Doing the Right Thing
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 PREFACE AND ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

It is no wonder the American Congress is among the most reviled of American institutions, political or otherwise. We know a great deal about the institution, its structure and constitutional power, its organization, and the people who inhabit it and their behavior. Unfortunately, much of what we pass on to students is quite negative in tone. The institution is frequently depicted as gridlocked, impotent, overly influenced by special interests, and even corrupt. Political scientists would seem to be at least partly to blame for this impression. Far from disputing these notions, our models of legislative organization and behavior appear to confirm them by utilizing the electoral motivation as an organizing principle and treating legislators as utility maximizers interested in accruing “gains from trade.”

While there is a great deal to be learned from these models and from these organizing principles, this book is animated by the welcome observation that Congress does sometimes do the right thing. The “right” thing is an admittedly subjective concept; but meeting the literature on Congress on its own terms, we might argue that Congress is doing the “right” thing when it enacts policies that confer benefits widely perceived to be in the public interest while imposing costs on small, concentrated, and, as a result, powerful groups. By this definition, Congress does the “right” thing far more often than the bulk of the literature would have us believe. I do not wade into the difficult question of why they do this; rather this book is completely focused on the question of how members of Congress do the right thing. As we will come to see, the deft manipulation of procedures is a critical component of doing the right thing. These procedural maneuvers remain a remarkably underappreciated and misunderstood part of the legislative process. They are underappreciated in a scholarly literature that does not recognize the central role they can play in altering policy outcomes. They are misunderstood in a scholarly literature that too frequently portrays them as tools designed to frustrate accountability and responsibility by members of the contemporary Congress. In this book, I seek to add some balance to that portrayal of America’s central lawmaking institution.

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advisor, John Hird, offered helpful comments and a guiding hand throughout the process and he was very generous with his most precious resource—his time. He always read drafts of chapters faster than I could celebrate their completion and provided constructive advice in coping with the most difficult theoretical problems I encountered. This study is far more coherent and interesting for his efforts, and what problems remain are my responsibility alone. I would also like to thank the members of my dissertation committee, Fred Kramer and Ralph Whitehead. They agreed to serve on my committee despite a host of other commitments when I had no reward to give other than my thanks, and they offered useful suggestions along the way. I appreciate their sacrifice of time and energy, and I hope the final product can serve as a partial payment of the debt I owe to them.

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