should be two weeks on, one week off, or three weeks on, one week off? Do you have an opinion on where time should be?

PRICE: I think for most of the year three weeks on, one week off is about right, and then that's assuming that you have for Easter, Passover, you probably have a couple of weeks, for the August break, you have five or six weeks, so you know there are some exceptions to that, but it sounds about right to me. And I think one thing I'll give the Republicans credit for is they did initiate a long weekend, short weekend rotation, which I really like, and I think it serves especially the west coast members well.

In other words, one week you're there Monday to Thursday, and then you come back in on Tuesday. That's a long weekend, almost everybody goes home. But then the next week you're there Tuesday to Friday, and you come back on Monday, and that is some, you know, I would go home, but most people wouldn't, and so I think that's a good innovation. You, I think a four-

day work week is about right, and so even when you're up there three weeks in a row, you still have some time back home, but that strikes me as a good balance.

And if we're doing our work, if we're especially, if we succeed after we get through this pandemic, and you know kind of on a more even keel, I would like to see committees more active once again. I'd like to see more not just floor activity but the other activity that goes into the work of the Congress. I think it demands three weeks out of four. I would support that.

CHERVENAK: Got it. So you, it sounds like you would expand a little bit of the time that's done working in DC, specifically in committee work as opposed to—

PRICE: I would.

CHERVENAK: —some of the other kinds. Yeah. Great. Well in terms of the, you know your time, you know, part of your time is going to be in this kind of legislative aspect and some of it's in this oversight aspect. If we talk about legislation for a minute, you know one of the questions that really comes up is, you know, there's the fundamental bill creation process that underlies everything that Congress does. And one of the fundamental questions I have is around bill creation. So you've obviously written bills over the years. What goes into the bill? Why, where do you get the ideas from the bills from? Is it from your committee? Is it from your constituents? Is it from your personal experience, and do you consider the competitive landscape of other bills that are out there, and you don't want to copy a bill, you know, what are the factors in real life that happen in a member's mind when they're thinking about what bills to write and how to execute on that?

PRICE: Well, that, a that's a very big and important question, and members really need to be sensitive to a number of sources of ideas for the need, indications, of what the gaps in policy might be and the needs might be. I think members and staff should go to the Congress with that kind of curiosity, and not everybody does. But I can just give you some quick examples, and they're not uniform by any means.

Sometimes, like when you're the new member on the block, like my first year on the Bank— what was then called the Banking and Housing Committee—I was looking for a bill to initiate. I was looking for something that as a new member I could find a niche. I could find a policy need that I could support and drive a bill through to passage just in the classic a bill becomes a law textbook fashion, which of course is much easier than it is now, which I think anyone would say.

Anyway, long story short, I fastened on this new financial product called a home equity loan, a second mortgage on your house. Those were the Wild West in terms of terms and conditions, and so we wrote a bill requiring full disclosure of the terms of home equity loans and managed to fend off more senior members like Chuck Schumer, who wanted to have a bill of their own. And I got my bill, a name on a bill, my first term in Congress. So that's the kind of classic way it happens. And I did that on a number of bills. It has become harder, but I have bills right now,

stuff I've worked on for years. I mean, I'll just tell you one of the more, one I still feel passionately about, but it's one of the more frustrating examples.

I, for years as an Appropriations member, I did earmarks designated spending for important research over at NC State University about animal waste and how you dispose of animal waste and how you reduce the environmental impacts of environmental waste, hog waste in particular. So I developed a bill years ago that would give an incentive, either a tax incentive or a subsidy, to the farmers or packers who adopted sounder environmental practices. Got rid of these waste lagoons and put sounder waste processing facilities on their farms. I still think that's a great idea, but I have to tell you, it's sitting there, still not passed, but that's a good example. I mean I certainly saw the problem.

We had these hurricanes in North Carolina that left these lagoon, left animal waste and carcasses all over the landscape, and there were some things that were done to slow the development of lagoons in the future, but we didn't deal with the ones that were there, so that's a policy idea that I just simply saw the need for. Although I don't have an agricultural district, I certainly saw the need for it, still see the need for it, so there's some things that make it and others that don't. But that's one way you do things.

Other things come out of your case work. I'll just give you a quick example. It may seem small, but it's important, I think. I think I'm going to get this done this session, I believe so. Turns out years ago when student loans were first being administered, if a couple would take what they called a joint liability loan and then if they split later or even if there was violence involved, one partner was still responsible for the other's loan obligation, and so we need to sever that. We need to sever that responsibility that no longer applies, but those old loans are still sitting there, and a lot of people have real hardship because of that, that came from casework. You know, I had had a young man in this case come into the office here and trying to get some help with this, and the more we looked at it the more we thought, well helping this guy is going to require more than just dealing with his case. It's going to require actually changing the law.

So some things come from that, and I think in recent years, in recent years the main source of that kind of legislative initiative has been immigration. I mean during the Trump administration immigration policy and immigration practice was so awful, so distorted that it just cried out for a policy remedy that went beyond individual cases, whether it's the terms under which people are deported or the policy for admitting refugees to this country, or, or many other things where immigration policy has really gone off the rails. So those are a few examples.

