

Part II

Perspectives on the Speakership

Chapter I

The Speakership in Historical Perspective

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Just over 100 years ago, on November 9, 1903, the Honorable Joseph Gurney Cannon, a Republican from Illinois, was sworn in as the 34th Speaker of the U.S. House of Representatives. "Uncle Joe" Cannon became, perhaps, the most powerful Speaker in the history of that office, exercising almost complete control over the legislative process, dominating the committee system, often determining the content of legislation, and standing toe to toe with Republican Presidents Theodore Roosevelt and William Howard Taft. Cannon was a colorful figure, earthy in appearance, demeanor, and sense of humor. He was the most prominent legislator of his day and perhaps, at that time, the only Member of Congress to gain extensive public recognition. In fact, his power in the House of Representatives became increasingly controversial until finally, on St. Patrick's Day 1910, the Members of the House rebelled against him, stripping him of control over the Rules Committee and putting the party regime that had evolved since the Civil War on the path of extinction.

The speakership of the House had not always been so powerful an office nor such a pure expression of party interest as Cannon made it. During the formative years of the Republic, the political party system was in flux, and House Speakers were not usually cast in the role of national party leaders. Henry Clay of Kentucky, the most important Speaker of the antebellum period, was in-

deed a partisan figure; but his influence extended beyond the circle of his partisan supporters and as a national figure he, in effect, transcended the offices that he held. Other antebellum Speakers were less noteworthy. It was not until after the Civil War, with the rise of the stable, two-party system that we have known since, that the speakership became defined as a position of party responsibility. This development sharpened the fundamental tension between the Speaker's partisan and institutional roles that is latent in the constitutional design. From 1865 until the turn of the 20th century, the political parties became more entrenched and the speakership became an increasingly important position of party governance. Several Speakers during this period became powerful political leaders. These included Republicans James G. Blaine of Maine, Thomas B. Reed of Maine, and Cannon himself, and Democrats such as Samuel J. Randall of Pennsylvania, John G. Carlisle of Kentucky, and Charles F. Crisp of Georgia. Clearly, however, Cannon was the most powerful of them all, and his speakership represented the apotheosis of the office. Cannon came to the speakership just as that office reached its zenith under the rules of the House and of the Republican conference. The Speaker controlled floor recognition, named the members of committees, chaired the Rules Committee, determined referral of bills to committees, and controlled the floor agenda. Speaker Cannon's power

was made emblematic by one disgruntled GOP progressive Member who, when asked by a constituent for a copy of the rules of the House, sent a picture of the Speaker.

Today, we remember Cannon as the Czar of the House, and the office building that bears his name is a monument to his power. It is equally important to remember, though, that Cannon's speakership witnessed the peak of the Speaker's powers and the beginning of their decline. The St. Patrick's Day revolt of 1910 stripped the Speaker of his control over the Rules Committee and led to the defeat of the Republican Party and of Cannon himself in the 1912 elections. Cannon was reelected in 1914 and the Republicans recaptured their House majority in the election of 1918. The speakership, however, was never again as powerful as it had been under Cannon. It is ironic that the building that bears Cannon's name was emblematic of an institutional shift that would, over time, erode the power that he had enjoyed.

When the Cannon House Office Building was completed in 1908, it was the first detached office building serving the U.S. House of Representatives, and it symbolized, and gave further effect to, an underlying transformation in American politics and in the House of Representatives. It was at or near the beginning of the era of "institutionalization" of the House.¹ The demands of legislative work and constituency service had created the need for each Member of the House to have adequate staff and appropriate office space in which to operate. No longer would Members have to meet with constituents in the halls, lobbies, hotels, and restaurants. Henceforth, Members would have their own space and that space would be at some distance from the legislative Chamber. The first step in isolating Members from each other was taken out of institutional necessity.

The Cannon House Office Building opened during a period of electoral realignment and the attendant sharp political conflicts. Progressive western Republicans allied with northern and southern Democrats to dislodge Cannon from the Rules Committee. When the Democrats took the

House in 1911 their Speaker, Champ Clark of Missouri, relinquished to Floor Leader Oscar Underwood of Alabama control over the House floor. Underwood experimented with government through the Democratic Caucus (much to the displeasure of their erstwhile allies, the progressive Republicans), but eventually power flowed to the committee system where it remained ensconced until the reform movement of the early seventies.

