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HOUSE COMMITTEE ORGANIZATION AND
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THE HOUSE AND ITS COMMITTEES:
SOME ORGANIZATIONAL PERSPECTIVES

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(II)

THE HOUSE AND ITS COMMITTEES: SOME ORGANIZATIONAL PERSPECTIVES

(By Joseph Cooper, Rice University, and David W. Brady,
University of Houston¹)

DIVISION OF LABOR

All formal organizations must maintain the dependence of external units on their outputs. The ability to maintain dependence, in turn, depends to a significant degree on the ability to establish a viable division of labor. This is true because of the relation between output capacity and division of labor. Outputs must be rationally effective, i.e., exist as efficient means to designated ends, to evoke a positive environmental response and it is division of labor which provides the capability for rational effectiveness on a comprehensive scale. In the case of the House the committee system for a variety of reasons exists as the primary instrument of the division of labor. Thus, insofar as the House's ability to maintain its position in the political system is dependent on its ability to make rationally effective decisions autonomously and comprehensively, it is highly dependent on the effectiveness and efficiency of its committee system.

There is little doubt that the expansion in the range and complexity of governmental endeavor in the 20th century has threatened the ability of the committee system to provide the House with sufficient capability for rationally effective decision making. Nor can it be denied that the amount of stress the House must handle in seeking to preserve the autonomy and scope of its decision making is greater today than even a few decades ago. On the one hand, the range and complexity of governmental activity has grown greatly since the end of the Second World War. As a result, the House's need for information and advice has grown more intense at the same time that the limits imposed by its fixed size and multiple membership roles have grown more restrictive. On the other hand, though the committee system has been consolidated and staff resources substantially augmented since 1946, these gains have been largely offset or neutralized. This has been due both to the increase in the number of subcommittee and jurisdictional overlaps and to the continued growth in the size and resources of the executive branch.

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Since committees constitute the primary mechanism for division of labor, the House must cope with developments that impair its ability to make rationally effective decisions independently and/or in a variety of policy areas by strengthening the operation of these units. Indeed, as noted earlier, this is exactly what the House has done throughout its history. Four potential areas of improvement exist:

1. STRUCTURAL CHANGE

The House in 1946 made a substantial effort to reduce the number of committees and to consolidate jurisdictions. The primary purpose was to focus the effort and attention of members on particular committees so as to reduce the conflicts multiple committee memberships involve. In addition, the House desired to rationalize the match between committees, policy areas, and executive departments in order to make it possible for particular committees to deal more consistently and effectively with entire areas of policy. Nonetheless, since 1946 the number of subcommittees has grown to the point where the total number of committee and subcommittee units now exceeds the number that existed before the passage of the Reorganization Act in 1946. As a consequence, many of the ills this Act attempted to cure have reappeared.

2. STAFF ASSISTANCE

The Reorganization Act of 1946 also sought to strengthen the autonomy and scope of House decision making by increasing the number and improving the quality of committee staff personnel. For the first time in history explicit authority to hire professional staff was conferred. Since 1946 the size of the standing committee staffs has expanded greatly. In 1972 the number of such employees totaled well over six hundred. Nonetheless, the positive impact of expanded committee staff resources has been circumscribed by a number of factors. One problem relates to size. If committee staff resources are now far greater than in the pre-World War II period, so too are the federal budget and the expert or professional resources of the executive branch. Moreover, the majority of committee employees are clerical so that the true professional base numbers only a few hundred. Another problem concerns quality and effectiveness. Some portion of the professional staff is primarily engaged simply in organizing and managing the processes of committee consideration. Equally important, the utility of those staff members engaged largely in substantive work has been impaired by the ad hoc and personalized methods of hiring and job assignment. Both nonpartisan operation and the degree to which staff members truly possess professional expertise or competence have suffered because of the character of the employment system. A final problem relates to distribution. More staff is employed on the basis of special investigative authority than on the basis of permanent authorization. The size of committee staffs as well as the existence of minority staff are accordingly largely a matter of the preference or inclination of the individual committees. As a result, the total number of committee personnel conceals glaring differences in the staff sizes of particular committees and in the availability of staff services to minority members.