Part of the time you're thinking things up. I did that of course with the House Democracy Partnership. Just had this experience early in my career working in Eastern and Central Europe, helping bring those parliaments to life. That was a very, very good experience, a very good idea I thought that Martin Frost had to set that up. So Newt Gingrich let it go, but I brought it back, and that that was just an institutional innovation that I thought was important. So that's kind of the range. Some things large, some things small, but the underlying question is, does a member come there with a, with an intention of doing this sort of thing? Do you have a kind of

entrepreneurial approach to the job? Not everybody does, but I picked this up a long time ago and I actually wrote about it in my PhD dissertation. I was a staff member all through graduate school on and off in a Senate office, and I saw during a very interesting period of the US Senate, 60s, I saw how much a difference staff members could make who had ideas and pushed those ideas with their bosses, and I also understood how the member's attitude in the end was one counted. You want to be an active entrepreneurial member, or do you not want to do that? And I always wanted to do it, I think a lot of members want to do it, and it's harder now, but I do think the US House is still a place where you can be an entrepreneur if you just work at it.

CHERVENAK: So what about on the other side of supporting others' legislation through co-sponsorships, etc? When you think about that, or why would you co-sponsor a bill? Is it because you think it's a good idea and you'd vote for it? Is it because you've got a relationship with that person? Is it because of leadership? Is it because of, you know, it's the best of a series of bills that are addressing the same issue? What comes into play in your mind when you think about co-sponsoring, and how does also, or does it relate to the district, etc? So how do you, what's your thought process there?

PRICE: It's really all of those things can figure in. Just like initiating a bill, it's not the same always. I don't co-sponsor things that I disagree with, but I do sometimes co-sponsor things that I think are a good idea but maybe not fully developed, or an idea that it's an advanced idea that I want to show support, help give emphasis to the effort. I've recently co-sponsored, for example, a bill introduced by Congressman Andy Levin, which is called the Two-State Solution Bill, and it takes the often expressed commitment to two-state diplomacy with Israel and the Palestinians, takes that commitment which is in danger, I think, of becoming just a platitude, takes that and says, well all right, here are some specific measures that would be required. Admittedly we can't negotiate a settlement right now, but here are the conditions on both sides that would push that idea forward and protect it, and so here's how you flesh that out. And I didn't necessarily, I didn't write that bill. I didn't necessarily agree with every aspect of it, but I thought it was an effort worth supporting.

So sometimes you do that, sometimes you co-sponsor a bill when a group asks you to. You might not even know it's been introduced, but if it's a sympathetic effort and you approve of it, then sure sign me up. Sometimes it is a matter of supporting colleagues. We, where there's a group of us who were supportive of the Iran Nuclear Agreement back in the Obama administration, and we called ourselves an informal gang of eight, we weren't getting much leadership from our party, our committee leaders on that, of either party, so we just decided we're gonna, we're gonna work on this, we're gonna, we're gonna support the negotiation process, we're gonna introduce resolutions or circulate letters or whatever, and it wouldn't always be me if, it might be me, it might be others, but I would, I was part of a team that, so I supported other people's initiatives as if they were my own. So there, too, there's a range of possibilities.

CHERVENAK: So you mentioned earlier you've got a PhD in in political science, which is a rarity in Congress. How has that impacted your work in Congress, or has it? I mean, did it bring you a

more institutional view? Did it change? Do you have a different perspective than your colleagues, or was it really like any other profession coming in?

PRICE: I don't know how unique it was that, I think it was good preparation, though. I mean I, when I got involved in this work with Martin Frost early in my time there, in, when all these showcase parliaments in Central and Eastern Europe had to become real parliament, so we started traveling there and consulting with them and helping them get up to speed, I said boy, this is the first time I've ever used my political science background really in a direct way, but in a less direct way it's been important in various, various ways. I did, I wrote a dissertation on the US Senate. I did pretty close to the ground kind of research, interviewed a third of the senators serving at that time out of my boss's office, Senator Bartlett of Alaska, and I was following the pattern set by Dick Fennel and Nelson Polsby and other Congressional scholars of you know the generation preceding mine where they interviewed members, they paid a lot of attention to Congressional policy making and processes, and wrote very good, helpful studies about that.

That is not the style in political science these days. There's some people doing that kind of work, but that kind of political science was very good experience, as well as my staff work in the Senate, which gave me some very definite ideas about how I would operate as a member and what I would expect of my staff that had a very direct impact. I wrote about that actually in my book *The Congressional Experience*, which I just finished a fourth edition of, but that's been an element in the book from the beginning, the kind of difference it made for me to come in as someone who had studied the institution and also someone who had been a staff member and both were good preparation. That's not to say it's like academic life. It really isn't very much like academic life, but it still, the kind of academic work I did was pretty good preparation.