The transformation of the House from a party-centered to a committee-centered legislative body was manifested by the construction of two additional office buildings. The Longworth Building, named after Speaker Nicholas Longworth (R-OH), was completed in 1933. The Rayburn Building was completed in 1965 and was named in honor of the House's longest-serving Speaker, Sam Rayburn of Texas. These buildings were monuments to the power of the committees. While the Cannon Building had few committee hearing rooms, both the Longworth and Rayburn Buildings are organized around them. With the exception of the Appropriations, Rules, Standards of Official Conduct, and Ways and Means Committees, which today occupy offices in the Capitol Building, all other committees established their operations in the detached office buildings. The party leaders occupied space in the Capitol. Just as the physical layout of Washington, DC, reflects the constitutional separation of powers, so, too, did the arrangement of Capitol Hill reflect the institutional divisions between the party leaders and the committees and their chairs.

The influence of political party competed with that of the committee system under Democratic majorities from 1911 to 1918 and under Republican majorities from 1919 until 1930. The Democrats experimented with "King Caucus" while diminishing the role of the Speaker. The Republicans managed business through a small group of legislators whose most influential Member was Longworth. As Speaker, Longworth demonstrated vestiges of the power that Cannon had enjoyed, but only that. Beneath the surface, a trend was already underway that would alter the House and the speakership for generations: longevity in service was steadily on the rise. This trend was especially accentuated in the southern States dominated by Democrats. When the Democrats

¹Nelson Polsby, "The Institutionalization of the House of Representatives," *American Political Science Review*, v. 62, March 1968, pp. 144-168.

returned to power in 1931, southern Democrats were at the top of the seniority lists and came to chair many key committees. The Democrats were to hold power for all but 4 of the next 64 years, and, until the reforms of the early seventies, the southerners sat astride the committees and the House like statues on the balustrades of an ancient castle.

I have elsewhere labeled this the “feudal” era in the history of the speakership because of the manner in which Speakers showed deference to the committee chairs.² There were related political and institutional reasons for this deference. Politically, the ascendancy of the committees and the relative decline of the speakership was the product of the Democratic Party and the coalition that supported it. The Roosevelt coalition combined voters from northern cities with the “solid South.” The quid pro quo was always implicit: the South would provide reliable congressional majorities and the North would leave civil rights alone. To ensure that this political bargain stuck, congressional Democrats opted for seniority as an almost inviolate rule for advancement up the committee lists. They granted extraordinary powers to the committee chairs, powers that enabled them to set the agenda, determine committee meeting times, cast proxy votes, name the subcommittees, and, in effect, control legislation. The southern barons could block any legislation thought inimical to southern interests. The Rules Committee, which had been the bastion of Cannon’s power, now functioned autonomously and often at odds with the leadership. The Ways and Means Committee, whose chair had formerly served as floor leader and deputy to the Speaker, now functioned autonomously in controlling vital legislation and serving as the party’s Committee on Committees. The speakership that Cannon knew had become unrecognizably eroded.

This was just fine with Democratic Speakers. Their job was to preserve the Democrats’ hold on power. This meant holding the coalition together. Conflict resolved or avoided in the committee rooms would not infect the Democratic Caucus or erupt on the House floor. It was in

this context that Sam Rayburn became the longest-serving (and by many accounts) most esteemed Speaker of the House. Rayburn represented a district in a southern State. His obligations as a national Democrat were always in tension with the attitudes of his Texas constituents.³ Rayburn shaped the culture of the House of Representatives. He was both feared and revered by Members. Because he did not exercise active control over the committees, he was not held to account for their actions. At the same time, he was able to influence the committees when he needed to do so, precisely because he cultivated relationships with their chairs, his fellow southerners. Together, they taught a generation of new Members that “to get along, go along,” go along, that is, with Rayburn and the committee dons.