3. WORKLOAD REDUCTION

The Reorganization Act of 1946 did eliminate a number of areas of private and minor business. Nonetheless, several classes of such business remain and have grown in size, e.g., District of Columbia and immigration bills. The passage of time may thus have rendered private and minor business just about as burdensome now as it was before the approval of the Reorganization Act in 1946.

4. MECHANIZATION

Though use of the computer has grown tremendously in private organizations and public bureaucracies, the House has lagged behind in this regard. It has, to be sure, computerized its payroll and voting on the floor; but it has not yet taken full advantage of the benefits in terms of information retrieval and analysis that the computer can confer.

Nonetheless, it would be a grievous error to miscalculate the potential for further elaboration and refinement of the committee system. If efforts to strengthen the committees are to be effective and realistic, the constraints imposed by the character of the House's environment, role, and product must be recognized and taken into account.

1. ENVIRONMENT

The House as the legislative unit in a democratic political system is and must be tied to electoral constituencies. The size of the House is thus fixed at four hundred and thirty-five and these four hundred and thirty-five persons must function as the decision makers in all fundamental regards if the House is to make its necessary contribution to basing collective goal decisions on citizen preferences. This means, in turn, that the House is limited in the responsibility it can give to its employed personnel and in the number of such personnel it can effectively use and supervise. It therefore must guard against expanding committee staff to the point where staff personnel displace the members as decision makers. The House, in short, is not a bureaucracy and does not possess the great plasticity in terms of personnel expansion that bureaucratic organization permits. As a consequence, the House cannot escape reliance on executive officers for information advice, and proposals. To be sure, it can and should add to the number of its committee personnel, especially at the professional level. Nonetheless, it must aim simply at providing itself with countervailing sources of intelligence and be aware of the dangers of turning the committees into prisoners of their staffs. In truth, there is little to be gained by replacing overdependence on executive officers with overdependence on committee staffs.

2. ROLE

The House's role in the political system as basic determiner of the concrete meaning and necessities of collective goals has significant implications for the further reduction of the workload and the further restructuring of committees. In reality, the potential benefits to be

gained from eliminating classes of minor legislation are not great. Though the House passes hundreds of minor bills each session, except in a few cases they cannot readily be grouped into discrete categories and thus they cannot be easily eliminated by restricted categorical cuts. Moreover, the House has been reluctant to make such cuts not only because minor business is handled relatively expeditiously through a variety of special procedures, but also because cuts in minor business have a deleterious impact on the ability of the individual member to serve his constituents and build up his own bases of support. This very same factor, as well of course as concern for the scope of House decision making, militates against more wholesale or comprehensive reductions in workload. The truly effective way of reducing the workload is to emphasize the establishment of general objectives and standards in particular policy areas, rather than putting a premium on detailed specification of projects or programs, and then compensating for the increased generality of statutes by expanding oversight activity. In fact, this is the long run trend in Congressional decision making and it is irreversible as long as the range and complexity of governmental activity continue to increase.

Yet, if the House can adapt to this trend by expanding its oversight activity, its inclination to resist broad delegations of power, rather than seeking to accelerate them, is probably wise. Though emphasis on general standards need not impair the House's ability to make the determining policy decisions, detailed specification is much less likely to endanger its policy influence or impact. Ironically enough, however, given the current power of the Presidency, the House's reluctance to pare its legislative workload in any sizeable way is justified as much, if not even more, by concern for its autonomy. As we have suggested, insistence on determining the details of policy in minor and major areas of business enhances the ability of members to control government action that is of direct and intense concern to their constituents. It therefore provides a source of independence that powerfully reinforces the sources of autonomy the formal separation of powers between the branches confers.

