

Bill Clinton's recognition of value for firefighters and the efforts to modernise...

[Government](#)



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

The Firefighter Investment and Response Enhancement Act H. R. 1168 (106th), from here on referred to as the FIRE Act, started as a relatively simple piece of legislation submitted by Rep. William J. Pascrell (D-NJ). Rep. Pascrell, a former mayor, had difficulty funding local fire services and sought to reform how firefighters received supplemental funding. Originally introduced as H. R. 4229 (105th): the 21st Century Fire and Public Safety Act, the bill sought to distribute five billion dollars in grants for local fire departments to be used for hiring, equipment, training, and whatever else they needed to be effective in their municipalities (Conlan, Timothy, Posner pg. 44). Providing funds in this manner started during the Clinton administration's community policing initiative (The Community Oriented Policing Services program), which sought similar funding goals but for police departments (Conlan, Timothy, Posner pg. 44). However, Clinton accomplished the COPS program while Congress was still under his control. Whereas Pascrell wanted to get this legislation out of a Republican controlled congress, and while he did have two Republican co-sponsors, it did him little good. The bill went on to the House Science, Space, and Technology Committee where it quickly died without as much as a hearing (U. S. Gov Publishing Office).

In the 105th Congress where Pascrell's original bill died, Pascrell was a freshman in the minority party and lacked the necessary understanding of legislative tactics needed to get his bill passed. The year following Pascrell's first attempt to reform firefighter funding a new Congress met, and with it a new opportunity for the bill to succeed. While the 21st Century Fire and Public Safety Act of 1998 did not receive much attention in the 105th

Congress, it did end up attracting big players in the firefighter lobby. Lobbyists directed Pascrell to Rep. Curt Weldon (R-PA), better known as the co-chair of the Congressional Fire Caucus (Conlan, Timothy, Posner pg. 44). Together they reworked the 21st Century Fire and Public Safety Act of 1998 and filed a new bill, the FIRE Act, on March 17th, 1999. Aside from the new name given to the bill, the content remained mostly the same. The significant change that Rep. Weldon added was how that money flowed down to the local level, changing it to five billion over five years. The new version of the bill also received sixty-eight cosponsors and continued grassroots lobbying efforts from the multiple firefighting organizations invested in the bill's success (Conlan, Timothy, Posner pg. 45).

The new version of the FIRE Act was short lived as it stalled in the House Science Committee's Subcommittee on Basic Research. Conservative chairman Rep. James Sensenbrenner (R-Wis) refused to hold a hearing on the bill due to the tremendous cost of the program, as well as the precedent the bill would set by expanding the obligations of the federal government (Conlan, Timothy, Posner pg. 45). However, Rep. Weldon was not ready to forfeit. He sought out a partnership with Rep. Steny Hoyer (D-MD), the Democratic co-chair of the Congressional Fire Caucus, to offer a smaller one-time one-hundred million dollar amendment that provided grants to fire departments. Hoyer and Weldon introduced their amendment on the floor as a part of the almost thirteen billion dollar Emergency Supplemental Appropriations Act of 2000 (H. R. 3908) (Conlan, Timothy, Posner pg. 45).

With the support of the Congressional Fire Caucus, both parties in the House rallied behind the Weldon-Hoyer proposal and passed it easily with a vote of

<https://assignbuster.com/bill-clintons-recognition-of-value-for-firefighters-and-the-efforts-to-modernise-this-field/>

386-28. Unfortunately, the amendment was subsequently stripped out of the bill in conference committee by Republican leaders despite having the backing of Sen. John McCain (R-AZ) (Conlan, Timothy, Posner pg. 45).