This House of Representatives defined what political scientists later called the “textbook Congress,” replete with “norms” such as reciprocity, collegiality, deference, hard work, and, of course, seniority. These values were ingrained in Members and those who best adapted to them were the most likely to rise in the party hierarchy. Rayburn’s socialization of the House even stretched across party lines. While the Republican Party always demonstrated a more centralized tendency than did the Democrats, their most senior Members rose on the committee rosters and learned that their best interests were served by embracing the Democratic system and working with its leadership. Rayburn developed a close friendship with Republican Leader Joseph Martin of Massachusetts, and, when Martin served as Speaker during the 80th (1947–1949) and 83d (1953–1955) Congresses, he perpetuated many of the values that he had assimilated during his service in Rayburn’s House. Rayburn held daily sessions in a room at the Capitol that was dubbed the “Board of Education.” Martin would join the Speaker in bending an elbow on bourbon and branch water while discussing the issues of the day. A generation of favored Democrats and Republicans assimilated bipartisan norms as they absorbed the Speaker’s liquor.

² Ronald M. Peters, Jr., *The American Speakership*, 2d ed. (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990 [1997]).

³ Anthony Champagne, *Congressman Sam Rayburn* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1984).

The “textbook Congress” did not last forever, indicating perhaps why textbooks always need to be revised. During the fifties, there arose increasing tension between the northern, liberal wing of the Democratic Party and the southern conservatives. The two Texans leading the Congress, Rayburn in the House and Senate Majority Leader Lyndon B. Johnson, were tugged to the left, Johnson by his Presidential ambitions, Rayburn by the increasingly restless liberals in the Democratic Caucus. When John F. Kennedy was elected President in 1960, he realized that the southern stranglehold on the House would frustrate many of his policies. In 1961, in the last great battle of his career, Sam Rayburn led a successful effort to enlarge the Rules Committee to give it a loyal majority. Thus, the path was cleared for the subsequent passage of the landmark Civil Rights Act of 1964.

After Johnson’s landslide Presidential election in 1964, substantial liberal majorities in the House and Senate swept away southern opposition to enact his Great Society. Still, House liberals such as Richard Bolling (D–MO.) believed that the time had come to break the southern grip on the committee system. By the decade’s end, they had enough votes to push through the Legislative Reorganization Act of 1970 and, during the early seventies, a series of Democratic Caucus reforms that both strengthened the speakership and weakened the committee barons. The Speaker was given operating control over the Rules Committee. By party rule, he named the chair and the majority members of the committee. The Democratic Steering and Policy Committee became the party’s Committee on Committees, and the Speaker appointed a number of its members. All committee chairs were to be nominated by Steering and Policy and ratified by the full caucus, as were the subcommittee chairs of the Appropriations Committee. The caucus itself met monthly, providing a venue for the liberal majority to express itself.

Even as the power of the speakership was thus enhanced, that of the committee chairs was reduced. The Democrats pushed through a “subcommittee bill of rights” that guaranteed that bills would be referred to the subcommittee of jurisdiction. Subcommittees were provided staff, budget, and jurisdiction. With a more auton-

mous set of subcommittees beneath them, and with the full caucus and its liberal majority hovering over them, committee chairs could no longer control the legislative process and dictate the content of legislation. The erosion of the power of the full committee chairs reached its apex in 1975 when, led by the Watergate class of 1974, three southern committee chairs were deposed by the caucus. After that happened, committee chairs were more careful to nurture their relations with the caucus as a whole.

The general effect of these reforms may be described in three rings. At the center, the party leadership, especially the Speaker, was empowered by these reforms. Leadership stock went up, committee chair stock went down. In the middle ring, power was decentralized within the committee system. By the late seventies, over 150 members of the Democratic Caucus served as subcommittee chairs. Each was granted considerable autonomy in managing the subcommittee’s business. To sustain their influence, committee chairs had to negotiate relationships with the subcommittee chairs. Rivalries naturally developed and the committees became venues for bargaining and compromise. In the outer layer, the House floor became a more important venue. The weakened committee system was the subject of less deference on the floor. The introduction of electronic voting, in 1973, made Members more accountable. Televised coverage made the floor more accessible to the public. Issues that might once have been resolved behind the closed doors of the committee rooms were now settled in open floor fights. And the floor was leadership territory.

Thus, the modern speakership was to operate in a very different legislative milieu than at any time in the history of the House. During the late 19th century, the Speaker was able to dominate the House. During most of the 20th century, the committee barons were in control. During the last three decades of the 20th century, the decentralization of power created the need for other control mechanisms. Under these circumstances, more power was given to the Speaker, but more was expected of him as well. Thrust onto center stage, House Speakers became more pivotal and more vulnerable. Members had higher expecta-

tions; political opponents had greater incentive and opportunity to cause mischief.