And there are some, there are some aspects of Congressional life that I gravitate toward, probably because of my academic background. I love these Aspen Institute seminars, for example, that we have on Thursday mornings and occasionally go on trips. I've been drawn as I said to the parliamentary strengthening work. I have organized myself a discussion group. We call it the Democratic Policy Group. Every Wednesday morning we gather for a coffee and stale donuts and discussion on policy issues that you know we really, it's a, it fills a void there you know you you're not just doing talking points you're really having serious speakers in. We had Jessica Rosenworcel of the Federal Communications Commission. We had Neal Katyal, the elections expert. We had Norm Ornstein, the political scientist. We have people like that as our guests, and I guess my academic background has made me think that those are valuable. Then I wanted to help make sure they happened.

CHERVENAK: You know it's interesting you mentioned your parliamentary work. I guess I've always been surprised that Congress doesn't have this kind of what I would call more competitive intelligence of other legislatures around the world, how are they working, what sort of best practices or innovations can we learn from or share, or what innovations do we have we can share with them? And it sounds like you've actually taken this up as an actual institution within Congress. So can you talk more about that? And yes, I'm sure we're teaching

them things, but on the other side have we learned anything through their processes that we can bring back?

PRICE: Well the first thing you learn is that democracy is most certainly a work in progress, and if we ever had any arrogance about our own democratic progress, I think what's happened the last four years has disabused us of that. We've had very alarming, very alarming indications that the rule of law, the peaceful transfer of power is not to be taken for granted in our country, therefore probably anywhere. So we we've always approached this task with a good deal of humility, partly because we have so much respect for the struggles of people in these emerging democracies. I mean, very, well none of us have really been through the kind of experiences they have been through in so many cases, and so you respect their courage and their persistence in in trying to make democracy work through representative institutions.

So that's enough to make you humble right there, just to realize what your colleagues have been through. But I think we also understand that certainly as a system of government, as a constitutional system, would we really recommend a kind of separation of powers system where you regularly have divided government to a lot of these new countries? New democracies? No, you wouldn't necessarily recommend that. In many cases a parliamentary system has more to recommend.

Anyway, that's not the level on which we're operating. We're talking about what it means to be a representative of your community, what it means to have some independent role in policy making in cooperation with other branches of government, we're talking about serving constituents, we're talking about shining a bright light on problems and having investigations if you need to do that, developing professional staff codes of ethics, you know, a whole range of things which are appropriate in various situations. So yeah, I really have enjoyed that work and have also come to appreciate, not just as a tactical matter, but just as an honest representation of where we're coming from. You know we do have a lot to learn from each other.

CHERVENAK: So moving on to the US Congress, then, and you know its institutions within Congress, right, one of them obviously is the is the budget appropriations process which you're intimately involved with, can you talk through, you know, and I've had other scholars and individuals involved in that process on the program. Alan Schick, in particular, was one of my favorite discussions on the budget, and he has become you know quite disillusioned you know about the budget process and its chances for reform or improvement. I'm curious about your perspective being in the mix and being a crucial part of it, you know, where is the budget process today, and how can it be in your mind improved, or you know, is it a matter of just following the rules that are already there? Is it redoing the rules, you know, what do you see as the way forward for budget and appropriations?

PRICE: Well I have a lot of respect for Alan Schick, who was the chronicler of this process from the beginning. Doesn't surprise me that he's disillusioned with the way it's turned out because I am as well. You know it's interesting, there's been a latter-day revival of the budget process by virtue of political necessity here early in the Biden administration as we, as we need to pass

ambitious legislation that the Republicans are totally unwilling to support. So we have to, we have to reach back into the budget bag of tricks and do a reconciliation bill, as we call it, which involves a kind of obscure provision of the original budget law, which was meant to just square up the budget in any kind of legislative activity at the end of the session.

Well it's been used by both parties since then for greater, much more ambitious schemes than that, and the reason is because it does provide a workaround for the filibuster. It can be passed with a bare majority. So all of a sudden when we're confronted with this, Johnny Yarmuth, our intrepid budget chairman, becomes the man of the hour because he's got to, he's got to put together the pieces of this reconciliation package and becomes the face of that process, so good for him. He's done a good job.

But one shouldn't be deceived by the fact that we're using a budget proceeding to get all this done right now, that has very little to do with the original objectives of the budget process, which I think have pretty much proved non-functional. I remember Alan Schick said at one point, I quoted this in an early edition of the book, Alan Schick said at one point that overall the budget process had had its difficulties but there were hundreds of incidents where spending and revenues had been brought into line and the budget process had had the desirable disciplining effect.

I think that has become much less true now. The budget process has, it's always been partisan. It's now just totally partisan, and it, generally we're very lucky to pass a budget resolution, let alone have a common budget resolution in in both houses, and it, so it doesn't have the traditional function anymore of setting parameters for our spending bills or saying what we need in the way of revenue.

The, often we're passing our appropriations bills so simply deeming a, as we say deeming quote deeming an overall number and that isn't really, that really, that's not a number that typically has been through the budget process, and so on. There's lots of commentary that I probably don't need to elaborate on about just how far we are from the original vision of that budget process. Having said that, I'm still a defender of the appropriations process, of the annual appropriations process, and to the extent the budget process can be configured as a kind of scene setting or parameter setting exercise for that appropriations process, I think it still has utility.

