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<u>Pork and Votes:</u> The Effect of Military Base Closings on the Vote in Ensuing Congressional Elections

PAPER SYNOPSIS: In 1988, the Commission on Base Realignment and Closure recommended some 25 major military facilities for closure or significant staffing reductions. Newspaper and magazine articles and some academic works have argued with certainty that loss of a major military facility would endanger the affected Member of Congress' chances for reelection. This study elaborates the assumptions implicit in this prediction and tests the relationship between base closings and electoral outcome.

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Before 1988, it was widely accepted that Members of Congress would oppose any effort to close a military base in their districts and that Members who lost a base should expect the loss to harm their chances for reelection. Rep. Dick Armey (R-Tex) observed:

Each and every member [of Congress] who has a base in his or her district is naturally going to protect that. That is understandable and in fact necessary for the individual member. 1

Former U.S. Representative and base closing commission co-chair Jack Edwards noted that base closings were "political dynamite" for Members of Congress.<sup>2</sup> And Secretary of Defense Dick Cheney once commented wryly, "I never met a Congressman with a base in his district he didn't like."

A host of anecdotes have emerged to substantiate the general proposition that Members of Congress (MCs) who don't pork barrel face electoral defeat or at least slim margins in ensuing elections.<sup>3</sup> Academics have not opposed this proposition. David Mayhew, for example, referred to those congressional idealists who denounce pork barreling for their districts as "saints," due to their self-sacrificing tendencies and perhaps due to their tendency to be martyrized.

Pork barreling is generally seen as the Member of Congress' paradox. On the one hand, they can consider 'non-political' criteria in determining the location of federal projects. For example, military bases can be built where they will be most secure from preemptive strikes, have adequate space for

maneuvers, occupy land with the fewest alternative uses. But MCs who use these 'non-political' criteria to vote against building a military base in their districts or to vote for closing one there may be depicted at home as not representing their districts' interests.

Because of their size and prominence in most communities, military bases are the ideal subject of a study of the effect of pork barreling on electoral outcomes. They represent thousands of jobs to communities. The staff at the base may live in the city and shop at local stores. The presence of the base attracts a host of support firms and retailers. The base also cements its position in the community through annual events such as air shows or open houses.

Military base closures provide a clear opportunity to gauge the relationship between pork barreling and electoral margin for three reasons: First, our null hypothesis is that voters are sensitive to failure to attract new federal projects (as in the anecdotes mentioned above), we must expect them to be doubly aware of congressional failures to sustain large existing federal facilities. Second, military bases are unusually large, visible, continuing sources of local economic support. The base is large in that it employs thousands of people and pumps millions of dollars into the local economy. Its visibility is attributable both to its size and to its role in the community. It may host open houses or it may cooperate with civil defense and emergency preparedness authorities to raise its profile in the region.

Unlike some public works programs, the military base is generally perceived as a continuing source of economic stimulation to the local economy. Finally, the electorate must place the blame for closure squarely on the shoulders of the local Member of Congress and the state's Senators. No other official is elected with the expressed duty of representing a single state or district in the federal government. Thus, the comparison of districts which experienced base closures with those which did not allow us to measure what, if any, effect an incumbent Member of Congress' ability to attract/retain federal dollars has on their margin in ensuing elections.

The creation of the Commission on Base Realignment and Closure offers precisely this opportunity to examine the relationship between pork barreling and electoral results. The case is interesting because, contrary to our expectations, not all Members of Congress opposed the loss of a major military base in their districts. In fact, the 25 Members of Congress (MCs) from the hardest hit districts reacted to the proposal differently, potentially resulting in different electoral consequences. Some fought the closings in Congress by supporting legislation to overturn the commission recommendations. Some tried to thwart the closings through the appropriations process. Some went to court. Some accepted the closures reluctantly. A few supported them.

Did the individual strategy matter? Did the Members' leadership during the early transition in the base-closings

prevent electoral repercussions from the closing itself? Did the Members' extensive press coverage surrounding the base closings actually improve their electoral margins? Did legislative opponents make use of the base-closing issue in their campaigns? Did the base-closing have any effect on affected MCs' vote margins?