The essence of the FIRE Act survived through an amendment strategy utilized by Sen. Chris Dodd (D-CT). He did so by adding language similar to the FIRE Act into an amendment to the Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2001 (S. 2549). This amendment would have provided 2.1 billion dollars in grants over six years, down from the previous versions of the bill, but significantly larger than the amendment offered in the House (Conlan, Timothy, Posner pg. 45). This addition received strong backing from the chairman of the Senate Armed Forces Committee, Sen. John Warner (R-VA), as well as the ranking minority member Sen. Carl Levin (D-MI). The bill, now amended with the support of the committee chairs, came up for a vote in the Senate which they passed by a vote of 97-3 (Conlan, Timothy, Posner pg. 46). However it was not yet over, as the bill encountered opposition once again in Conference Committee. Sen. John McCain fought to secure some of the funding rather than allowing the entire amendment to be stripped out again (Conlan, Timothy, Posner pg. 46). Within the Conference Committee, McCain was able to strike a deal for a two-year provision that provided four-hundred million dollars in grants to fire departments (One-hundred million dollars for FY2001, and Three-hundred million dollars in FY2002). Support for the program was solidified by adding a provision requiring that no single grant could exceed seven hundred fifty thousand dollars. The newly revised bill then came out of conference committee and was sent to both houses for

passage. The final roll call vote in the House was 382-31, and the final roll call vote in the Senate 90-3 (Congress. gov).

While full funding of the original versions of the FIRE Act never occurred, it was still the first major federal program that offered federal assistance for fire services. After September 11th, 2001 public and congressional support rallied behind first responders, and the change in policy was drastic. In 2003, five years after the first bill was introduced, the Government Accountability Office calculated that there were twenty-one categorical grants aiding first responders, training firefighters, and providing equipment (Conlan, Timothy, Posner pg. 47).

Analysis

When the 21st Century Fire and Public Safety Act arrived on the floor during the 105th Congress little was known about the issue it sought to remedy. Legislators avoided the bill due to the large amount of money it required and the lack of public interest in the topic during a time highlighted by the President's impeachment proceedings. However, a mere five years later there were numerous programs that provided federal funding to enhance first responders ability to help effectively during disasters, as well as everyday emergencies. While this sudden flood of money was a result of the attacks on the Twin Towers in New York City, getting the funding before then for these programs proved to be much more of a challenge. My analysis will focus primarily on how the issue moved through Congress prior to this major event.

First, why the 21st Century Fire and Public Safety Act developed into the Firefighter Investment and Response Enhancement. When Rep. Pascrell envisioned the 21st Century FPSA (Fire and Public Safety Act), he did so before he even entered Congress while his local fire department suffered from a lack of meaningful funding. This effort is an example of the policy strategy known as the Garbage Can model, where policy makers use pre-drafted solutions in order to accomplish their goals. However, Rep. Pascrell lacked the necessary political tools - interest group backing, significant bipartisan support, or backing from the Congressional Fire Caucus - that he needed in order to advance his legislation. Acting as a political entrepreneur and trying to force significant policy change into an area where Congress lacked precedent demonstrated Pascrell's relative innocence in the legislative arena. Eventually, the policy stream would shift to a more favorable environment for him to achieve his original goal, but now was not the time. Furthermore, the fact that Rep. Pascrell did not get so much as a hearing on a bill that would usually attract the support or at the very least sympathy of members of Congress is unusual. Especially since the final version of the legislation that passed did so with enormous amounts of support. This I attribute to two things - first that Republican members of Congress in 1998 were wary of anything modeled after a Clinton policy. This, of course, was due to the impeachment trial that the House was holding at the time, and Republicans knew that anything positive the Clinton administration could claim credit for would not bode well for the proceedings. The second is that Rep. Sensenbrenner, who chaired the House Committee on Science and Technology at the time, sensed intense party

loyalty at this time would put him in a position to move up within the party. Identifying trends with the Policy Agenda's project shows that Rep. Sensenbrenner's committee did not hold as many hearings in 1998 as one would assume, especially as the Y2K bug loomed. In general, in 1997 and 1998 there were fewer Committee hearings held in the house than in past years. However after Clinton's acquittal, hearings spiked significantly, possibly indicating a backlog of legislation that needed to be discussed (See chart on the next page). Rep. Sensenbrenner two years later received the chairmanship of the House Committee on Jurisprudence, lending credence to the idea that those who fought with the party during this period received a promotion. FPSA most likely would have been abandoned after the failure, but interest groups decided to embrace the bill and advance it further.