And the annual appropriations process, yes the bills are usually late. Yes, we have trouble getting especially Senate action on House Appropriations bills, that's the way it is right this minute, but still I think the kind of detailed work that goes on in appropriations, the kind of line-by-line scrutiny that we give to budgets, and of course ideally we give them to budgets of a President of any party, and we do to some extent, but I, there's no question that partisanship has infused the appropriations process, and that it works better sometimes than others. Still at the, it's the most cooperative thing I do apart from the House Democracy Partnership, but the work I do with my Republican counterpart in putting that transportation HUD bill together initially at the subcommittee level, that's still a very cooperative activity.

Now when we take it to the floor and get into the end game, you know, and government shutdowns and that sort of thing, then it goes above our pay grade, as we often say, but still then when it gets stitched together into an ominous bill at the end of the process, guess what, most of that work remains intact. Most of the work that we did cooperatively is in there and I happen to have a very friendly relationship with Mario Diaz-Balart, my Republican counterpart, and he was chairman and I was ranking, and now vice versa. We often at the end of the day are able to say that we have a common product, but it's usually not a very pretty process the way we get there.

CHERVENAK: Well, so that's interesting. So you think the top down budget concept to start the process off still is a legitimate one, and you like the single year versus dual year, I know that from your previous—

PRICE: Well from appropriations. I think a multi-year budget framework is just fine, in fact probably is a good idea, so that's, those are different questions. The idea of, you know when we did this awful, awful 10-year plan when the Republicans held Obama hostage on the debt ceiling question, this Budget Control Act that was passed in 2011 and kept us over a 10-year period under these budget caps, they were just totally unrealistic, so we just had to find a way around them, but it was pretty messy finding a way around them. But we did it with a series of two-year budget agreements. You know there were four of those, four two-year budget agreements over the decade, and yeah those needed to be two-year agreements. Ideally they might have been more than that. So I have no brief for a one-year only budget resolution. I do have a brief for one-year appropriations because that's where the real nitty-gritty work is done.

CHERVENAK: So can you explain this nitty gritty process on the appropriations side? I mean obviously there's the authorization side, which you know we don't necessarily have to get into here, but the appropriations, and I've heard this because earlier we had, I think it was Representative Rodney Davis who also talked about the process and appropriations and that that's where there's really kind of discussion. And you know at the end of the day you have to put, get something out there, has to be compromise. How does that process actually work? You're the chair of this subcommittee. How do you run it? Is it in the open? Are you guys getting together in the basement to, you know, duke it out? You know, how does that process actually work, and is it uniform across the various different appropriations committees?

PRICE: It's not totally uniform, but if you wanted to generalize about it, I think you could say that it is more bipartisan than you would know or would think looking at the antics on C-SPAN, you know, when we get into the end game, is more cooperative than you would think, but there is a variation, there is in terms of how cooperative and collaborative it really is. The translation HUD subcommittee which I share is on the collaborative end of the spectrum.

But it is my responsibility as chairman to do the chairman's mark, the initial draft of the bill. I do consult with the ranking member and often accommodate the ranking member in doing that, but it is my responsibility, and then we proceed to mark up the bill, and that is a process these

days, I've seen it more freewheeling than it is now, but these days the markup of the bill, often the Republican amendments are, let's just say less constructive or more kind of gotcha things sometimes, or more contentious things, which then we just simply have to fight. So the process there in the committee, the committee room, if you look at it, I have a picture in my book that illustrates this, the committee room is unlike any other committee room. We're in, we're kind of all on the same plane and tables around the room, and it sort of speaks a collaborative atmosphere, but the markup is often quite partisan, but that belies what has gone on earlier, which is a cooperative process in getting the bill put together.

And all this has involved hearings, it's involved just enormous amount of staff work in scrutinizing the President's budget and in scrutinizing agency performance. Often the hearings are pretty cooperative and pretty collaborative. There are partisan clashes, but then again there's a lot of common effort, but the further you go in the process, the further you go from you know the subcommittee assembling of the bill to floor passage, the more partisan it becomes. Appropriations bills historically on the floor have gotten bipartisan support, and they do still at the very end of the process when you get an omnibus bill finally stitched together, finally get an agreement to stop a shutdown or avert a shutdown then it often is bipartisan, but increasingly passing the bills initially on the House floor is not bipartisan, no matter how much input the Republicans have had, and I regret that.

I mean I've had some very unpleasant surprises in this regard the, where partisan and ideological politics has intruded. I remember I think it was 2013, 14 along in there when I was the ranking member on Homeland Security. I had been chairman. I was now ranking member with the Republican chair, and we had worked very carefully on this bill. This happened twice. Norm Ornstein wrote it up if you want to look it up, but this happened twice. We had worked very hard on this bill and had come to an agreement even on contentious items like immigration, but then on the floor in the middle of the night, in comes Steve King, ideologically extreme members, one you would think in the old days would have been fended off. I don't know. Steve has this fire breathing immigration amendment, and every Republican but four or five you know went along with this. And I would say that's, that does it. This is no longer a bipartisan bill if you do this, and that appeal to the tradition of the committee was not enough unfortunately to under to counter the intrusion of kind of modern ideological politics. I really think that's regrettable. It happened twice. It happens a lot more than it should.

