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Publication Date

1988

A1458
no. 88-14
Aug. 15, 1988

8/30/88

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U.S. Congress & Senate

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Modernization of the U.S. Senate

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The purpose of this brief paper is to offer a series of hypotheses embedded in a narrative about the main lines of institutional development in the U.S. Senate since World War II. It follows along from my article "Goodbye to the Inner Club" (August, 1969) in which I set forth the notion that the character of the U.S. Senate had changed markedly over the last 30 years and that the Senate could no longer be characterized as a well-bounded entity ruled by an "inner club" of insular grandees.¹ I argued that the modern Senate is, increasingly, a great forum, an echo chamber, a theater, where dramas -- comedies and tragedies, soap operas and horse operas -- are staged to enhance the careers of its members and to influence public policy by means of debate and public investigation.

In both the House and the Senate a fundamental commandment to new members is "specialize". But this means vastly different things in each house. "Specialize" to a Representative means "attend to your knitting" -- work hard on the committee to which you are assigned, pursue the interests of your state and region. In the Senate everyone has several committee

¹ Nelson W. Polsby, "Goodbye to the Inner Club," Washington Monthly 1, (August 1969), pp. 30-34. I have also developed some of these ideas in the Senate chapter of my book Congress and the Presidency 4th edition (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1968) pp. 85-113 and 251-257. I mention in passing that it is a rare text that treats the Senate and the House as separate institutions, as this one has done since its first edition in 1964.

assignments. Boundaries between committees are less strictly observed than in the House. Access to the floor is much less regulated. So the institution itself gives few clues and no compulsions to new senators wondering what they should specialize in. For senators, specialization seems increasingly to mean finding a subject and cultivating a nationwide constituency that has not been preempted by some more senior senator.

As I said in my book, Political Innovation in America (1984), it is a cliché of academic political science that in legislative matters, it is the President who initiates policy and Congress that responds, amplifying and modifying and rearranging elements that are essentially originated in the executive branch.² But where do innovations in policy come from before the President "initiates" them?

Commentators have greatly underestimated the role of the Senate in gestating these ideas, by providing a forum for speeches, hearings, and the introduction of bills going nowhere for the moment. This process of incubation accomplishes a number of things. It maintains a sense of community among far-flung interest groups that favor the innovation by giving them occasional opportunities to come in and testify. It provides an incentive for persons favoring the innovation to keep information up to date on its prospective benefits and technical feasibility and it accustoms the uncommitted to a new idea. Thus the Senate has in some respects become a crucial nerve-end of the polity. It articulates, formulates, shapes, and publicizes and can serve as a hothouse for significant policy innovation, especially in opposition to the President.

² Nelson W. Polsby, Political Innovation in America: The Politics of Policy Initiation (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984).

If it is true, as I believe, that this has been going on only since World War II, this constitutes a substantial shift in the role of the Senate in the American political system. In the aftermath of the war there was a general movement of political resources -- aided and abetted by the more recent party reforms -- toward Washington which has tended to divert public attention away from local and regional arenas.³ This has been reinforced by the growth of national news media, especially television. The impact on the Presidency of this nationalization of public awareness has been frequently noted. But, to a lesser extent, the same effect can be noted for all national political institutions. Of these, only the Senate has taken full advantage of its increased visibility. The Supreme Court has remained aloof. Speakers of the House until a few years ago when we entered the age of CSPAN refused to allow televised coverage of any official House function. The bureaucracies have been expected to leave the public formulation and defense of their programs to their political executives -- especially the President. Over the entire 40 year period, only members of the Senate have had no constraint placed on their availability for national publicity, except for the ban -- now lifted as we have entered the age of CSPAN - 2 -- on photographing or televising activity on the Senate floor itself.

Senatorial names -- Kefauver, McCarthy, Kennedy, Goldwater, McGovern, Sam Ervin -- have become household words in the last three or four decades.

³ Not that these arenas -- especially the state level -- have ever in modern times been terribly visible. V. O. Key's 1956 book American State Politics (N.Y.: Knopf) begins: "The American people are not boiling with concern about the workings of their state governments. In the competition for public interest and attention the governments of the American states come off a poor second-best against the performance of the finished professionals who operate in Washington" p.3.

In presidential election politics, this has operated to the detriment of governors. Where once a governor's control of a political "base," by virtue of his leadership of a state party organization, was the single overwhelming resource in deciding, at a national party convention, who was presidential timber, television and the nationalization of resources have on the whole eroded this gubernatorial resource.⁴ Proliferating Federal programs, financed by the lucrative Federal income tax, have also -- at least until the partial turnaround of the Reagan era -- more and more been distributed among the states in part as senatorial patronage. Governors are by no means always ignored in this process, but their influence has on the whole been much

⁴ Consult the following table for a quick measure of what has happened.

