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LEADERSHIP IN THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES: OPPORTUNITIES FOR EFFICIENT EXPRESSION
by
Ed Wingenbach

The House of Representatives is often denigrated by the media and the Executive as an inefficient and overly decentralized institution which is incapable of effectively representing the citizens of the United States. The criticisms seem to center on the political cowardice of the Representatives and a lack of strong leadership within the body itself. These sort of widespread public perceptions are dangerous to the very essence of democratic government — confidence in a citizen’s personal representation. If Congress in general, and the House in particular, lacks the respect of the electorate, the legitimacy of representative democracy itself is at stake. Fortunately, the criticisms of Congressional leadership are not as warranted as they might appear. Leadership and political fortitude do exist on Capitol Hill, but in a way that is more accommodating than charismatic, more competent than compelling. It is a style of leadership more compatible to and consistent with a recently democratized institution. It is a leadership learning to use the new tools of reform and creating a more expressive, reactive, and, consequently, less efficient House of Representatives. The advantages of this new approach far outweigh the difficulties it creates. Unfortunately, the primary difficulty is the creation of a perception of failure and lack of direction among the electorate. It is the purpose of this paper to examine the real and developing nature of political leadership in the House and dispel some of the unwarranted criticism which Congress has weathered in recent years.

Leadership in the House of Representatives is no longer restricted to a few committee chairpersons and the three major Leadership positions, namely the Speaker, Majority Leader, and Majority Whip. Due to the proliferation of subcommittees and these committees’ increasing importance, formal leadership positions with real and discernible power are available to more than a third of all House Representatives. This expanded potential for leadership can, however, be deceptive. The rapid turnover in subcommittee personnel and inability of subcommittee chairs to wield influence effectively in an atmosphere of greater equality has, in many senses, presented greater opportunity for effective Party leadership. Far from diluting the power of the senior ranks of the Party Leadership, recent reforms have strengthened the potential for leadership perhaps to its highest level since Speaker Joe Cannon’s reign.

Today’s House of Representatives is very different from any in the past. Its members and the party organization of which they are a part are of a unique nature (unique, at least, in the history of the House). There are many obstacles to a leadership style that is dominant or demanding. Because of these obstacles, it is unrealistic to expect leadership to live up to the examples set by
men such as Sam Rayburn — the external tools for control are simply not present. Some of these barriers are due to the structure of national parties, others to the nature and motivation of members. The inherent weakness of the party structures lies mostly in the campaign-and campaign-funding process. Party organizations do not control local nominations to any real extent; the party is greatly lacking in funds which can be dispersed to members for campaigns, and there is no functioning system of public campaign funding for the House (Baker 27). The lack of control over nominations essentially prevents the national parties from screening the potential members of the House, a process that would aid in insuring party loyalty. The lack of party campaign funding or any viable public funding system means, obviously, that the candidates must seek other sources of revenue. As a result, the party has little direct responsibility for the election of any candidate; thus, the candidates are less beholden to the party for their position, and, in many cases, support interests with which the party is not necessarily in agreement. When these points are combined with the irreverence of the modern junior member towards the leadership, leading becomes a difficult task indeed. Expecting dominant leadership in such a situation is not only irresponsible, but almost inconceivable. "Instead let us think about the challenges of generalship in an army of colonels or of heading an academic department in which everyone is tenured" (Baker, 27). It is these challenges which must temper expectations of House leadership. Interestingly enough, the facts seem to belie this bleak picture — leadership is indeed occurring, and, in some instances, defying the low expectations one might have for such an unfocused body.

**Leadership and the Reforms of the Seventies**

The extensive reforms of the early seventies laid the groundwork for expansion of modern House leadership. These reforms arose from a variety of reasons and accomplished both intended and surprising results. The major impetus for the reforms appears to lie in the influx of young, activist Democratic politicians during and after the Vietnam War and the Watergate Crisis. These newer, more irreverent House members felt little need to wait their twenty years in order to make an impact on legislation, and were also frustrated with the stranglehold Conservative Democrats held on committees important to activist legislation.