So the days when the Appropriations Committee would take a kind of unified stance as an institutional spokesperson, as opposed to representing one party, and would fend off amendments from both sides, you know that's not the way it is anymore. I don't want to say it's some kind of idyllic bipartisan life. It isn't. What I will say, though, is that compared to other arenas in the House, it does have cooperative elements still, and I think it's important to preserve those.

CHERVENAK: So you know, leaving the floor antics aside, if we just talk about within the subcommittee itself during that really crucial negotiation that, where that work is actually happening, right, you've been there for a long time, you've seen different dynamics in that

group, whether it's, you know, we where you have one party in charge or the other, I'm assuming larger committee size versus smaller committee size in terms of the number of members, are there dynamics that work better for those subcommittees than others, you know, are there committees that work really well together because of some mix of elements or best practices or rules, versus others that don't work well because of some alternative set of rules or number of people on the committee? Can, like what in your mind, you know, even as a scholar, right, looking at the subcommittees over 30 years, which subcommittees have worked better together and which ones have worked less well together, and are there any, you know, best practices or common elements among the winners and the losers?

PRICE: Well that's a really good question, and somebody should study it more than I have. I have some impressions, but it's an important question, what has happened, the whole partisan evolution of the budget process and the appropriations process that I've sketched here, but that needs to be studied in more detail because it has evolved and mostly in the direction of more polarization and more partisanship. But as I said, not entirely.

The subcommittees that have maintained more of a collegial cooperative approach, I'd say a couple of things help. One is having a jurisdiction that lends itself to that. You know, and sometimes jurisdictions themselves, the politics the evolves as regards certain subject matter, like Homeland Security. I mean Homeland Security used to be the easiest bill to pass. After 9/11, this was a new a new subcommittee, it involved all these critical agencies pulling together to protect the country. We had some battles, and as I said the intrusion of the immigration issue with Steve King was, kind of broke the broke the spell. For a long time, though, that was about the easiest bill to pass. That's often the first one we put out there because the subject matter lended itself to it and I do think we had cooperative leadership, Hal Rogers on the Republican side, myself on the Democratic side. We were, we worked at it. We weren't looking for flash points. Quite the contrary, we were looking for ways we could, when I was chairman or what he was, we were looking to bring a bill to the floor that we both could support.

And that attitude matters, too. That's another variable of some importance, so and I always say, you know, a lot of these things I can't do much about, but at the margins I can, you know, at the margins the way I choose to operate makes a difference. Do I want to fan the flames, or do I want to promote cooperation, and you know there are times when you, sometimes when you have to fight, times when you have to resist, times when you turn your ranking member down when he wants to change something on your bill that you think is a matter of principle, but there are other times when you when you try to accommodate.

So I can't give you a strict rule of thumb, but I can say that I think a number of things matter, including the jurisdiction, the politics of the day, you know, and what's hot and what's more easily accommodated, and then just to some extent the tradition of the committee, including the attitudes of the leaders.

CHERVENAK: What about in terms of the rules? You know, I think clearly the chairman of the of the committees or the subcommittees have, you know, almost like you know, they have a lot of

power as it comes to the procedures, the rules of the committee. Are some of those rules better than others to making the committee work, or are the rules really totally subordinated to the relationships among and the weather outside in terms of the polarization?

PRICE: Well that that, too, is a good question that I would like to see people explore more fully, you know, people who are taking a kind of analytical view of the institution. I think the rules of procedure do not vary very much between appropriations subcommittees. In fact, they don't vary at all. I mean, there are uniform rules that we're following that have to do with staffing and have to do with what minority rights and the way we file bills and so on. Most of the variation would come in the areas as I mentioned, within the rules. So, now if you were looking more generally around the Congress you probably would find differences in rules and procedures that do have a have, make a difference, but I wouldn't say within appropriations that that's a key differentiating factor.

CHERVENAK: And if you were to say what's a successful subcommittee versus an unsuccessful subcommittee, what would be kind of the way you would measure success? Is it that people work together to come to and everybody owns it, or is it that you get something out the door on a majority basis? You know, what would be your kind of subjective measure of success for a committee or subcommittee?

PRICE: Well, partly as a member of the majority party who has some pretty strong policy views about housing and transportation, I bring those standards to evaluating our product, and I'm going to push for those. Up to a point I will accommodate. Fortunately a lot of those objectives are shared by my ranking member, and so we're able to find common ground, and but I'm going to push harder than he would push if he were in my position on certain things. I'm going to insist on that, and he will too if he's chair, and that's I think the way it needs to work. You don't sacrifice everything just to have an accommodation, but you do try to find whatever accommodation you can within those constraints.