The impact of the House's role as basic determiner of policy in the political system is not confined to circumscribing the potential benefits of reducing the workload. Rather, because the House's role severely limits the leeway for beneficial change in this regard, it also severely constrains the potential benefits of further restructuring of the committee system. Given the compression of committee forms effected by the Legislative Reorganization Act of 1946 and the continuing growth in the role of the federal government, it is hardly surprising that subcommittees have multiplied and jurisdictional overlaps increased in the past quarter century. Nor can any great improvements be made. A few classes of minor business could probably be eliminated with more gain than loss, which would reduce the total number of committees and subcommittees marginally. Some other subcommittees could possibly be eliminated and some restructuring of the committee system that would clarify jurisdictional lines might also be effected. Nonetheless, in a context in which only a score of committees exist, the federal budget totals over \$200 billion, and the potential for workload reduction is very limited, large numbers of subcommittees and highly overlapping jurisdictions are endemic and unavoidable.

3. PRODUCT

One of the most distinctive aspects of the House as a formal organization is the value-laden character of its product—basic decisions on concrete collective goals. The value-laden character of this product has significant implications for both the potential benefits of increased mechanization and the potential benefits of increased professionalization of the committee staffs. Increased use of the computer will aid the House's ability to make rationally effective decisions autonomously and comprehensively. Nonetheless, the computer is no cure-all and this is especially true in an organization such as the House. The House, after all, is not an engine factory. At the core of all the major issues it deals with are complex value or end questions that are not resolvable by technical operations, standards, or information. Hence, output capability in the House will continue to be primarily contingent on politics, on the processes of persuasion and bargaining that forge agreement and thereby provide the essential or critical basis for action in a legislative organization.

Nor for much the same reasons can committee staff reform be approached as if Congress were a bureaucratic organization, as if Congress were comparable to General Motors or the U.S. Army. In general, the top levels of committee staff have to be politicized if they are to make any substantial contribution to output capacity. These persons must share the goals and enjoy the confidence of the committee leadership if they are to contribute significantly to the modification of executive proposals or the initiation of committee proposals. The degree to which this is true does, of course, vary from committee to committee. However, its over-all truth as well as the variegated and shifting pattern of exception make it very undesirable to impose any highly structured and nonpartisan employment and job classification system on the committees. Some leeway possibly exists for institutionalizing arrangements for nonpartisan professionals at middle levels. Nonetheless, it is probable that one of the unavoidable costs of being as political an organization as the House must be is inability to guard or insure the quality of top staff professionals.

In reviewing the impact and significance of the constraints imposed by the nature of the House's environment, role, and product, we do not wish to imply that the operation of the committee system cannot be improved or that steps to do so are not worth taking. Certainly, the professional staffs of a number of important committees are stretched too thinly at present. Undoubtedly, there are important benefits to be gained from increased use of the computer. Moreover, though the most efficacious approach to change lies in action that will strengthen the House's ability to analyze and evaluate its workload, there are even some marginal benefits to be gotten from eliminating classes of minor business and restructuring jurisdictions.

Our point is simply that no decisive or revolutionary changes in the position of Congress *vis a vis* the President can occur as a consequence of efforts to strengthen the operation of the committees. Both because the committee system is already highly elaborated and because the over-all potential for elaboration is circumscribed by the nature of the House's environment, role, and product, the gains to be achieved from

strengthening the efficacy of division of labor in the House can only be incremental in character. To assume the contrary will only lead to proposals for change whose costs are greater than their benefits and, even more important, will result ultimately in great disillusionment and cynicism over even the possibility of constructive change.