The obvious primary goal of the early seventies’ reform was to disperse power within the House in a manner more equitable than the seniority in committee method that dominated previously. The mechanism was the series of reforms known as Hansen I, II, and III, as well as the Democratic Caucus reforms of 1974 and 1975. These were directed primarily at weakening the committee chairpersons, strengthening the Party’s effectiveness, and dispersing power to subcommittees (see chart in Jones, p. 123). This effectively accommodated members’ desires for easier access to power and representation in the body.
These reforms seem, at first examination, to indicate a corresponding decline in the efficiency of the legislature. As it turns out, it may be possible that the first does not always require a decrease in the second. Jones characterizes the uniqueness of these reforms in the following way:

Whereas earlier reform periods appeared to swing in one direction or the other — toward centralization or decentralization, responsibility or responsiveness — the elaborate changes enacted in the 1970's seemed to go in both directions at once (Jones 121).

This statement arises from a comparison of actions like the Hansen reforms and the Budget and Impoundment Control Act of 1974. While the Hansen reforms were clearly decentralizing leadership, the Budget Act's primary result was an integration of decision making powers and an increase in the strength of the Speaker (who appoints the members of the Budget Committee). The result of such mixed signals is not, as might be expected, chaos, but what Jones calls "Channeled Expressiveness" (Jones 122). By dispersing power to the subcommittees, and, in effect, expanding the power franchise greatly by circumventing the committee chairpersons, a much greater degree of expression was possible to House members. At the same time, because of the lack of committee leadership and the potential chaos of dispersed power, stronger leadership at the Party and Speaker level is required to maintain House functions. In this way, the allegedly conflicting desires for both representation and efficiency were being bolstered at the expense of the power of the committee chairs.

**Some Informal Powers of Leadership**

While it is clear that the dispersion of power was the main thrust of the reforms, it is not at all clear that "Channeled Expressiveness" was the goal; however, this term does seem to describe best what occurred as a result of the reforms. An area where this is particularly evident is the floor management of almost any given bill. Whereas prior to the early seventies the House had a tendency to defer to a committee's judgement on the floor, the decline of committee chair power and vocalness of newer members led to an increasing lack of deference to any committee recommendation, and, as a result, a great deal of legislating on the floor (Sinclair, "Strategies" 183). This is a symptom of the inability of largely inexperienced subcommittee chairs to manage a bill on the floor effectively, produce excellent legislation, or assemble a majority. This was not a problem for the committee chairpersons of the past, who were able to rely on their own experience and political ability to pass a bill. The new, dispersed and ineffective (at least on the floor) subcommittee leadership must either turn to the Party leadership for aid or risk the death of their bills. Says Kenneth Shepsle,
Final legislation today is less the result of specialized consideration by experts than it is the product of whoever is skilled at assembling floor majorities. On some occasions, as in olden times, this may in fact be a wily committee or subcommittee chair; but on other occasions it may well be an agent of the Speaker, or of the majority party caucus... (Shepsle 480). This sort of problem, and the possible solutions which require cooperation with the leadership, exhibit quite well the divergent trends of expression and integration bringing one another about in possibly unintended manners.

This inability of most subcommittee chairs to manage their own bills successfully has created an atmosphere which requires effective Party Leadership in more ways than the incidental type discussed above. Coordination by the leadership is imperative to the successful passage of just about all legislation. According to Davidson, leadership is indispensable to the current House in providing three major services: consultation, inclusion, and routinization (Davidson 361). They are consultative in that the leadership is best able to provide channels through which all legislation must pass, and facilitate the process. They are inclusive in that they supply and moderate to a large extent the arenas in which the legislative battles are fought. Finally, they supply and maintain routine by communicating and maintaining the procedures and precedents of the Congress.