So, the problems we're facing right now, I don't know if this is totally responsive, but I'll just mention them because they are illustrative of situations we're facing. We're facing a couple of problems now on appropriations which probably illustrate larger issues. One is that we don't have any Republican cooperation on the floor initially on these bills now, even though it's appropriations, even though they've been involved in formulating the bills in most cases. No Republican votes this summer for any of the nine bills that we brought to the floor. Well, that's a problem. That's a problem because that puts us in a position, in a closely divided House, that puts us in a in a position that makes the passage of these bills difficult, and the reason it was nine bills and not twelve is because of that. I'll explain that in a minute.

But none of those bills got Republican votes despite the earmarks being back in, despite the cooperative process, so, and why is that? That's because of a, because of a larger party issue which has to do, yes, with budget numbers, but also I think with just a reluctance to cooperate and help us succeed, and of course that's even worse in the Senate. So that's a big problem. But then you say, why nine and not twelve? Well those are problems within our party, and that also

needs to be addressed. The bills that we had, we have a margin of only three or four votes in the House, and so if there's some of our members who, even though the defense bill has overwhelming consensus, but for someone in our caucus who thinks even that is too much, and you know they can hold up the bill, they can do the same with ICE and immigration agencies. They could do the same with assisting the police in the Commerce Justice Science bill, and so you really need to have discipline as a majority party in appropriations as in other areas. The days are past, in other words, or you could just go to the bill confident that yeah, you could have a few outliers here and there and not worry about it. No, this is going to be a partisan vote initially, and so discipline within the majority party does matter.

CHERVENAK: It's interesting that, you know, this kind of situation sounds similar to what a lot of academics wanted in terms of the kind of a parliamentary system, right? We just don't have that same mechanism, and so you have a lot of parties acting parliamentary when the Congress itself isn't designed to do that and so you've gone halfway to what a lot of those original academics wanted for a parliamentary system.

PRICE: Yeah, I think I'm quoting Norm Ornstein when I say that in the book, if you're going to have parliamentary parties, you better have a different system than all we've got.

CHERVENAK: Right.

PRICE: Because what that's going to produce is what you see, a kind of partisan standoff, and we have to overcome it, we usually do overcome it at some point, but it is not functional, and it is not, and especially when you start talking about the failure to pass appropriations bills on budget and on time and the kind of collapse of the budget process itself, that's the culprit of a kind of polarization that even these traditional institutional norms can overcome.

CHERVENAK: So in my mind this brings up another question about representation as a concept because, you know, if you're tightly toeing a party line, it's hard to square that with a concept of representation that is all inclusive of a district, right, so your district isn't a hundred percent of any party or any type, so I always wonder about, you know, this kind of external control of a member's decision making by a party apparatus when, in theory, they should be beholden only to their districts, which is quite diverse. So I guess this leads into my next question, which I ask all of our guests, so I'm moving into the portion of our discussion where I ask everyone the same question, including Norm Ornstein, who's been on the program, which I guess my question to you in this regard is representation, you know, what does it really mean to you as a member? Obviously you knew it in theory as a scholar, but when I say when we use the word Congressional representation, what should that mean?

PRICE: It means that as a member of the House, when I'm figuring out how to vote but also other decisions that I have to make about setting priorities and taking positions, that I give a very strong regard to the preponderance of opinion in my district, understanding that on a lot of issues that won't necessarily be majority opinion, it will be the view of intense minorities, you know, people who are intentionally concerned about an issue, different issues matter,

issues differ in, you know, how the how public opinion is configured and how salient those issues are to the broader public, but I'm obligated to take account and give you regard, give strong regard to the preponderance of opinion, however that's expressed. I don't think that's an absolute obligation. I think that I need to take account of the of opposing views. I need to take account of the, of how well informed the electorate is and how mature the issue is. I need to take account of my own convictions and my ability to shape those views, reciprocally to shape those views, certainly to interpret what I'm doing, but also to persuade sometimes. So I don't think it's an absolute obligation without nuance, but I do think I'm obligated to be in touch with my district and to take account of preponderate views.

CHERVENAK: So it sounds like on the one side you've got the, you're just a window to the beliefs of the district, the majority of the district. On the other side there's a, you're making your own judgments on everything and your own considered opinion and then you move between these depending on the issue, is that what you're saying there?

PRICE: Yeah, that's fair enough. I mean that's but that is a principled approach, I think, I mean sometimes people are tempted to say, well you got to choose one or the other or you're just waffling or you're just, in the crunch you're just going to decide what you want to decide. No, that's not right. This is a genuine tension. Most of the time it's not a tension, actually. Most of the time there's a, there is this congruence between my own views and my district's views, and if that isn't usually the case, I'm in trouble, you know, I shouldn't probably be representing this district. But where there is this tension, there is this uncertainty or there is this conflict or is this or just this disagreement, yeah, you deal with that in a principled way. You're not just splitting the difference, and I'm trying to describe how you deal with it in a responsible way. It's just over simple I think to say that you're simply a cypher for your district or that you're a Burkean principled representative. I just think that doesn't do justice to the kind of balance a representative sometimes needs to strike.

CHERVENAK: And in terms of the constituency, the way you define that is that, is it primary voters? Is it all the voters? Is it all the constit— is it everyone in the district? How do you define that concept of constituency?