Political scientists have written for a long time now about the "post-reform House." The term remains useful in differentiating the transition away from the committee-centered regime of the textbook Congress. By now, however, it may obscure more than it reveals. It has not been the reforms alone that have altered the context of the modern speakership. An underlying realignment has reshaped the political landscape that gives definition to institutional processes. The most obvious manifestation of this realignment is the fact that in 1994 the Republicans won control of the House for the first time in 40 years. As early as 1968, pundits had been anticipating a rightward drift in American politics.⁴ Barry Goldwater had prophesied it and Ronald Reagan had pressed it forward. Newt Gingrich completed it. The linchpin of this realignment has been the transition of the South from Democratic to Republican control. This process began with the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, which drove many southern, white Democrats into the camp of the Republicans. This development has led us to where we are today. Richard Nixon carried a substantial percentage of the black vote in 1960. More Democrats voted against the Civil Rights Act than Republicans. The Republican decision to seek the votes of southern whites had its intended effect, swinging a majority of southern congressional districts, Senate seats, and electoral votes to the GOP; but it has cost them dearly among black voters who now vote 95 percent for the Democrats. This racial and regional polarization meshes with religion and other cultural variables to shape the present narrow political division in the country.

The parity between the two parties shapes the political and institutional context of the speakership today. The reformed House had one set of consequences when it was run by entrenched Democrats holding a comfortable majority of seats most of the time. It runs differently when run by a narrow Republican majority determined to hold on to power in a protracted war for control of the House. For example, the relationship

between the party leadership and the committees is fundamentally different under the Republicans than it had been under the Democrats. The Democratic committee chairs saw their power eroded, but were never dominated by the party leaders. Even when several committee chairs were deposed by the Democratic Caucus, the initiative came from within the caucus and the leadership supported the chairs. The Republicans have simply bypassed several senior Members as committee or subcommittee chairs, and have punished deviating Members by denying them chairs to which their seniority would have entitled them. Thus, if the reformed House is different from the pre-reformed House, the Republican House is different from the Democratic House. No matter which party is in the majority, the narrow division that has been in place between the two parties since 1995 has shaped the legislative environment in ways that the reformers of the early seventies could not have anticipated.

One manifestation of this new environment is the upheaval that the speakership has experienced in the past 15 years. Almost a century ago, Uncle Joe Cannon was stripped of much of his power, defeated for reelection and, upon being reelected, reduced to the role of elder statesman within the Republican conference. During the 20th century, the speakership has witnessed great stability, even as its stature was in many ways diminished in relationship to the committee system. The reform movement and the development of partisan struggle for control of the House have created a more politicized environment than any since Cannon's time. This has taken a toll on the speakership. One Speaker resigned from office, a second was defeated for reelection, and a third declined to seek another term in office. These events say as much about the contemporary climate of American politics as they do about the individual Speakers.

This inquiry into the speakership today, then, comes at a critical moment in the history of that office. This volume presents a variety of perspectives on the changing speakership. Part I provides the proceedings of the Cannon Centenary Conference on "The Changing Nature of the Speakership," co-sponsored by the Congressional Research Service and the Carl Albert Congressional Research and Studies Center of the Univer-

⁴Kevin Phillips, *The Emerging Republican Majority* (New Rochelle, NY: Arlington House, 1969); Richard M. Scammon and Ben J. Wattenberg, *The Real Majority* (New York: Coward-McCann, 1970).

sity of Oklahoma. (Funding for the conference was also provided by the McCormick Tribune Foundation.) The conference addressed in detail the speakerships of: Thomas P. “Tip” O’Neill (D–MA; 1977–1987); Jim Wright (D–TX; 1987–1989); Tom Foley (D–WA, 1989–1993); and Newt Gingrich (R–GA; 1995–1999). In examining each speakership, the book offers a statement by the Speaker himself (or, in the case of the late Speaker O’Neill, by his biographer, John Farrell) along with commentary from Democratic and Republican Members who served with that Speaker. Additional insight is provided by noted historian Robert Remini, who traces the broad path of the speakership’s evolution. Of particular note is the contribution of Speaker Dennis Hastert (R–IL; 1999–) who offers his most definitive statement on the speakership and his conduct of it to date.