# Assumptions About Base Closings

Academics have generally assumed that pork barreling brings votes. Base-closings are a negative form of pork barreling, of sorts. That is, we assume that the loss of a military base results in lost votes in the ensuing election. In fact, three assumptions seem implicit in this belief:

First, we assume that every MC will fight to save every military base in the district. Admittedly, this is somewhat a straw man argument<sup>4</sup>, except that it has many prominent supporters. The quotes at the beginning of this paper from Armey, Edwards and Cheney all endorsed this idea. We could add Senator Phil Gramm: "There is something in the heart of every politician that loves a dam, or a harbor or a bridge or a military installation. They want money coming into the area and they defend to the death the continuation of a base." Similarly, Jon Kyl, R-Ariz., noted, "Congress cannot and will not allow bases to be closed, it is too politically difficult."

Among congressional pundits, Nick Kotz has observed:

"Anything that causes a loss in jobs, [Members of Congress]

automatically respond to. The knee-jerk reaction of the member
is too often to protect the constituent interests when there are
vast national interests involved."

The second assumption of the base-closing/vote-loss relationship suggests that if a military base is closed, the challenger in the ensuing congressional election will make the base closure an issue in their campaign. Of course, citizens who are upset about the base closing might vent their anger on the incumbent, regardless of the challenger's campaign strategy, yet it is reasonable to expect that the optimum electoral impact of the base closing would be felt if the opponent publicized it as an issue in the campaign.

Finally, we assume the base closure will result in lost votes for the incumbent Member of Congress. Voters in the district will feel that the MC is not adequately representing the district's interests, and will thereby defect to the challenger.

These assumptions are hardly radical, but the recent round of base closings offers the opportunity to examine each more closely.

#### Methodology

Each assumption was examined separately in this preliminary study. The first assumption was explored by reviewing the voting records, press coverage and public statements of Members of

Congress from districts which lost major military bases.

Additionally, staffmembers of these MCs were interviewed to learn about the strategy which each office pursued to respond to the closing.

The second assumption was studied through interviews with congressional staffmembers and with the campaign managers of incumbents and challengers, to the extent possible.

The third assumption is the most interesting in this paper, and also the most difficult to investigate. The relationship between loss of a military base and lost votes in the ensuing election is presented here only in summary form using results from the 1990 congressional election. The effect of the base closing on the 1990 election outcomes should be somewhat dampened by the fact that no base had actually closed as of November 1990 as a result of the Commission on Base Realignment and Closing recommendations. It is possible that a delayed effect might be evident in 1992 or even as late as 1994 in some races.

At a later point in this investigation, it is hoped that the effect of the closings/realignments on electoral margins can be studied either through estimation of a statistical voting model or through review of actual returns in affected neighborhoods.

The statistical models which could be employed in this research have been carefully developed for the study of the effect of campaign spending on congressional election outcomes.8 One of these models could be adapted by adding a dummy independent variable distinguishing Members who lost a base from those who did not. An additional dummy might be added to

distinguish MCs who fought the closing from those who did not.

An appealing alternative for estimating this effect would be to interview campaign managers, congressional staffers, local officials and military base staff to try to identify the particular precincts which would have suffered the most severe economic hardship as a result of loss of the base employment. (This might be helped by reviewing the MC's mail to locate senders of the letters opposing closure.) Then, a comparably simple test might be undertaken to compare change in the incumbent's vote 1988-1990 in the most severely affected precincts with the change in the remainder of the district. This approach would be sensitive to other geographic electoral factors, such as favorite son status of the challenger.

#### Preliminary Results

We begin by testing the hypothesis that each MC would fight to save their military bases, focussing on Member votes on the creation of the commission and to overturn its recommendations. The House approved the legislation to establish the base-closing commission on a vote of 223-186. Members whose districts would later be hardest hit by the commission's recommendations split evenly 12-10. This suggests that, on average, these MCs were not exceptionally concerned by the potential for the commission to recommend closure or realignment of a facility in their districts.

When it came time to vote to disapprove the commission recommendations, the House voted the proposal down 43-381; affected MCs supported the measure 15-9. This would seem to confirm that, on balance, House members voted to protect bases in their district. Of course, given our assumptions, the surprise in this data is that any member voted to allow the bases to close. In fact, members responded to the proposed base closings in four ways:

# Fight the Good Battle

In fact, almost all affected MCs voiced opposition to the recommendation to close or realign so as to significantly reduce the base in their districts. However, this opposition varied from lip service at the time of the announcement to prolonged struggle employing a variety of legislative strategies.