Policy Agendas Project

This is where the pluralist policy pathway helped to further Rep. Pascrell's goal. The two major Firefighter interest groups, The International Association of Fire Fighters (IAFF), and the International Association of Fire Chiefs (IAFC) pushed FSPA forward. Recognizing Rep. Pascrell's failed attempt to pass sweeping emergency services funding reform, the IAFC and the IAFF realized they had a new congressman who possessed a sympathetic ear to their problems. The IAFF and the IAFC significantly improved the chances of the bill getting passed by connecting Rep. Weldon with Rep. Pascrell. The interest groups also drove several representatives to co-sponsor the bill, increasing awareness on the issue through aggressive grassroots lobbying campaigns (Conlan, Timothy, Posner pg. 45). The combination of the grassroots lobbying and providing input to enhance the language of the bill

demonstrates the degree of influence that interest groups can have on the process. In this particular case, interest group involvement was integral to the advancement and eventual passage of the legislation. For example, Rep. Pascrell's first draft of the bill had two co-sponsors, but at the final count, the list of co-sponsors reached 285 representatives composed of members from both parties. This was the direct result of effort put in by the interest groups. By doing so, they helped to maintain momentum for the issue and also explains why the amendment that eventually passed received votes from more than two-thirds of Congress (Congress. gov). However, Rep. Sensenbrenner's fundamental disagreement with the policy and use of his gate-keeping authority kept a stand-alone bill from ever reaching the House floor. Although, it is questionable why Rep. Weldon never attempted to utilize a discharge petition during his efforts. Instead after Rep. Sensenbrenner's refusal to give the bill a hearing, Rep. Weldon solicited help from Speaker Gingrich, who assisted in getting multiple referrals for the bill. Unfortunately, the additional referral to the House Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure did not assist in getting the legislation passed. The Committee only held five hearings on referred legislation in the second session of the 106th Congress, partly due to the investigation of Chairman Bud Shuster and his campaign treasurer (Public Policy Project). Lingered in committee for over a year, when the bill finally received a hearing Rep. Weldon had already sought to include similar language from the bill in an amendment.

In order to circumvent the difficulties in committee, Rep. Weldon started seeking out members willing to support an amendment to their bill. This

<https://assignbuster.com/bill-clintons-recognition-of-value-for-firefighters-and-the-efforts-to-modernise-this-field/>

gave Rep. Weldon the power to shape how negotiations would follow on the amendment, as well as give him a chance to demonstrate the variety of support for his legislation. Two separate amendments, one in the House, and one in the Senate attempted to save the legislation from its impasse. In the House, the Congressional Fire Caucus composing of Senator Weldon and Senator Hoyer, proposed a significantly stripped down one hundred million dollar amendment to H. R. 3908 Emergency Supplemental Appropriations Act. In the Senate, Sen. Chris Dodd (D-CT) proposed a larger, 2.1 billion dollar, amendment package to the Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2001 (S. 2549). As I mentioned earlier, the involvement of the IAFF and the IAFC led to massive amounts of support for the amendment in the House. Conversely, the amendment in the Senate did not have the same level of involvement from the interest groups. Instead, the legislation received the endorsement of the committee chairmen and ranking member of the committee responsible for the bill. Gaining the committee chairs' support proved to be more impactful than the interest group involvement in the House, primarily because a less conservative Senate meant more money for the program. Also, as per lecture, legislation that passes out of the Senate has a much greater chance of being able to pass out of the House than vice versa. Both amendments found success in their respective chambers and joined their respective bills. The House bill that was amended did not survive the conference committee and failed to pass, but the Senate bill did. This was in large part due to Sen. McCain's efforts as a congressional workhorse to find a middle ground between the members of the conference committee. Acting as a mediator, he negotiated with the conservatives in the house who