PRESIDENTIAL CANDIDATES

1928-52

Governor	Washington-Based
Al Smith	Herbert Hoover
Franklin Roosevelt	Harry Truman
Alf Landon	Dwight Eisenhower
Thomas Dewey	
Adlai Stevenson	
Totals 6	3

(Wendell Willkie unclassified)

1956-88

Jimmy Carter	John Kennedy
Ronald Reagan	Richard Nixon
Michael Dukakis	Lyndon Johnson
	Barry Goldwater
	Hubert Humphrey
	George McGovern
	Gerald Ford
	Walter Mondale
	George Bush
Totals 3	9

reduced. Some observers have also argued that, at the state level, services have not kept pace with demands, and taxes are often inequitable and unproductive. Responsible governors of both parties have often tried to do something about this problem, but it has led to donnybrooks with state legislatures, great unpopularity, and, on some occasions, electoral defeat. Gubernatorial success stories, where they have occurred, have frequently derived from a fortuitous pattern of federal expenditures.⁵

The decline of the influence of governors and the shift of public attention to national politics and national politicians are not quite enough to explain how the modern Senate became the incubator of policies and presidential hopefuls. Historical accidents have also played a part. The first was Lyndon Johnson's majority leadership. Ambitious for the Presidency and immensely skilled, Johnson sedulously perpetuated the myth of the inner club while destroying its substance. Joseph Clark, newly elected to the Senate in 1957, described a lunch Majority Leader Johnson gave for freshman Democrats. "As we sat down...we found at our places copies of Citadel

⁵ Ronald F. Ferguson and Helen F. Ladd offer a cautious evaluation of the "Massachusetts miracle" of the 1980's for which Governor Dukakis has claimed much credit: "Neither the scope nor the timing of recent policy initiatives in Massachusetts supports the view that they were an important catalyst in the remarkable economic turnaround of the past decade.... At the same time, state initiatives helped to attract growth to some depressed central cities...and may have helped at the margin to sustain the state's revival once it began." "State Economic Renaissance" in The New Economic Role of the American States, R. Scott Fosler, ed, (N.Y.: Oxford University Press, 1988) p.21. A very good review of the literature on the alleged changing political status of the American governor up to 1969 is J. Stephen Turrett "The Vulnerability of American Governors, 1900-1969" Midwest Journal of Political Science 15 (February, 1971) pp. 108-132. He finds that over the 70 year time period he covers, governors did not become notably more politically vulnerable, and, if anything, they became more visible to their constituents. It is time to add the next 20 years to Turrett's analysis. If his conclusions hold, it would be plausible to argue that changes at the national level have had an even stronger impact on the role of the U.S. Senate in the political system.

autographed 'with all good wishes' not only by its author...but by the majority leader as well. During the course of the lunch...Senator Johnson encouraged us to consider Mr. White's book as a sort of McGuffey's Reader from which we could learn much about the 'greatest deliberative body in the world' and how to mold ourselves into its way of life."⁶

Yet if the essence of the argument of Citadel was collegiality among the fellowship of the elect, the essence of Johnson's Senate operation was the progressive centralization of power in the hands of the Majority Leader.⁷ By the time Johnson left the Senate, after eight years (1953-60) as Democratic Leader,⁸ the inner club could command little of its old power. It had too long been merely a facade for Johnson's own activity, a polite explanation for the exercise of his own discretion in committee appointments, legislative priorities, and tactics. Under the looser rein of Johnson's successors, the Senate has become a collegial body whose corporate work has been pretty much determined by presidential programs and priorities.⁹ The Senate has never recaptured the sense of cohesion, community, and separateness that obtained "in the old days," before Johnson. As younger people came in, pro-administration majorities on legislation were by no means uncommon, nor were

⁶ Joseph S. Clark, Congress: The Sapless Branch (New York: Harper and Row, 1964) p.5. William S. White, Citadel (New York: Harper and Row, 1957).

⁷ A good discussion of what was involved is Ralph K. Huitt, "Democratic Party Leadership in the Senate," American Political Science Review 50 (June 1961), pp. 333-344.

⁸ Johnson was Minority Leader 1953-55, Majority Leader 1955-60.

⁹ See John G. Stewart "Independence and Control: the Challenge of Senatorial Party Leadership," an unpublished doctoral dissertation at the University of Chicago, 1968; and Stewart's "Two Strategies of Leadership: Johnson and Mansfield" in Congressional Behavior, Nelson W. Polsby ed., (New York: Random House, 1971) pp. 61-92.

majorities for policies more liberal than those passed in the House. And the Senate has become a more public-regarding body.¹⁰

The senatorial generations of the 1960s and thereafter have pursued a style of senatorial service that in their search for national constituencies and public visibility have little in common with the old Senate type.¹¹ Nevertheless, these new style senators are not regarded as mavericks. Quite to the contrary, it is the senators (e.g., Hecht of Nevada)¹² who do not court publicity who are regarded as deviant. The more common pattern today is for senators to seek to become national politicians, something that the mass media have made increasingly possible. These senators are following a style of service hit on by several postwar senators but most notably pioneered by Arthur Vandenberg of Michigan and, in the 1950s and 1960s, brought to full flower by Hubert Humphrey.¹³