Baker points to a different set of techniques which the leadership uses to exert influence on and foster favorable legislation. He points to the abilities of the leadership to use their stature and position to provide services from outside of the House to which rank-and-file representatives have little access. These are the ability to attract policy experts for testimony on bills, the ability to provide political cover through public relations in the party caucus and party committees such as the Committee on Party Effectiveness, and the tendency of the media to seek out the leadership for answers and coverage (Baker 29-31). These are all functions which the powerful chairmen of the past could preform for their own committees but which now fall to the party leaders. Such services are essential to House members if any action is to be successful. In the current House, no group can supply these essential techniques and information. In a very real sense, leadership is responsible for managing the procedures of the House that allow it to function coherently and cohesively. It is through these basic skills that the leadership has made itself more and more essential to the membership of the House.

The leadership is able to use this "management" position to both foster legislation of which it approves, and to set the legislative priorities it wishes to see realized. If we are to accept the fact that the leadership can no longer completely control originating legislation through powerful
committee chairs, it is immediately apparent that legislation will originate with much less control or guidance from above. This also results in a more diversified selection of legislation. The leadership’s role then becomes one of discrimination and cultivation. From this fertile garden of potential laws, the leadership is able to select those proposals which are most amenable to the leadership’s program and use their resources to help move the legislation along. In a sense, “the policy-shaping activities that the best members pursued would be underwritten by their party’s leadership—not simply tolerated but fostered and cultivated” (Baker, 28). While such a policy is less certain than the dictation of a legislative program from above, the results, if the technique is properly applied, will be generally the same. The leadership is able to choose the priorities of the House through the extension and retention of its special skills (Sinclair, “1980’s” 312). Another result of the fractured operation of subcommittee floor management is introduction of many more floor amendments than ever before. These amendments are often complex and the amount of time available for review before voting inadequate. Only the leadership is in a position to have a likely understanding of most amendments and the ability to get out succinct information quickly in the chamber (Sinclair, “Strategies” 189). The members are forced to rely on the leadership’s capsule summaries in order to decide their direction on many amendments. This gives the leadership yet another tool for both influencing the outcome of floor debate and making itself procedurally indispensable.

The Expanding Formal Powers of the Leadership

The reforms of the early seventies did more than create mere opportunities for the Party Leadership to influence the House — they actually granted the leadership, specifically the Speaker, quite a few important formal powers. One of the most important was the change which allowed the Speaker to appoint eight members of the Steering and Policy Committee. These members, when combined with the four leadership positions already on the committee, give the leadership a majority of the seats on this extremely important committee. It is a healthy assumption to say that this is the most important committee of the Democratic Party Caucus, and that those who sit on the committee are respected and influential. The Steering and Policy Committee becomes even more formidable when one realizes how extensive its power is when it comes to committee appointments and positions. With so many leadership positions available in the subcommittees, almost every committee assignment decision is important. This is obviously not a body to be ignored. The speaker, through the fact that he virtually controls the committee, is able to use this widely-respected/feared group to influence legislation viewed favorably by the speaker. This is done through the use of Steering Committee endorsements of certain pieces of legislation. “A Steering and Policy Committee endorsement signals the member-
ship that the bill is seen as important and a party matter” (Sinclair 193). Since the Steering and Policy Committee takes Party loyalty into account when assigning committee positions, an indication that a bill is an important partisan matter to the committee is a pronouncement with teeth.

A second powerful tool of the Speaker is his ability to control (subject to caucus approval) the majority members of the House Rules Committee. While Rules does not always go along with the Speaker’s wishes, he exerts a considerable influence. The use of restrictive rules that aid the leadership’s agenda has increased greatly over the ten years between 1978 and 1988, by almost 300% (Davidson 358). This is a clear indication that the Speaker and the leadership is able to dictate the course of legislation in a manner much more direct than the unsure business of creating a majority coalition. The leadership is also able to create special conditions for the order of consideration of versions of bills, referred to as “King of the Mountain” rules. Such a rule allows the leadership to place its version last in a series of considerations and then stipulate that the last version receiving a majority will be adopted. This, of course, often results in the leadership’s most favored version being adopted — yet another example of the small advantages of leadership which add up to truly effective power as a whole.