This would be a disaster and, ironically enough, a wholly unnecessary one. The House can increase the degree of effectiveness and efficiency with which its committees operate; it can increase the degree to which they contribute to its ability to make effective decisions autonomously and comprehensively. Since autonomy and scope are themselves matters of degree, this is well worth doing. Moreover, what must not be overlooked is that the House's position in the system does not depend simply or exclusively on the efficacy of its division of labor. If it would be a serious mistake to miscalculate the benefits to be gained from strengthening the decision-making capability of committees, it would be an even greater mistake to overestimate the significance of division of labor as a determinant of the effectiveness of the House's performance in the political system. Though an exclusive focus on division of labor is usually simply a product of implicit and unquestioned assumptions, it is exactly this kind of myopia that results in exaggerated expectations of the benefits of change and then finally despair over even the possibility of strengthening the effectiveness of the House in any significant way.

INTEGRATION

An organization's ability to produce outputs that will evoke a positive environmental response and thereby maintain environmental acceptance of its role or functions is as dependent on the existence of adequate integrative capability as on the existence of a viable division of labor. Output capacity, in brief, is as dependent on the ability to coordinate and unify the discrete elements of an organization as on the ability to apply specialized knowledge effectively and apportion effort efficiently. Here again, however, the House must satisfy its integrative needs in quite a distinctive manner because of the constraints its environment, role, and product impose. As the legislative unit in a democratic political system, it cannot rely primarily on hierarchy and technology to provide the cohesion necessary for action. Rather, it must rely far more heavily than most formal organizations on politics, on the forging of agreement through persuasion and bargaining, as an integrating element or force. As a result, integration presents more serious problems in the House than in other organizations. Yet, whatever the difficulties of sustaining adequate integrative capability, inability to do so has a deleterious impact on the autonomy and scope of House decision making. It induces members to look to the President as a source of initiative, coordination, and influence and to cede decision making authority as well as basic prerogatives to the President and the bureaucracy.

It seems obvious, then, that the over-all state of integrative capability in the House and the manner in which it is affected by arrangements within the committees and between the committees and the whole should be a prime focus of attention for those concerned about the House's position in the political system. Indeed, history suggests

that once a basic foundation for division of labor is laid, i.e., once a standing, specialized committee system is established, the House's ability to protect and/or extend its policy influence is more dependent on the degree of integrative capability and the degree of Presidential assertiveness than on the degree to which labor is divided effectively and efficiently. Figure 1 illustrates the point.

We may note that in the Rayburn House in the decade or so following the Second World War the efficacy of the division of labor is far greater than in the periods of the Cannon, Stevens, or Wilson Houses. The Rayburn House is the House of a consolidated committee system and professional staffs. In the other periods the number of committees range from the low forties to the low sixties, jurisdictions are highly overlapping, numerous inactive committees exist, and committee staff is sparse and clerical in nature. In addition, the Rayburn and Wilson Houses are highly decentralized and lacking in integrative capability. In both cases parties are incohesive and the Speaker lacking in formal power, though more so in the Rayburn House than in the Wilson House. However, in the periods of the Cannon and Stevens Houses integrative capability is strong. In the former case this is due to a concentration of power in both the formal and party structures. In the latter case it is due primarily to a high degree of cohesion within the majority party which permitted use of the caucus and reliance on party discipline.

FIGURE 1

		<u>Presidential Assertiveness</u>	
		Strong	Weak
<u>Integrative Capability</u>	Strong	Joseph Cannon's House of early 1900's	Thaddeus Stevens' House of late 1860's
	Weak	Sam Rayburn's House of late 1940's and early 1950's	Woodrow Wilson's House of 1880's

Now if we ask in which of these periods was the House successful in preserving and/or enhancing the dimensions of its policy influence, the answer is in all periods except that of the Rayburn House. To be sure, the House's success or effectiveness in the periods of the Stevens

and Wilson Houses is tied to the weakness of the Presidency. In the Wilson House this factor compensated for the amount of disarray in the committee system. In the Stevens House it compensated for the limitations of basing integrative capability on only a single prop. Nonetheless, in no period did weakness in the division of labor undermine the over-all position of the House, if integrative capability was strong and/or Presidential assertiveness was weak. In contrast, weakness in integrative capability when combined with Presidential assertiveness does impair the autonomy and scope of House decision making, as the Rayburn House and indeed the whole course of events since the revolt of 1910 demonstrate.

