
Henry Waxman is plain spoken and tells many good stories here. The subtitle of the book is a little overstated, as the book is a chronological account of his life focusing mainly on his many legislative successes and struggles. If we are to distill a list of *how Congress really works* from his pages, we might find something like this: (the words are mine, not his)

- It is good to be from a safe district, in large part because one is not so beholden to the people who fund campaigns.
- Republicans can be astonishingly kooky. Some get apoplectic about homosexuality, and are blinded to public health issues. Some dislike any government spending, and would rather cut budget lines even if the consequence is many more cheaply preventable deaths. Among the chief kooks in the book is Ronald Reagan. Not all are kooky—Orrin Hatch comes across as a mostly reasonable man, for example.
- Personal contacts are essential for political success. Waxman always was gregarious and talked to whoever might become a supporter. Several of his stories turn on getting a friend or acquaintance to talk to someone important, like President Reagan, who then changed positions and supported an important bill. Personal relationships with legislators on the other side of the aisle can turn into surprising compromises.
- Public perceptions turn on disasters and media events, and legislators have to use them wisely. This theme appears again and again. This is especially noteworthy when fighting wealthy, powerful interests.
- Committees in Congress have specific jobs, and Congress works well, when it does, when those committees are allowed to do their jobs. Partisan conflict is of course the norm in Congress, but the extreme polarization under Gingrich and most subsequent Republican party leaders led to a breakdown of the system.
- Bipartisanship is a good thing, and Waxman misses it.

This list should be compared to other perspectives on Congress, such as the analysis offered in Mann & Ornstein’s *The Broken Branch*.

One of Waxman’s FDA-related stories was about the Nutrition Labeling and Education Act of 1990, which contains many passages that were his personal victories (and a loss—the public relations fight against strict labeling of supplements led to weaker prohibitions on health claims). These earlier stories of life with Reagan and the first President Bush are almost setups for the political fights he faced during the Bush II years. Bush and his appointees, in Waxman’s account, consistently sided with industry and against public health concerns. Waxman’s Republican colleagues discarded the older rules of comity with the minority party, and Waxman took to issuing “Waxman Reports,” of the minority (Democrat) members on his committees. It is a sign of another theme that runs through the book: Never give up. Be patient. Keep working.