A third power the Speaker can use is the creation of Ad Hoc Committees for the study of particular issues. Such creations are the sole province of the Speaker and he retains the right to appoint both members and jurisdiction to these temporary committees. While the speaker is usually careful to avoid stepping on a standing committee’s toes by infringing upon their area of jurisdiction, the ability to form Ad Hoc Committees serves as a check and a warning to the standing committee system. It also gives the Speaker power to manipulate legislation in such a way that it must be reported within certain limits and in a form that the Speaker wishes to see. This power, though not always successful, can be potent when used properly and supplies a legislative safety valve and mechanism to encourage responsible conduct in committees accessible only to the leadership (Sinclair 192).

A more common method of controlling the path of legislation than the Ad Hoc Committee, is the use of multiple referral. The Speaker has a right, in a multiple referral, to set deadlines for consideration (after the first committee), to integrate diverse aspects of the House’s newer, more inclusive bills, to gain credit by protecting jurisdictional turf, and to control/coordinate the entire legislative process in a direct manner. “This expansion in internal roles and techniques has taken the form of an expansion in the activities and leverage of the majority party leadership” (Collie and Cooper 265). These powers are, in combination with other techniques already mentioned, used to further influence the path of legislation and process of cultivation that is so essential to creating a leadership program in the modern House. “This multiple referral authority ties the Speaker more directly into committee decision-making than perhaps at any time since the 1910 revolt.
against Speaker Cannon” (Davidson 359). Such intrusive and inclusive scheduling power, in combination with a cooperative Rules Committee and the ability to control entirely the creation and jurisdiction of Ad Hoc Committees, gives the speaker unprecedented (at least in the last 80 years) power over the internal procedural workings of the House.

Another power of the Speaker is the ability to form ad hoc Task Forces. While this is not a specific legislative power, it is an ability utilized officially only by the Speaker. Task forces are, simply, party committees charged with insuring the passage of a particular piece of legislation. This entails both an intimate knowledge of the bill and the creation of floor majorities to pass it. A task force created to handle an important bill takes some of the load off the Speaker and leadership’s shoulders, while, at the same time, increasing commitment and party loyalty among junior members, i.e., their “socialization to followership norms” (Garand 391). Task forces serve as an example of action serving both the goal of expression and integration. The junior members of the House are made to feel more significant and powerful, and, therefore, more satisfied with their position in the party. It is interesting to note that membership on task forces increased a member’s party support by 7 to 10 percent among junior members, while there was less effect as seniority of task force members increased (Garand 392). So, while members in task forces feel as though their expressive needs are being met, party coherence and followership, and, thus, integrative leadership is strengthened.

The Effect of Budget Politics

If greater centralization leads to more effective or powerful leadership, an important question to examine is the effect of centralizing and decentralizing issues. A decentralized House requires an ability for members to act and create legislation fairly independently. Independent legislation requires an ability to spend money without being overly concerned with spending as an issue. If the power to spend money is vested in authorizing committees, acquiring and spending money requires less of an ability to manipulate the Appropriations Committee and garner floor support. “Much of the decentralization of the 1960’s and 1970’s was accompanied by a weakening of the Appropriations Committee’s hold over spending...” (Davidson 355). Unfortunately for those who prefer a decentralized House, the money is no longer there for the spending, and the Budget and Appropriations Committees are playing a larger and more essential role in decision making. This, of course, results in more and more centralized decision making and, concurrently, a rise in leadership opportunities. Davidson compares the House to a corporation experiencing financial difficulties—when money gets short, centralize and streamline your decision process in order to cut down on waste and reduplication.