Part II provides additional depth of analysis in chapters arrayed topically. Prepared by political scientists and congressional specialists at the Congressional Research Service, these chapters offer an analytic perspective on the speakership. In Chapter 2, Walter Oleszek and Richard C. Sachs examine the impact of three Speakers—Reed, Cannon, and Gingrich—on the rules of the House. They argue that these three Speakers were distinctive in their proactive efforts to implement a fundamentally new institutional order in the House. Their account reminds us that Speakers are not entirely hostage to circumstance, and that exceptional Speakers have been able to bring about important institutional changes.

Chapter 3, by Christopher Davis, surveys the history of the House Rules Committee and the relationships of House Speakers to it. During the partisan era of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the Rules Committee served as a reliable arm of the majority party leadership, and Speakers such as Reed and Cannon used control over the committee to push party legislation. With the rise of the conservative coalition in the late thirties, the Rules Committee assumed considerable independence, and became an impediment to legislation pushed by the liberal Democratic majority. Since the reform movement of the early seventies, Houses Speakers have once again taken control of the Rules Committee. The Republicans, who complained bitterly about the tyran-

nical dictates of the committee when in the minority have, Davis finds, been as assertive as the Democrats in using their control over Rules to structure floor debate and to shape legislation brought to the floor.

In Chapter 4, Elizabeth Rybicki traces the relationship between the Speaker of the House and the leadership of the Senate. She identifies the key differences between the two bodies that structure this relationship, and examines how the role of the Speaker in bicameral coordination has become more challenging in the modern era. Of particular interest is her description of the mechanics of bicameral relations. Among these are the legislative conferences through which the two Chambers reach agreement on the final language of bills.

Of increasing importance has been the relationship between the Speaker and the press, addressed by Betsy Palmer in Chapter 5. Her account stresses the changing relationship between House Speakers and the media, affected by the historical and partisan context, the personalities of individual Speakers, and evolving media technologies. During most of American history to date, Speakers had informal and sometimes personal relationships with a core group of press corps veterans. With the emergence of broadcast television, cable television, and Internet technologies, Speakers have had to develop more sophisticated media strategies to counter those of the President, Senators, and other House Members. The decision to open House proceedings to broader media coverage has changed the political environment. The increasing partisanship we see today echoes that of a century ago, but the relationship between the Speaker and the media is greatly different today than it was then.

There has been no more important relationship for House Speakers than that which they have encountered with Presidents of the United States. In Chapter 6, Eric Petersen provides a template for understanding the Speaker-President nexus by considering the relationship between Speaker Cannon and President Theodore Roosevelt, on the one hand, and Speaker Rayburn and President Franklin Roosevelt on the other hand. In the former case, despite Theodore Roosevelt’s efforts to court Cannon, the relationship was at times strained, as Speaker Cannon often dis-

dained the legislative initiatives of the President. Forty years later, Speaker Rayburn was a pillar of support for Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal and wartime policies. In each case, however, the Speaker's relationship to the President was shaped by the needs and expectation of the Members of the House.

Chapter 7 elaborates on the relationship between Speakers and Presidents by considering that relationship in the context of national emergencies: the Civil War, World War I, the Great Depression, and World War II. In it, Harold Relyea argues that times of national emergency affect the role of the Speaker and the relationship of the speakership to the Presidency. In our system of separated institutions sharing powers, the Presidency naturally emerges during times of national crisis. The Congress, in general, and the speakership, in particular, tends to defer to Presidential leadership. This may take the form of passing Presidential legislation or in acquiescing to Presidential actions. In such times, House Speakers tend to be supportive of Chief Execu-

tives. Still, relationships between Speakers and Presidents during national emergencies have varied due to personality, partisanship, ideology, institutional stature, and statesmanship.

In the book's final chapter, I provide an overview of the many changes the speakership has experienced and offer a reflection on its role in the House today. This discussion echoes many of the specific themes developed by the other authors. In particular, it reinforces the perspective that the speakership has evolved over time according to underlying changes in the American political system, producing periods of partisan turmoil as well as periods of bipartisan stability. Speakers have had to adapt their leadership style to the contexts in which they were called upon to serve, yet each Speaker has put his stamp on the office. The present period is characterized by a strong partisanship not experienced since Uncle Joe Cannon was at the zenith of his power, a century ago. Whether this augurs well or ill for the House of Representatives, the speakership, and the country, is a story yet to be told.