planned to find a way to strip out the amendment. Whereas the House bill that was amended was a non-essential piece of legislation, Congress had to pass the Senate bill. In a definitive strategic move, members of the Senate refused to pass a bill without some form of the FIRE Act. By forcing the issue, the Senate advanced the issue further, whereas the alternative was likely the end of the idea within FIRE Act. Instead, McCain sought to appease House Republicans to get them to agree to a deal. He did so first with a reduced fiscal note, but they were still not supportive mainly because of concerns that grant money would only go to large fire departments. So in addition, McCain sought to alleviate those concerns by introducing a clause stipulating that each department could only qualify for \$750, 000 in matching funds (Conlan, Timothy, Posner pg. 46). With this addition House Republicans finally ceded. This compromise was finally enough to get the bill out of the conference committee and back into both houses where the bill would pass and later become law.

Finally, an analysis of why a stand-alone version of the bill never passed and the implications of this policy area post September 11th. With such large amounts of support in both houses - enough to even overturn a presidential veto - it was very unusual that a stand-alone bill did not pass, or even get a hearing! I argue that it all goes back to John Kingdon's theory of policy streams. Rep. Pascrell was the first congressman to pitch the idea of funding local fire departments from the federal level, and he did so because he had experienced an event on the local level of government that inspired him. While valiant and noble of him to set out to right that wrong, other members of Congress did not possess the same urgency in the task. His role as a

<https://assignbuster.com/bill-clintons-recognition-of-value-for-firefighters-and-the-efforts-to-modernise-this-field/>

political entrepreneur was honestly incredibly successful given the position he was in, that being a freshman congressman in a minority party. He was able to open the policy stream wide enough to attract other Members who were willing to work on the issue, “ But there is much more to do, as these grant awards were simply a downpayment on the partnership between Washington and our local first responders.” – Rep. Pascrell Jan. 31st 2002 (pascrell.house.gov). However, as he indicated in that statement, he was unable to impact the amount of change he desired, which is somewhat uncommon for such a symbolic policy area that is easy to support. I assert the primary reason for this lack of a sweeping policy change was a lack of urgency in both Houses for the issue. While the issue received significant amounts of support, a grassroots lobbying campaign of firefighters calling their congressmen will do that, there was not a major event during that period that warranted significant government action. That is why Rep. Sensenbrenner was so opposed to expanding the role of the government; there simply was no compelling reason to do so. Despite Rep. Sensenbrenner’s wishes, a new policy precedent was established in the final passage of the Defense Authorization Act of FY2001. As a result, I contest that this is one of the explanations for how Congress responded domestically to the attack on 9/11. If the policy of funding local fire departments had not been established previous to 9/11, would Congress have responded with the magnitude of support that it did? While I am sure that Congress would have assisted in some way, whether that be additional FEMA funding or some other similar program, I doubt funding local fire and rescue services would have been their first idea. This gives rise to the Punctuated Equilibrium

Theory, which suggests that change will be incremental until a positive feedback loop occurs, and the public gets on board. Therefore, after the policy stream created a new precedent change would have been incremental for the most part following that. Then following the shock to the public, the new policy option that existed allowed Congress to respond within that new policy area - resulting in the punctuated aspect of the punctuated equilibrium theory. Members of Congress being single-minded seekers of reelection were able to respond on a level that the public could easily support, and that support was more funding for the heroes that protected us during that tragic day. As a result, twenty-one new grant programs were established by 2003 (as mentioned previously) that shared the original intention of the FIRE Act. This result is not something, I argue, Congress would have gone to sought to implement after 9/11 had Rep. Pascrell pioneered Congress into this new policy area.

In conclusion, the FIRE Act while never passing as a stand-alone bill, resulted in the creation of a new policy area within Congress. The timing coincided with one of the most traumatic events in our country's history, leading to a significant expansion into an area that Congress had not anticipated playing a role in prior to Rep. Pascrell.