

27.10: Congressional organization

- Marks complete transition of course from district to Washington
 - Mayhew as bridge: reelection as a motivating force behind what Congress is & does
- New set of questions to consider
 - Why does Congress look like looks?
 - Why does Congress do what it does?
 - Or: How do things get done?
 - How should it look and what should it do?

Begin with the two great & enduring institutions of Congress

- Committees & parties
- When?
- Why?
- How have they developed?
- Several themes
 - Power of committees and parties have varied considerably over time
 - When one is up, the other is down

Useful opportunity to consider current events

- What happened yesterday?
 - http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ujFqR_YCirE
- Various players
 - Senator Reid
 - Senators Baucus & Dodd
 - The caucus
 - The president
 - CBO (“scoring”)
- Who are all these players?
- Why is this announcement considered significant?

What does Constitution say about congressional organization?

- 1 House and Senate shall keep journal (record-keeping, transparency)
- 2 “The House of Representatives shall choose their speaker and other officers”
 - Speaker presides over floor debates
 - Keeps order
 - Sets agenda
 - Rule on motions
- 3 Later, Constitution put Speaker 3rd in line to the presidency

So how did we get committees & parties? Committees first

- First Congresses almost immediately established temporary committees
- What's temporary?
 - “Select” v. “standing”
- Why the hesitation?
 - Jefferson v. Hamilton (again)
- Historical irony
- In early 19th century, first standing committees emerge (esp. after War of 1812)

Why is this important?

- Implies permanent jurisdiction & membership...
 - (really semi-permanence)
- Power centers w/i Congress
- Focus of members' careers
- By 1920 more than 80 committees in the Senate (around the same in House)
- Today, just over 20 in each body
 - Plus subcommittees

Why did Congress institutionalize committees?

- Congress' interest
 - Efficiency
 - Expertise
 - Both essential to keep up with / keep ahead of executive
- Members' interest
 - Desire for more influence
 - =? Reelection (Mayhew)

What do committees do?

- Consider bills
 - Referrals & jurisdiction
 - May either...
 - Pass bill (after hearings & mark up) to be considered by the floor
 - Or, not pass bill by voting it down or more likely by inaction
 - Committees are where most bills go to die
- Conduct oversight
 - Henry Waxman & Pat Tillman
- Represent bills on floor & in conference
 - Health care example
- See Smith for different types of committees...

What about parties?

- Early Congresses divided between supporters of Thomas Jefferson and Alexander Hamilton
- From this...“factions”
 - Washington’s famous farewell address
- By 1820s parties begin to take root in the public

Why parties or factions?

- Distinction between temporary and permanent coalitions
- Why did coalitions become permanent?
- 1. Lasting policy differences
 - Parties actually have different beliefs
- 2. Ease of creating later coalitions
 - Legislators tend to deal with same coauthors
 - Kennedy & Hatch, McCain & Feingold

So, by 1820s or 1830s we have
well-entrenched committees and
parties

What happened?

Woodrow Wilson's *Congressional Government*

- First great book on Congress (1885)
- “Congressional government is committee government.”
- “Congress in session is Congress on public exhibition, whilst Congress in its committee-rooms is Congress at work.”
- So, in 1883-4 committees are vital and parties barely merit mention...

What happened next?

- 1889 Thomas Reed (R-ME) becomes Speaker of the House
- Reed angered by delaying tactics of Democrats, begins reasserting power of majority caucus
 - Most notably, he empowers the Rules Committee to structure debate, and stacks it with his loyalists
- 1890 to 1910 becomes era of strong Speakers
 - Reed known as “Czar Reed”
 - His successor, Joseph Cannon called “Boss Cannon”

And after that?

- 1910: dissident Republicans join with Democrats to stage coup
 - Cannon stripped of position on Rules Committee & his ability to appoint other members to committee
 - Party leaders' power broken
- Seniority system developed in the aftermath
 - Committees become central feature again

And after that?

- From 1930s onward Democratic liberals increasingly frustrated
 - Democrats' odd coalition
 - Complications caused by seniority / power of committee chairmen
 - Who benefits from seniority?
- By 1950s liberal actively plotting to find ways to circumvent conservatives' hold on power
 - But how?

Answer = reinvigorating parties

- Huh?
- Wanted to make Democrats support the position taken by majority of Democrats
 - Hastert's "majority of the majority" principle
- Proceeded in various ways
 - Additional power to party leaders to control appointments to committees
 - Caucus votes on committee chairs
 - Power to subcommittee chairs
 - Multiple referrals
 - Etc.

This is where things stand today...

- Eventually series of strong Speakers (& Majority Leaders), especially fueled by GOP takeover in 1994.
- Recall Mayhew quote: “Still, I have not seen any evidence that today’s congressional party leaders “whip” or “pressure” their members more frequently or effectively than did their predecessors thirty years ago.”
- Do party leaders force members to do things against their will?
 - Jamie Whitten, Arlen Specter
 - Health care example?

Wrap up

- First, we see that the power of committees and parties has varied considerably over time
- Second, we see that the each one has claimed power at the expense of others.
 - When committees are strong, parties are weak (e.g. Mayhew)
 - When parties are strong, committees are weak (Boss Cannon, Newt Gingrich)
 - Both aren't weak or strong at once, except in earliest Congresses

Two questions

- 1 Why do committees and parties essentially compete for power in the U.S. House of Representatives? (Hint: consider the process of moving legislation.)
- 2 If parties really have grown in strength since Mayhew's *Electoral Connection*, does this mean that he was wrong about members' motives, wrong that strong parties don't serve them, or something else?