Here, MCs who fought a prolonged struggle to save their bases are considered those who "fought the good battle." One loose coalition of affected MCs, headed by Rep. Saxton of New Jersey (Fort Dix), led the effort for congressional rejection of the commission's list. Several of these legislators continued to struggle by attempting to block funding for the base closings, seek ways to retain certain military units and/or government owned corporations on base, or to create other arrangements whereby the military presence would continue in the district.

#### Go to Court

After Congress failed to reject the base closings, Illinois representatives, facing the loss of Chanute Air Force Base and Fort Sheridan, opted to place their faith in two lawsuits. The National Federation of Federal Employees filed suit in federal court, challenging the constitutionality of the commission that recommended the closings. Also, the Illinois attorney general considered litigation charging that the plant closing decisions were "arbitrary and capricious." 9

# Facilitate the Transition

Several representatives opted against fighting the closures/
realignments. Instead they tried to facilitate the economic
transition by leading initiatives to form citizen's committees to
study possible uses for the old base. These Members engaged in a
variety of additional activities including: contacting the
Office of Economic Adjustment in the Department of Defense to
arrange planning assistance and supporting legislation for
additional planning assistance. Hopkins (KY), Matsui (CA),
McMillen (MD), Smith (NH) are examples of members who announced
their intention to follow this strategy in the press.

This group might be divided into two categories. The first are the representatives who lost facilities which were not particularly popular in the community. The <u>Philadelphia</u>

<u>Inquirer</u>, for example, suggested that a military hospital there had been the target of criticism for some time and that many in

the city saw this as an opportunity to improve medical care in the area. The second group lost bases or staff at bases which were considered economically important to the community. In two cases, the representatives acquiesced to the inevitable political success of the base-closing strategy. One argued that the loss was bad for his district, but was philosophically consistent with his and his constituents' support of governmental efficiency.

# Make Few and Low-Key Efforts

This category includes MCs who fought the good fight up to the point of the vote to reject the commission list, but took a hands-off approach to community decision making on reuse of the facility. For example, one representative was a go-between, but not a principal actor, for a Mayor's task force on the reuse of an Air Force Base.

Why did representatives accept, even support, full or partial base closures in their districts. In this small database, two reasons seemed most important. Members of Congress who lost bases in areas which were economically robust and where popular alternative uses for the land could easily be found seemed most willing to allow facilities to close. This list would include such bases as Fort Meade, Fort Sheridan, Cameron Station and Brooklyn Naval Station. The second reason involved the political aspirations of affected members. Two members who planned Senate campaigns suggested that the base-closing issue

would be useful to demonstrate their priorities on broader interests over parochial considerations. Additionally, one member did not oppose the closing due to personal ideology, arguing that his and his districts' desire for government efficiency outweighed their desire for a military base.

#### BASE CLOSINGS IN THE ELECTION

Based on several staff interviews as of this writing, it seems that election challengers did not highlight the base closings in their campaigns. When mentioned at all, the closing was generally included in campaign literature on the "failures" of the incumbent, but was not the central topic of any television or radio advertising, and was only one item among many in newspaper ads. In one instance, the closing was turned into a positive issue for an incumbent. Rep. McMillen supported legislation to convert a large portion of Fort Meade for park use. He subsequently used his success in this effort as one of the central campaign themes of his reelection campaign.

How did the representatives who lost military bases fare in the 1990 election? Three were uncontested. (Three from this list had been uncontested in 1988.) One was elected to the Senate (Robert Smith, NH). Of the twenty who were challenged in congressional elections, all but one (Stanford Parris, VA) were successful, a reasonable average given the approximate 95 percent national incumbent retention rate in 1990. On balance, affected Members saw their electoral margins decline from 1988. Five had

larger margins; thirteen had smaller margins. Of those whose margins had declined, only three received less than 60 percent of the vote.

A further analysis compares the average change of electoral margin for incumbents who did not lose a base with those who did. This analysis is limited to races where 1) there was a 1990 incumbent who was first elected in or before 1988 and 2) the incumbent had faced major-party opposition in both 1988 and 1990.

