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HOUSE COMMITTEE ORGANIZATION AND OPERATION

Statement of JAMES A. ROBINSON
Macalester College

ON

Committee Staffing

NINETY-THIRD CONGRESS

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STATEMENT ON COMMITTEE STAFFING

(James A. Robinson, President, Macalester College)

This panel on "Committee Staffing" comes at a time when it is widely appreciated that executive-legislative relations are out of balance and that Congress has lost influence over public affairs relative to the Presidency. I attribute this state of affairs, largely, though not of course wholly, to the Presidency's superior resources for acquiring and processing information about public problems. This is not the occasion to argue either of these assumptions, but it is important to be explicit about the context in which I make some recommendations about committee staffing.[1]

Congress and especially its committees need two kinds of information: that which applies to current matters demanding immediate attention, and that which applies to issues likely to emerge in the future. It is a common characteristic of organizations both large and small to concentrate on problems at hand and to take little thought of the morrow. Moreover, organizational decisionmakers typically adhere to the obverse of Benjamin Franklin's advice; namely, they rarely do today what they can do tomorrow. Nevertheless, the consequences of today's actions, or inactions, often determine tomorrow's resources and possibilities for choices among competing alternative policies. It is useful, therefore, for bodies such as Congress to organize themselves in ways that anticipate the future, or at least some aspects of it, and to prepare for problems lying beyond the horizon.

Measures to improve the flow of intelligence to Congress would undoubtedly help both in making current decisions and in planning future ones, although care should be taken not to overload the organization with more information than it can process effectively.

The first recommendation for improving information that must occur to anyone, whether he be a Congressman or an observer, is to increase staff available to individual members and to committees. Few members of the House have professional staffs because the daily demands of answering mail, caring for constituents' Washington problems, and managing routine office duties exhaust most of the financial resources. By the time a Congressman hires a sufficient number of secretaries, receptionists, robot typewriter operators, and authorities on the politics and problems of his district, he is likely to have few dollars available for employing a legislative assistant who can help him with his committee work and other policy interests. Not only is there a severe dollar limitation for Representatives, but there is also an acute shortage of space. Despite the opening of a new building in the nineteen-sixties, quarters remain cramped, and it is not uncommon

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[1] See my *Congress and Foreign Policy Making* (rev. ed., 1967) and "Staffing the Legislature," in A. Kornberg and L. Musolf, eds., *Legislatures in Development Perspective* (1970).

to find that in a busy office the Congressman no longer has any privacy, because he has given over part of his own room to an assistant. The disappointments associated with the construction of the Rayburn Building may have made some members chary of voting for more House office space. But if more legislative assistants are to be added to the staffs of Representatives, the Rayburn Building will need to be followed by more buildings honoring other former Speakers and other distinguished members.

The rationale for providing members with policy advisers on their individual staffs is that at present most Congressmen, especially House members, are dependent upon their own experience and wisdom. They have no immediate, confidential counsel to help with the vast array of issues that confront them. To be sure, on issues before their respective committees, advice and assistance may be obtained from the committees' staff. But, on the other issues, the members may be without counsel. Moreover, their need for counsel and assistance intensifies as the amount of information required to handle public problems increases.

It is a commonplace, however, to recommend that members and their committees should have more staff. The subject deserves to be discussed with more explicit reference to the kind of personnel most required. Congressmen and their committees need assistants whose qualifications complement their own strengths and weaknesses. Legislators are typically lawyers or businessmen, with a few farmers, physicians, and teachers. Scientists, whose occupational specialties have become increasingly relevant to national policies, are rarely elected. Thus, at any particular session Congress is not likely to possess expertise on atomic energy, chemical warfare, biological evolution, environmental pollution, water disalinization, public opinion surveying, and information retrieval equal to its expertise in law, taxation, investments, agriculture, and banking. What is primarily required, therefore, is staff who can furnish Congress with the scientific and technical knowledge that the elected politician seldom brings with him to Washington.

While inventing ways to augment intelligence resources, one should not overlook the fact that some members of Congress have been reluctant to increase the size of committee staffs. Opposition in the House to augmenting the number of legislative assistants has come more from "conservative" members than from "liberals." Part of this opposition stems from the fact that conservatives assume, and probably rightly, that with more policy advisers more new proposals will be promoted and government activity will extend further into various domains of public policy.

A partial answer to this bias against increasing intelligence facilities is to suggest that conservatives themselves need help in constructing alternatives to liberal initiatives. Efforts of Republican Representatives to develop alternatives to Democratic programs during the late nineteen-sixties and early nineteen-seventies attest to the value of increasing the scholarly competence of the staff of the minority side. At the very least, Republican staffs have sharpened and clarified alternatives and given a constructive character to the minority party's positions.

It is important that the minority as well as the majority be staffed on each committee. Controversy over minority staffing is not surpris-

ing in view of a Congressman's natural ambitions for power. Information is a source of power, and the majority understandably wishes to restrict the minority's chances to acquire power, even though it knows that it may itself some day be the minority. Undoubtedly, a sense of fairness mitigates the demand for power in certain committee majorities, and some of them have been much fairer to the minorities than others.

It is not fairness, however, that constitutes the most compelling argument for providing minorities with a staff almost equal in numbers with that of the majority. The best argument is that the improved performance of the minority members helps to strengthen Congress vis-a-vis the Presidency and the executive departments. If the majority party becomes increasingly aligned with the executive branch (as is not impossible and is certainly in accord with the hopes of the "party responsibility" and "executive force" schools of thought), then one must look to the minority to check the majority and in so doing to provide the necessary legislative counterbalance to executive power.