Since the current House of Carl Albert is far more like the Rayburn House than the Houses of Cannon or Stevens, we may conclude that the impact of deficiencies in integrative capability on Congressional weaknesses *vis a vis* the Presidency certainly match and probably exceed the impact of deficiencies in the division of labor. This, in turn, suggests three corollary propositions or theses.

1. In considering changes designed to increase the efficacy of the division of labor and/or to increase organizational morale, the impact on integrative capability should be taken into account. One of the great problems of reform in the House is that proposals, though advanced with the best of intent, are too often formulated and assessed in a vacuum. It is quite possible, for example, that action to increase the distribution of subcommittee chairmanships involves more costs in terms of impairing integrative capability than benefits in terms of dividing labor or broadening the rewards of service in the House. In short, then, quite aside from the question of whether steps should be taken to centralize power in the House, the significance as well as the precarious state of integrative capability require that care be taken not to weaken it further through the adoption of changes simply on the basis of their surface benefits.

2. If the President's power in the political system increases as a result of environmental changes that augment his position and resources as national party head and/or as a result of environmental changes that augment his position and resources as Chief Executive, the dimensions of the House's policy influence will diminish unless it takes action to increase its integrative capability. As evidenced by the recent proposal to create a Budget Committee, this is a lesson that has finally been brought home to the House in the bitter disputes with the Nixon Administration over control of the federal budget. This again is not to deny the worth of the incremental benefits that can be secured from improving the effectiveness and efficiency of the committee system, but only to put them in perspective. These benefits can help to stabilize the House's position *vis a vis* the President. However, they cannot halt any long run decline in the autonomy and scope of House decision making if the environmental forces augmenting Presidential power remain strong and operative. Nor can they bring about any lasting improvement of marked or substantial consequence in the House's position, if these forces begin to weaken. Though it is possible that the course of future events might in themselves halt or greatly inhibit the further expansion of Presidential power, halting this trend when the environmental forces favorable to Presidential power are

strong or reversing it under any circumstances requires that integrative capability in the House be substantially increased. In brief, then, to reclaim any sizeable portion of the power and influence it once possessed, the House would have to retrace its steps back toward the Cannon House.

3. If the House desires to increase its integrative capability, it should not attempt to do so exclusively through the party structure. Such an approach has a great deal of appeal in the House since it increases centralization primarily by concentrating power in the collective body of party members and/or their representatives, i.e., by increasing the activity and prerogatives of the caucus and/or steering committee. It therefore tempers or limits expansion in the personal power of the party leader and in so doing protects the equality and dignity of the ordinary member. Whatever the appeal of this approach, however, it also has severe limitations. As noted earlier, the party structure in and of itself serves as a far less potent and durable means of enhancing integrative capability than the formal and party structures taken together. More important, given the President's current position of leadership in the party system and in the Congress, any substantial increase in integrative capability achieved primarily through party mechanisms could have extremely counterproductive results whenever the Presidency and the House were controlled by the same party. In other words, the result of enhancing centralization through party mechanisms in the context of a 20th century rather than a 19th century Presidency could well be simply to deliver the House into the hands of the President. Our designation of the Cannon rather than the Stevens House as the model to be followed in increasing integrative capability was thus quite deliberate. Enhancement of the formal power of the Speaker over scheduling and committee operations must accompany increases in the efficacy of party decision making mechanisms if expansion in integrative capability is to serve its intended goals. To offset Presidential power the House has little choice except to build up the independence and power of its Speaker. Ironically enough, the price of greater external authority is greater internal submission.

ROLE FULFILLMENT

Our analysis of the significance of integrative capability and the approaches to expanding it should not be taken as a recommendation for the immediate reimposition of Czar rule. We have not meant to suggest that the House should immediately reimpose the Cannon House in its entirety.