PRICE: That really is often issue specific as you know political science mentor Robert Dahl pointed out many years ago. Issues are sometimes quite, I just talked for example, just before I got on with you, I just talked to constituents who are passionately involved about hunger, Bread for the World, that organization. In dealing with their issues internationally and actually you know I don't really think there is a very intense or developed majority of you. I think there are people in the district who are very intensely interested in this. I happen to agree with their point of view, and so I am likely to support a lot of what they support. They could be a right wing group. Let's say it's a right-wing group that has a very firm issue, firm views on some foreign policy issue. There, too, there's not going to be a majority of you. I'm going to strongly disagree, and so I will not hesitate to vote against their view just because they're a small, intense group. I'm not going to feel compelled to go their way. Of course there are other issues where there very definitely is a majority of you, and there are issues where there is a party

view, you say primary voters. Yes, I mean they're and usually I'm in sync with those views with what has become a party position on something like the Affordable Care Act or Build Back Better, and so I, there's no question that yes it's a party view, but there's also no question that it's very strongly in line with my own values.

CHERVENAK: What about in terms of the future? You know that you've got your current constituency and you're also in a position which is interesting with such a strong set of younger people in terms of the universities, etc., what about one or two generations down, three generations down, ten generations down? Do you feel like you are representing them as well, or are you representing the current people, and those future generations are kind of embedded into this current generation?

PRICE: Well, if we don't think about that, we should. I'm not sure any of us think very far beyond maybe the next couple of generations. I have grandchildren. I do think about them. I think especially in terms of the world they're inheriting, about the environment, the climate, changes that are going to be so drastic and much shorter time frame than we thought. I do think about that, and I sometimes say to constituents, I say look, 100 years from now when people look back on us and say, what were you thinking, what could you have been thinking?, that's going to be the issue that those climate changes and those catastrophic changes potentially and in the planet we inhabit, so that's the issue that just needs to force itself on us I think much more in a future-oriented way than we often understand.

But, I don't know, there are other issues that have certainly an implication for future generations and the way we will live. I don't know that any of them are quite as dramatic as, or quite as obviously on a trajectory as the way climate is. But I've always thought of social justice issues in that way, and I think it's particularly distressing that Republicans have decided that they're going to use this dog whistle of critical race theory for their political advantage then. The reason that's dangerous is that it really does, it really does encourage a kind of sanitized and heroic view of history, which is not a good guide for the future that you're talking about. In fact it's a way of shutting ourselves off, I think to the way American history has worked.

I mean this is a very tangled, mixed history, and it kind of cries out for an honest rendering, and if we're, if we're constrained and you know I here again in the book I quote Bill Coffin, who I knew years ago at Yale, he said look, what does a country need in terms of patriotism? Country doesn't need uncritical lovers, nor does the country need loveless critics. What a country needs is loyal, loyal citizens who love the country and who respect its history but who also constantly are mindful of its flaws and want to make it better, and that, help us if that doesn't become our historical view. And so yes I think especially in questions of social justice and the, you know, the kind of, what each new generation considers in terms of human rights and what the scope of our ideals are, who they include, you know that continues to expand, and so I definitely think that we need to have that view of where we've been, and that influences our view of where we're going.

And you know we've, this the democracy work overseas has the same influence, the same effect on me. You know I'm often led to reflect on our kind of mixed history and our mixed present, and so we're in trouble if we aren't aspiring to do better, but I'm not saying we always do that very effectively or certainly not more than a couple of generations out.

CHERVENAK: Yeah, I mean I think one of the fundamental challenges Congress has is that it's a short-term institution in that everyone can turn over within two years, right, but at the same time it can create liabilities in the long term, whether it's budget liabilities, whether it's climate liabilities, whether it's, there's a whole range of long-term liabilities it can create, but meanwhile it's engineered to have short-term incentives around its constituents. So that's a fundamental challenge I think democracy has, and it's interesting to hear you talk through it.

PRICE: Yeah, we're facing that right now with this Build Back Better. We're having to cut it back, and the way we cut it back is to make it shorter term, right, I mean it's, and so I've been working on the housing provisions of that, and you know we're going to have more vouchers on the street for people to get affordable housing. We're going to finance those up to a point, and then there's going to be a future Congress that's going to have to decide, do you fall off this cliff, or do you continue this? And I don't like doing it that way, but you're right. There's a lot built into our process, even when we're doing something you know big and lasting, presumably. There's a lot built into our process that is going to, it'll be made or broken by future Congresses. It's not there for the ages, necessarily.

CHERVENAK: So you know my next question is around fundamental institutional improvements that Congress should make within a 50-year time frame. So you know big, big things facing Congress, you know, from your book or from your personal experience, what areas do you think Congress as an institution really needs to improve in the coming 50 years?

PRICE: Well I can address that, but, and I will, but I think a lot of what's going on in the Congress now, a lot of the dysfunction is not fixable within the terms of just Congressional operations. We have, and Norm Ornstein I'm sure said this, and I think he's exactly right, that our politics has taken a turn particularly the asymmetrical polarization, and by that he and I mean not only parties that are more homogeneous within and more divided. We do have that, but in the Republican party there has been a particular turn toward almost anarchism. And certainly I mean starting with the Tea Party and then Trumpism and now this defense of the insurrection, you know, it's hard to know how we come together when we are not just so far apart but so, trying to work with some, an ideology that fundamentally just disdains government and perhaps disdains the rule of law, who knew.