As seen in Table I, on average, those who had lost a base received margins which were about two percent narrower than those who did not lose a base. Moreover, the group which lost bases had a greater percentage of members with a smaller margin of victory in 1990, than those who did not lose bases.

TABLE I
Change in Electoral Margin 1988 - 1990

	Members with Wider Margin in 1990	Members with Narrower Margin in 1990
Members with base closures	4 (21%)	15 (79%)
Members with no base closures	77 (30%)	182 (70%)

A second factor was included in the analysis to determine whether the number of representatives who were freshmen affected the group electoral margins. Representatives who were first elected in 1988 probably faced a well-funded incumbent that year,

but by 1990, they were incumbents and presumably better funded.

Thus, in 1990, we would expect them to increase their margin.

Table II shows that freshmen generally improved their margins more than non-freshmen between 1988 and 1990. While the gap between MCs who lost a base and those who gained one narrows for non-freshmen when we control for the effect of freshman status, it remains at about 1.5 percent for non-first-termers. The gap is much larger for freshmen (over five percent), but the number of freshmen who lost a base is too low to draw statistical inferences.

TABLE II

Average Percent Change in Electoral Margin 1988 - 1990

Controlled for Freshman Status (no. of MCs)

	Non-Freshmen	Freshmen
Members with	-3.76	4.18
Base Closures	(234)	(25)
Members with no	-5.25	-1.15
Base Closures	(18)	(1)

#### CONCLUSIONS

In reviewing the three assumptions which were presented at the start of this paper, we suggest that popular generalizations about Congress and military base closings are oversimplifications and to some degree inaccurate. First, Members of Congress do not uniformly oppose the closure of bases in their own districts. Economic value of the base compared to other uses of the land, the representative's desire for higher office, and personal

philosophy of the representative all contribute to the likelihood that a Member of Congress will accept, even endorse, a closing or significant realignment in their district.

Second, challengers rarely made the base closures an issue in the ensuing election. When they did, the issue was low-key. This observation, however, may change as bases actually begin to close and the economic impacts of the closures are felt.

Finally, preliminary evidence suggests that, while loss of a base may have affected the margin which an incumbent received, it was not the singular cause of any defeat in 1990. On average, incumbents who lost bases saw their electoral margins decline by 1.5 - 2 percent more between 1988 - 1990 than those who did not lose a military base. This conclusion is tentative, however, as important other factors (party identification of challengers and the administration, campaign spending, challenger background) must be added to fully specify a model of congressional electoral outcomes.

A statistical model including these variables will help answer three questions: Does losing a base determine the MC's electoral margin or does the Member's skill in handling the issue affect their election returns? Do voters prefer to dispose of a base, if it can be put to more profitable uses? Did the strategy selected to respond to the proposed base closing/realignment affect the vote received? These are topics for later phases of the analysis.

# Endnotes

- 1. Congressional Quarterly Weekly Report. July 2, 1988. p. 1815.
- Edwards quoted by Kathleen Sylvester, "What to do When Your Local Military Base Makes the Pentagon Hit List," <u>Governing</u>. November 1988, p. 23.
- 3. Among those who reportedly have suffered close-calls in elections due to their reluctance to pork-barrel are minority leader Congressman Michel and Congressmen Hiler.
- 4. Morris Fiorina, for example, has modelled the circumstances under which MCs might have an adequate base of support such that they might make decisions which are not in the immediate interest of their reelection. (Representatives, Roll Calls, and Constituencies) Fred Thompson contends that MCs will gladly support base closings where more profitable uses of the land are possible. ("Why America's Military Base Structure Cannot Be Reduced," Public Administration Review. January/February 1988, pp. 557 563.
- 5. Gramm quoted in Congressional Quarterly Weekly Report. October 15, 1988, p. 2999
- 6. Kyl quoted in <u>Congressional Quarterly Weekly Report</u>. July 9, 1988, p 1910.
- 7. Kotz quoted in <u>Congressional Quarterly Weekly Report</u>. July 2, 1988, p. 1815.
- Gary Jacobson, "The Effects of Campaign Spending in House Elections: New Evidence for Old Arguments," <u>American Journal of Political Science</u>. May 1990, pp. 334 - 62. This is only one of Jacobson's many works on the subject.
- 9. Chicago Tribune, 4-19-89, p11

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