Budget restrictions have changed the House in many other substantive ways, mostly in the
direction of greater potential leadership. One of the most noticeable changes has been the increase in the size of bills introduced (and, correspondingly, the decrease in the amount of bills introduced). This greater incorporation of materials in larger bills is reflected in the fact that representatives introduce only a third as many measures as they did a generation ago (Davidson 352). These larger bills have one major purpose, and that is to disperse the blame for difficult cuts as widely as possible. It also contributes to the inability of floor managers to control bills their committees have introduced due to the sheer size and amendment potential of each larger bill. These trends towards greater centralization to avoid blame open greater opportunities for the leadership to exercise influence. “Continuing resolutions [the major type of budgeting bill] have the indirect effect of recentralizing authority in fewer hands” (Oleszek 75). This simply reinforces the idea that some sort of expertise and influence is now, more than ever, necessary for the passage of legislation.

Who is it that benefits most from this fiscally dictated recentralization? The obvious answer to this query is that those who control the budgeting process do. Who controls the budgeting process? Not surprisingly, the party leadership does. The control is not direct—the party leadership does not directly shape the bills in committee or on the floor—but it is extremely present. That this is so can be confirmed through a simple examination of the budget process.

Budget politics, as has been shown above, tends to increase the size and decrease the amount of legislation introduced during any given session. In fact, it is possible to describe the House as functioning under a Four Bill system—budget, continuing resolutions, supplemental appropriations, and reconciliation packages (Dodd and Oppenheimer 48). A vast majority of the legislation of any given session is contained in these four types of bills. All legislation requiring funds (which, of course, is a majority of legislation) must be funded through one of these bills. In essence legislation is crippled without approval in one of the four types of budgeting bills. The four committees which have the most decisive, and, in fact, total, influence on budget bills are Appropriations, Ways and Means, Budget, and the ever-present Rules Committee. These, not surprisingly, are the elite, restricted committees of the House. This leads Dodd and Oppenheimer to their conclusion that there is a “New Oligarchy” in the House which consists of the majority party leadership and the committee chairs of these four important committees (Dodd and Oppenheimer 39). This centralization of power is further confirmed when the composition of the Steering and Policy Committee is examined: for example, all four chairs were members of this committee in the 97th Congress. If the speaker appoints Steering and Policy, the four elite committee chairs are on Steering and Policy, and Steering and Policy controls most important appointments, it becomes clear just how much power this “New Oligarchy” can wield. They control the purse strings, have the ability to manage the huge omnibus budget bills, reconcile interests, and make committee appointments. When this is coupled with the increases in formal
power granted to the speaker over the last twenty years, especially his ability to appoint the Steering and Policy Committee, the amount of potential leadership avenues and control becomes manifestly greater.

Another aspect of the budgeting process is the tendency of budget and spending legislation to polarize party conflicts. The interests of both parties require budget proposals favorable to their particular agendas, and the voting on budget legislation tends towards party lines. “In a Congress where so many factions and pressures cross party lines, this situation dramatically shows the capacity of budgetary politics to polarize issues and factions” (Davidson 356). Obviously, such polarization is beneficial to the Party Leadership. The rank and file members do not have access to the opposing party’s proposals, and, if they wish to see their budget interests met, it is a requirement that the party members play along with the leadership. This will have two results: first, the leadership’s position as the only people who can effectively manage legislation by harmonizing diverse interests (even if the diverse interests are constrained to go along by the restrictions of the process), and, secondly, the leadership is able to amass favors and debts for use in later political maneuvering. That this is true is attested to by recent statistics. For example, in the 99th Congress 59% of all roll-call votes were along partisan lines, which was the highest level since World War II; in 1987 this rose to 64%; and, finally, party unity in 1987 was an astounding 81% (Dodd and Oppenheimer 42). While statistics can be deceiving, these are fairly convincing numbers. Those who control the budget process can take advantage of this polarization to shape legislation and quickly advance beyond their peers in influence. When this control is coupled with a leadership which is already powerful due to both the inability of others to lead and expanded formal powers, the House Leadership can become a formidable force indeed.