But the differences are very, very wide, and they are substantive. It's not just that, it's not just a your apart on a scale, it's the nature of the beliefs that we're being asked to accommodate, so I do think for the parties to regroup, for there to be a center-right party in this country, a genuinely conservative party, I think the country needs that, just as we need a center-left party that's always pushing for liberal values and for more inclusion. I just don't know how we operate otherwise, and so anything I'm going to say about institutional change is kind of at the

mercy of those larger political forces, and it's one reason I fight so hard for Democratic victories because I think the other side, I mean we saw them drive away two speakers, and this was even before Trump.

I just, I'm not quite sure how we operate under Republican governance. Maybe we're going to see, and you know with the midterm elections, I don't know, but I fear what might come from that, so having said that, yeah institutionally I think you need to, I think we need to have a revitalization of the committee system. I'm actually fairly hopeful about that. I, you know, the major changes in terms of centralizing the House and devaluing committee service, that mainly came with Newt Gingrich. Nancy Pelosi certainly wasn't going to go back to the days of Dingell and Rostenkowski. Nobody should have expected that. Nobody should have wanted it.

A more centralized House was here to stay, and polarization actually makes that more, makes that necessary, not only makes it more likely, it makes it necessary because it takes more of a centralized effort to pull things together and to make things happen. You can't just farm things out to the committee and let nature take its course. That's not the way it's going to work. Having said that, we are centralized now in a way, thanks partly to the polarization, thanks partly to the pandemic and to operating under crisis conditions, I believe whoever the next, assuming there's a Democratic speaker, I'll just speak to that.

I think whoever the next Democratic speaker is is going to be under a lot of pressure from within our party to dial it back and to install more of a regular order kind of operation with the committees, and I think the committees are going to feel more of a need to empower subcommittees, and I don't think it will be a full-scale decentralization, but I do think there is a widespread desire in our caucus to empower the committees and to empower service on the committees and service down through the ranks. So I do think that's not only possible but, or desirable, but I think it's likely. I don't know how far it'll go, I don't know what the dimensions will be. It'll matter, of course, if we have a three-vote margin.

That's different than if we have a 30 vote margin, you know, as to what is likely to, how much slack there's going to be in the system, but I would, I do think we will not maintain these pandemic conditions operations where we're doing everything about reconciliation bills and it's all assembled in the speaker's office. I do not think that will continue, and I would think most of our members would share that. If we if we lose the chair and Republicans take charge, and I'll leave it to them to game it out.

I'm not sure what the future will look like except that I think they'll have an even harder time governing than they did before, you know, they were worried about the frequent caucus before. Now they're worried about true insurgents, and it's just, I mean there are people, right, today in the news today, there are there are members of the Republican caucus who are saying those 13 members who voted for the infrastructure bill that was a bipartisan bill in the Senate, they're saying those 13 members should be stripped of their committee assignments, and I don't think that will happen, but I do think it's indicative of the internal turmoil that you're likely to see.

CHERVENAK: All right, well the last question is really about your priorities for the coming year in the long term. So I know you've got some time left. You've announced your retirement, you know, what do you hope to accomplish before you leave Washington officially, and then what do you have planned afterwards?

PRICE: Well, I don't know about afterwards. I'll probably do some teaching and maybe help with a few causes that I care about. I really haven't processed that yet, but I'm, you know, it's, I'm very, very mixed feelings about leaving. It's time I think, personally, for me to pass the baton, that time has come, but I said in my statement announcing this, that if you expect me to say the normal things about having achieved a sense of closure, forget it. You know, this is, if you're looking for closure, this is the wrong job for you. You're never going to have that. In fact you're likely to have an ever-expanding sense of how much needs to be done, and so there's a yes, do you have a sense of achievement?

Sure, I can look to a number of things that we've done here in the district and in housing and transportation policy and this democracy work. I, you know, I'm proud of those achievements and I guess the most obvious answer to your question, most obvious aspect of my answer is that I want to leave those in good shape. I really, we've made some headway toward like bringing housing to the front burner and making it a critical national investment, and I want to solidify that the best I can. I want to solidify the kind of multimodal approach we've taken to transportation both in North Carolina and Ashley, so I'll try to continue to work on those issues and leaving them in a strong position financially and otherwise. And then with the House Democracy Partnership, I feel a particular concern. The pandemic has been hard on us. We are now back in term in personal meetings in limited ways, but I feel like we got a lot of work to do in the next 14 months of getting that bipartisan institution in a stronger position, so that's, I'm going to pay a lot of attention to that.

CHERVENAK: Well, Congressman Price, thank you so much for your time. It's been a pleasure, and I look forward to seeing you in the coming year achieving those objectives.

PRICE: Well thank you. This is an interesting project. I'm glad to be part of it. Thank you.

CHERVENAK: Thank you.