

### A Trend of Decentralization

Although Congress began as an entity of centralization, it has slowly taken a trend of strong decentralization. The intentions of the founders of Congress were concerned about excessive power in one branch as well as mob rule and on what basis congress was going to be represented. The solution to this was bicameral legislation that resulted in an upper house, the Senate, and a lower house, the House of Representatives. As this high efficiency, less participation program began to fall into place, a major change occurred in 1970 that dismembered this once centralized system. Factors leading to the decentralization of Congress include the division of powers through the committee systems, congress members focusing on reelection and their incessant attention catered toward constituents. "Members of Congress are not only faced with the daily dilemma of balancing reelection interests with their efforts at upward power mobility within Congress; their lives area also complicated by a cruel paradox, the ultimate incompatibility of widely dispersed power within Congress, on the other hand, and a strong role for Congress in national decision making, on the other."<sup>1</sup>

The committee system leads to specialization in areas of interest and expertise at the expense of a consistent set of goals and policies. In the year of 1970 a critical change occurred in which the period of strong centralization, 1889-1910, diminished. During the period of strong centralization, Thomas Reed, the Speaker of the House, was able to eliminate all stalling tactics as well as assigning members of Congress to particular committees. He also had the power to choose the chairmen of which committees and put himself as the chair of rules committees as the most powerful position. Joseph Cannon soon took over for Reed. However, there was a revolt in

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<sup>1</sup> American Government Readings and Cases, Fifteenth Edition, *Peter Woll*, 97-52268 CIP, Copyright © 2004, *The Rise of the Washington Establishment*

1910 that did not allow Cannon to have all the powers Reed had obtained, except for stalling tactics. The hunger for power began to augment and the strong central leadership and authority over rank and file began to transform. National interest was no longer placed ahead of local interest and there were now many opportunities for stalling tactics, making it a decentralized Congress with emphasis on participation, rather than efficiency. Congress wanted to cater more to its constituents, which ironically weakened themselves. There was an explosion of subcommittees which aided the dispersion of power within Congress. “The dispersion of committees maximizes the opportunities of committee chairs to use their power to distribute benefits directly to their districts and states and to take positions on issues that will be appealing to their constituents.”<sup>2</sup> This allowed members to go their own ways in dealing with their diverse constituents. Individual members started to challenge chairmen and tradition had no standing ground as it had before. The typical bureaucrat can be expected to seek to expand his agency in terms of personal, budget, and mission. “Both the establishment and maintenance of a vast federal bureaucracy is explained by congressional reelection incentive.”<sup>3</sup>

The desire of the congressmen to get reelected, to compete amongst themselves for money and favors they can bestow upon their districts. The primary goal of the typical Congressman is now reelection, making the Congressman more engaged “in a mix of three kinds of activities: lawmaking, pork barreling, case work.”<sup>4</sup> According to the constitutional theory, Congress is primarily a law-making body that has the ideology that the good of country on any issue is best for the majority of the congressional districts. Committee selection is made to advance reelection, increase power and statues on Capitol Hill or to make good public policy. Committees such as “Insular Affairs in the House serve the reelection incentives of their members

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<sup>2</sup> American Government Readings and Cases, Fifteenth Edition, Peter Woll, 97-52268 CIP, Copyright © 2004, *The Rise of the Washington Establishment*

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<sup>4</sup> American Government Readings and Cases, Fifteenth Edition, Peter Woll, 97-52268 CIP, Copyright © 2004, *Congress and the Quest for Power*

by channeling specific benefits, such as water and conservation projects, into their districts.”<sup>5</sup> A second activity favored by congressman has to deal with how much money they are able to bring home to their districts. “Congressmen consider new dams, federal buildings, sewage treatment plans, urban renewal projects, etc. as sweet plums to be plucked.”<sup>6</sup> Federal projects are highly visible and their economic impact is easily detected by constituents. Civil rights issues such as abortion are much harder to see in a visible light and as something that benefits everyone in aiding to that congressman’s reelection. Congressman find it easy to claim federal projects awarded to their districts. “Virtually all members of the U.S. Congress are preoccupied with power considerations. They are unwilling—unless forced by external events—to leave the major decisions in either a centralized, autonomous staff system or a central leadership.”<sup>7</sup> Congressmen must focus almost solely on reelection and activities related to reelection. They advertise for themselves in order to disseminate one’s name from another. Congressmen also put an emphasis on credit claiming making the focus on the individual accomplishments, rather than governmental or party accomplishments. Another activity that congressmen frequently participate in that has aided the decentralization of congress is position taking. Where a congressman stands on an issue and whether he supports the president, may be directly connected to his reelection. “There is no doubt that congressmen believe positions make a difference.”<sup>8</sup>