A substantial number of Congressmen take periodic surveys of the opinions and attitudes of their constituents on current issues. The most common form of Congressional survey is a mail questionnaire. Some members send mimeographed sets of questions to every constituent whose name they can find in voter registration books, city and county directories, telephone listings, and their own correspondence files. Others "sample" these sources by polling every fifth or tenth name. Many Congressmen take pains in wording the questions and in drawing a sample, in a conscientious effort to obtain a valid and reliable profile of their constituents' policy preferences. Others, however, use polls, especially questionnaires, simply as one more means of placing their own names before the voters, and have little concern for actually informing themselves about the views of their districts.

I see no reason to prescribe for what purpose Congressmen should question their constituents. This depends on the "role" that a Congressman adopts for himself. Members assume different kinds of roles, and the particular role taken determines the way in which a member relates to his district, and therefore how seriously interested he is in having trustworthy polls.

Among those members who actually want to know what their constituents think, few are trained to construct samples and design questionnaires. Their administrative assistants usually have only a rudimentary knowledge of surveys, and few members can afford to hire private consulting and opinion survey experts. Congress could authorize the Legislative Reference Service to make available two or three technical specialists in the use of survey methods and in the interpretation of survey results. Members of Congress, of course, would decide whether and when and about what issues they want to send questionnaires to their constituents, but they would be able to obtain expert assistance in selecting samples, wording questions, and analyzing results.

While individual members rather than committees have typically sampled public opinion, there is no reason that major committees may not wish to commission or conduct opinion research for their purposes. National surveys are more likely to be obtained through contracting

with established polling firms than through Congressionally administered surveys. For this purpose, Congress as a whole or committees on their own should consider budgeting appropriate sums.

The proposals so far discussed apply principally to providing Congressmen with resources for dealing more effectively with current problems on its daily agenda. Several measures can also be introduced to improve Congress' facility for long-term planning.

One of the easiest and least expensive ways of enlarging legislative perspectives on the world is foreign travel. Congressional trips abroad have frequently been pejoratively dubbed as "junketeering," even by such scholarly and usually sympathetic organs as *Congressional Quarterly*. If arguments are needed or precedents required to justify foreign travel for legislators and their staffs, they are readily at hand. It is not uncommon in other occupations and professions to send officials abroad to enhance their understanding of current situations and of future opportunities. Similarly, in the Foreign Service officials are regularly rotated between various overseas assignments for many reasons, among them the belief that experience in different climes and places broadens the perspective of Foreign Service Officers and prevents their becoming victims of the ideology or interests of particular locales.

Currently congressional foreign travel usually is arranged by the legislative liaison office of the Department of State, and transportation is often provided by the Department of Defense in Air Force planes. This places Congressmen and their staffs in the debt of executive departments and at the mercy of the perspectives of their executive hosts while abroad. Congress need not to be dependent for its travel facilities upon the agencies that it intends to check and balance. Instead it could establish its own travel office, and use Air Force accommodations only as a last resort. Because the government subsidizes airlines, Congressmen and authorized staff could justifiably travel at reduced fare, just as executive personnel traveled at less than full fare on subsidized railroads when trains were the chief mode of transport.

Another useful measure would be to provide each Member and senior committee staff with an annual allowance budget of, say, $1,000 for the purchase of books, reports, and other published materials. Although the Government Printing Office makes available to Congress virtually unlimited copies of its many publications, and Congress can readily command many of the other materials published in the executive branch, members have no funds allocated to them for the purchase of non-governmental publications. A Congressman or his staff can quickly requisition an annotated copy of the Constitution published by the Government Printing Office, but they must pay out of their pockets for privately and commercially published volumes and reports of interest to them. To be sure, these can be borrowed from the Library of Congress if they are not in great demand, but personal copies cannot be obtained.

From time to time a few committees have commissioned non-governmental consultants to prepare reports for them. For example, the Senate Foreign Relations Committee has engaged experts from universities and other research institutions to study special topics. Other committees have also on occasion commissioned outside research as-

sistance. Congress' use of external assistance, however, is paltry compared to that of the executive branch. The Air Force has long retained the RAND Corporation, not so much to advise it on immediate problems as to anticipate future concerns of the defense establishment. In addition, the executive departments have the financial resources to engage consultants from outside the government on a *per diem* basis. It could be worth experimenting with a provision that any member of Congress could call on the expertise of non-governmental bodies at rates commensurate with private consultation fees. The experiment would determine the extent of demand, and give individual Congressmen the opportunity to learn whether this sort of arrangement facilitates their work.

Another possibility for enlarging the opportunities for Congress to obtain outside counsel is the public commission. The President frequently appoints commissions to investigate and recommend on such matters as civil rights, health, crime, smoking, sex discrimination, etc. Congress has occasionally established similar commissions, which report either to particular committees or directly to the Speaker and might experiment further with the method.

I have, in effect, put as much emphasis on staff resources as on staff. Appointing more assistants may be less useful than equipping present staff with resources for travel, surveys, publications, consultants, and commissions. Enlarging staff runs the risk of creating a bureaucracy as cumbersome as that in the executive branch.

The important objective is to put staffing in the context of all the effective strategies for better informing Congress and its committees and thus strengthening the legislature in its interaction with the Presidency and the executive departments.

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