In the first place, though the threat posed by the growth in executive power is serious, a sense of proportion concerning the House's position in the political system should be retained. Even if one assumes that the environmental forces which have brought about a long run decline in the autonomy and scope of House decision making will continue to operate, it is highly unlikely that the House will become a mere cipher in the political system. As long as the autonomy that the existence of locally defined constituencies confers is not vitiated by centralization of the national party system, the House's constitutional authority to legislate and appropriate will provide the foundations for a signifi-

cant policy role. If it is true, then, that further decline in the dimensions of the House's policy influence cannot be halted in the long run by incremental improvements in the division of labor or for that matter in integrative capability as well, it is also true that the House need not regain its late 19th century preeminence to fulfill its role as basic policy determiner in the political system and that the degree of decline can be moderated or ameliorated by incremental changes. The true or valid issues are therefore relative rather than absolute in character—the degree of autonomy and scope the House requires to perform its role satisfactorily and the organizational changes needed to protect and reinforce such levels of autonomy and scope.

In the second place, the costs of reimposing Czar rule at this point in time would far outweigh the benefits. Expanding integrative capability requires centralizing power. This, in turn, constrains the material or personal rewards members derive from service in the House. It can also gravely distort policy satisfactions if the potential for agreement in the majority party is not high. In addition, broad agreement on concepts of authority that legitimize the instruments of centralization must exist if these instruments are to function without provoking intense feelings of inequity. As a consequence, unless the potential for party cohesion is extremely high and allegiance to the concepts of party government is strongly rooted, the high degree of centralization Czar rule involves will seriously damage the effectiveness of the House as a representative vehicle and the personal morale and institutional loyalty of House members. Since neither of these facilitating conditions currently exists in the House, the reimposition of Czar rule is not only unlikely politically, but also undesirable as a reform goal. The kind of integration Czar rule could achieve at the present moment in history would be highly artificial on the one hand and productive of great animosity and alienation on the other.

Nonetheless, our stress on the role and significance of integrative capability is not intended as an academic exercise, designed only to put the usual emphasis on strengthening the efficacy of the division of labor into perspective. Some leeway for expanding integrative capability already exists and such leeway may well be expanding. As the decline in the number of Southern Democrats and the increase in the influence of the Democratic Study Group indicate, Congressional parties have undergone and are undergoing great changes. In truth, despite the resemblance the Albert House still bears to the Rayburn House, a new era appears to be dawning in the House. Thus, in the last few years important alterations in the modes of party operation have occurred that would have been regarded as highly unlikely even in the last years of Rayburn's tenure as Speaker: the reappearance of regular majority caucus meetings, provision for the election of chairmen in both party caucuses, and the reemergence of an operative majority steering committee chaired by the Speaker. Moreover, to some extent the leeway for expanding integrative capability through increasing centralization is subject simply to the will of members, to their readiness to place their common interests as members and their regard for the House as an institution above narrower, self-oriented desires for personal or policy advantage. This is testified to by the current movement to coordinate budgetary consideration through a budget

committee mechanism, another event that would have been regarded as highly unlikely even five years ago.

For both these reasons the questions of the extent to which the House should expand its integrative capability and the means through which it should do so are quite relevant at this point in time. Efforts to strengthen the House need not and should not focus simply on the division of labor. Nor should efforts to increase integrative capability to be limited primarily to enhancing the role of collective mechanisms for party decision making. Indeed, steps in this direction that are not accompanied by action to build up the personal independence and authority of the Speaker in both the formal and party structures are likely in the end to contribute more to Presidential power than to the autonomy and scope of House decision making. House members therefore must probe the depth of valid concern over the decline of the House during the last six decades and ask themselves how much increased subordination to the Speaker they are willing to accept to keep the trend toward Presidential power within proper bounds. These are not easy questions to answer. Nonetheless, House members concerned over the House's role and prospects in the political system would gravely deceive themselves if they did not pose these questions and seek to answer them in a disinterested way.