**Conclusions**

A graph of leadership in the House might show a consistent decline in effectiveness since 1910, with a possible jump during Sam Rayburn’s tenure as speaker. Common wisdom seems to point to the current leadership as the weakest and most ineffectual at any point in the current century. Such common wisdom seems, however, to belie the real facts of leadership ability and potential in the current House. The combination of dispersed power in the subcommittee system, inexperienced floor management, an increase in formal leadership opportunities, and the importance of budget politics indicate that the potential for powerful leadership is greater now than at any time since Cannon. If leadership is not effective, it can only be because of an inability or unwillingness to exercise these powers and grasp leadership opportunities. Yet Sinclair (and others) indicate that “the leadership has been very skilled in using its resources to cope with the problems created by rule and norm changes and by heavy membership turnover” (Sinclair 203).
The perception that leadership is weak probably arises from the surface appearance of disorganization created by the greater expressive and representative options open to more members of the House. This leads many observers to the conclusion that the House can not get anything done effectively. Such a conclusion is simply inaccurate. It is apparent from recent experience that a determined and skillful leadership is able not only to control legislation but actually implement a program from above—a seemingly impossible task, even given the expanded abilities of the leadership. The most convincing example is the tenure of Speaker Jim Wright and his leadership team. Wright built on the power base developed by Tip O’Neill to truly control the House in the manner of an effective and powerful leader. In his first full term as Speaker, he did something which no Speaker had done in years—he presented a legislative agenda and used his centralized control to try and push it through the House (Dodd and Oppenheimer 55). While this is not the place for a detailed examination of Wright’s methods, it is sufficient to note that he took advantage of the resources available to him in an extremely effective manner. In fact, “[t]he House passed all the items on the Speaker’s agenda, and, despite a frequently deadlocked Senate and hostile Presidency, most became law” (Sinclair, “1980’s” 327). If leadership in the House is to be judged by an ability to shape the legislative agenda and insure that the final products resemble the leadership’s initial policy goals, it is clear from both the theoretical perspective (i.e., the powers and areas where influence is greatest for the leadership rest in the prevailing circumstances and rules) and reality (i.e., Wright’s legislative program) that strong leadership is eminently possible in the modern House of Representatives.

Perhaps it is just a matter of the House growing into its potential to be an effective and representational body without sacrificing either. According to Shepsle, “[T]he Congress that has emerged from the reforms of the 1970’s has not, even a decade later, settled down into the stable institution it was in the 1950’s” (Shepsle 479). Calls for stronger leadership (which seems to mean domineering leadership) may only delay the evolution of the House as an effective and efficient institution. As one House member put it,

Strong leadership? Yeah, I love to hear these guys talk about it, and then, five minutes later, they’re shouting about democracy — and they don’t even understand the paradox (Loomis 171).

The House appears to be moving towards an institution where effective but responsive leadership is exercised in a manner constructive to realizing, or at least considering, all interests. This balance between the danger of an efficient leadership dictating terms to an unheard membership and an unguided, atomized, and ineffective House is being reached in a measured but effective pace. The members are able to propose legislation almost without limits, giving them at least an impression of power and expressive ability, and the leadership, if it is skillful in taking advantage of its opportunities, is able to determine which of these bills are good legislation, as well as
assuring insuring their passage. This grants both expression and responsible, effective leadership—a leadership that, while not a simple dispenser of services to members, is responsive to member needs while creating a responsible agenda. It would be a shame to see this trend reversed or destroyed in the name of some anti-democratic call for streamlined government. The value of the House is its ability to have its membership heard, and the current House is doing this better than ever before while creating opportunities for effective, powerful leadership. If the question we ask of ourselves is: what can we *realistically* expect of House leadership?, then the answer seems clear. The leadership is managing to be extremely effective without injuring the expressive function of the House. Channelled expression allows for a healthy balance between the ability of legislators to be heard and leadership’s ability to form and foster responsible legislation. Such a structure is valuable, and should be preserved and treasured by the American electorate.

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