The heterogeneous nature of the United States means that the issues that concern the constituents of one congressman are different than those of other members. Each member of Congress wants to exercise power in order to make key decisions, thus making every member in a personal conflict with every other member. “Given this widespread power motive, an obvious

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<sup>5</sup> American Government Readings and Cases, Fifteenth Edition, Peter Woll, 97-52268 CIP, Copyright © 2004, *Congress and the Quest for Power*

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<sup>7</sup> American Government Readings and Cases, Fifteenth Edition, Peter Woll, 97-52268 CIP, Copyright © 2004, *Congress and the Quest for Power*

<sup>8</sup> American Government Readings and Cases, Fifteenth Edition, Peter Woll, 97-52268 CIP, Copyright © 2004, *Congress and the Quest for Power*

way to resolve the conflict is to disperse power-or at least power positions-as widely as possible.”<sup>9</sup> This was the evolution of committees and subcommittees in which had certain control in certain jurisdiction areas. Committee government rejects the idea of a strong centralized government. Because of the lack of leadership, there is lack of fiscal coordination. “Moves to coordinate the authorization, appropriations, and revenue processes are inconsistent with committee government, since such an effort would necessarily create a central mechanism with considerable say over public policy and thus centralize power in a relatively small number of individuals.”<sup>10</sup> In committee government expectations are so high and because of its inefficiency, they are hardly ever delivered. The rules committee is the most powerful committee in the House. They decide where to put a bill on the legislative calendar in which the congressmen favor the bills in relevance of their choice. They act as the traffic cop and can even attach rules to the bill along with adding anything that suits them. There are many conflicting interests and not all of congress is represented in the committees making Congress decentralized and biased. There is also lack of accountability and responsibility. Committee government distributes decision-making authority among largely autonomous sets of committees. “Responsiveness is further undermined because of the absence of strong central leaders, and a widespread desire among members for procedural protection of their personal prerogatives, require reliance on rigid rules and regulations to govern the flow of legislations and debates.”<sup>11</sup> Such rules are seen in the Senate, with the cloture rule that allows the existence of filibusters. In a committee government, rules such as this cause huge road blocks and fall in line with the decentralization of congress as it stands on a ground of high participation, low efficiency. These hurdles can block the easy flow legislation. The constant ambiguities of committee legislation make Congress extremely

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<sup>9</sup> American Government Readings and Cases, Fifteenth Edition, *Peter Woll*, 97-52268 CIP, Copyright © 2004, *Congress: The Electoral Connection*

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<sup>11</sup> American Government Readings and Cases, Fifteenth Edition, *Peter Woll*, 97-52268 CIP, Copyright © 2004, *Congress: The Electoral Connection*

decentralized. “Dispersion of power and the creation of numerous policy experts ensure congressional surveillance of the bureaucracy.”<sup>12</sup>

Although for the past century Congress has been decentralized, it is presently becoming centralized. “The irony of committee government is that it attempts to satisfy members’ individual desires for personal power by dispersing internal congressional authority so widely that the resulting institutional importance cripples the ability of Congress to perform its constitutional roles, thereby dissipating the value of internal congressional power.”<sup>13</sup> As decentralization is a complex social experiment a good case may be made for there to be more flexibility in the ability to change the specificity of implementation instruments, while enshrining the political and philosophical principles in the Constitution and the operating structures in the laws. However, it is the present-day situation of Bush holding Congress together that makes it centralized. The republicans are aligning and working together. This is the first time without a divided government for a while and is most likely going to be the fate of the United States in the near future.

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<sup>12</sup> American Government Readings and Cases, Fifteenth Edition, *Peter Woll*, 97-52268 CIP, Copyright © 2004, *Congress: The Electoral Connection*

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