Much earlier than most members of his generation, Humphrey sensed the possibilities in the Senate for long-range political education. He spent the

¹⁰ A good summary of the state of play as of the early 1970's is Sam Kernell's "Is the Senate More Liberal than the House?" Journal of Politics 35 (May 1973) pp. 332-363. See also Michael Foley, The New Senate: Liberal Influence on a Conservative Institution, 1959-1972 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1980). Lewis A. Froman, Jr., Congressmen and their Constituencies (Chicago: Rand McNally, 1963) pp. 69-84, and, especially, Alan Ehrenhalt, "In the Senate of the '80s Team Spirit Has Given Way to the Rule of Individuals," Congressional Quarterly, September 4, 1982 pp. 2175-2182.

¹¹ In general, senators have been most successful at generating national visibility when they have run for President or occupied formal positions of senatorial leadership. See Stephen Hess, The Ultimate Insiders (Washington D.C.: Brookings, 1986).

¹² See Jeffrey H. Birnbaum, "Nevada Senator Hecht, A Barrel of Gaffes, Staves Off Spotlight," Wall Street Journal (August 11, 1988).

¹³ Hubert H. Humphrey, Education of a Public Man (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1976). Carl Solberg, Hubert Humphrey: A Biography (New York: Norton, 1984).

Eisenhower era, incubating ideas that in a better climate could hatch into programs. In the late 1940s and early 1950s, a flood of Humphrey bills (many of them cosponsored by other liberal senators) on all aspects of civil rights, medicare, housing, aid to farm workers, food stamps, job corps, area redevelopment, disarmament, and so on died in the Senate. A little over a decade later, most of them were law, and Humphrey had in the meantime become a political leader of national consequence. The force of his example was not lost on younger senators.

In recent years, it has proved much easier for senators to reconcile their ambitions for large public accomplishments with accommodation to Senate norms. The Senate is now a less insular body than it was in former times, and the fortunes of senators are correspondingly less tied to the smiles and frowns of their elders within the institution. Although these changes are now widely accepted as having altered the character of the Senate, there is still in the literature no thorough account of the process by which the Senate modernized into the publicity-seeking, policy-incubating, interest group-cultivating body that it now is.

This is a story that should be told in greater detail. One strategy for doing so would be to analyze the careers of two populations of senators before and after the institutional change took place: perhaps a sample in the late 1940s, and a sample in the late 1960s. Five senators whose lives and careers spanned the change might come in for special attention: Johnson, of Texas, Arthur Vandenberg of Michigan, Hubert Humphrey of Minnesota, Estes Kefauver of Tennessee, and John Kennedy of Massachusetts.

Vandenberg was the earliest transition figure. In part because it suited the strategic convenience of Secretary of State Dean Acheson,

Vandenberg was drawn into prominence as a national figure from his position as chairman of the post-war Senate Committee on Foreign Relations.¹⁴ Subject matter specialists had existed in the Senate before Vandenberg, but before Vandenberg no senator had ever become a nationally famous figure as a subject matter specialist. Fame was not a coinage especially valued in the pre-modern Senate. In the 1950's this institutional norm began to change significantly.

In part there was the example of Vandenberg. But even more, the conditions of life changed. This can be illustrated by the dramatic example of Kefauver, a not terribly popular or hard-working senator from a middle-sized state who became a national hero because his committee hearings on organized crime happened to occur at precisely the point at which America was wired up for television and before there were regularly scheduled programs to fill the air time. As a result, Kefauver became a serious candidate for President for the rest of his life.¹⁵

Humphrey was the member of the transitional generation who used the resources of the Senate itself most creatively to project himself onto the national scene, and so it is worthwhile to examine how he did it. Kennedy was the first senator since Warren G. Harding to actually win a successful presidential campaign from a position in the Senate. In doing so, he was following in Kefauver's footsteps -- using the Senate as a springboard from which, rather than, as Johnson did, as an arena within which, to run for President.

¹⁴ Dean Acheson, Sketches from Life of Men I have Known, (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1961), Chapter 6.

¹⁵ Joseph Bruce Gorman, Kefauver: A Political Biography (New York: Oxford University Press, 1971), pp. 80-85.

The combined force of these examples, and the underlying conditions that made it possible for them to be examples, changed senatorial perspectives on how to be a senator. Moreover they illustrate the direction toward which the Senate was modernizing.

Tentatively, the hypothesized causal chain runs something like this:

(1) Television and other tremendous changes in telecommunications fundamentally altered the balance of publicity between national and local political institutions.

(2) A nationalization and centralization of the presidential nominating process took place in which the career prospects of senators were greatly enhanced.

(3) The Senate itself changed as a result, moving from a genteel men's club in which the major activity was second-guessing the President and waging guerilla war on the New Deal to a pro-active, publicity-seeking, policy-incubating, public-regarding body.

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