

Congress: Power and Reform

Lecture Notes

rev 2/10

I. Reforms in the Congress

A. The “democratization” of the Senate

1. *17th Amendment* - Popular election of senators in 1913
2. *Cloture Rule* - Filibuster restricted >>> 60 Senators need to vote to end filibuster

B. Recent changes/Reforms in the House: 1960’s and 70’s

1. Chairmanships become elective w/ secret ballot
Power of Committee Chairs - Has the power of congressional committee chairs increased or decreased in the last 20 years?
 - o "During the 1970s, Congress approved several fundamental changes that ended the nearly absolute authority enjoyed by committee chairmen" Service, Library of Congress:
 - o The biggest loss in power is related to the parties abandoning strict seniority >>> parties select chairs and ranking members by secret ballot in their caucus or conference.
 - o Republicans have set six-year term limits on chairmanships (HR)
 - o appointment of task forces by-passing committees reduces power of chairs unless they are on the task force.
 - o But chairs still wield tremendous power over their committee's agenda, staff, subcommittees, and the appointment of conferees >>> Republican Commerce Chairman Thomas J. Bliley, Jr (VA) as saying that he has more power than Democratic chairmen had when they were in the majority" (1995).
2. Subcommittees strengthened
3. Congressional staff increased
4. Subcommittee investigations open to the public & scrutiny of the press
5. *Discharge petition* - 218 members vote to get bill out of comm. & vote to floor. Recent: Camp Fin Ref in HR

II. Congress Attempts to Rein In the Executive Branch

A. Congressional Oversight of the Federal Bureaucracy

1. Investigations and Hearings - make sure Exec. Branch is doing what the Congress directs (EX: Challenger and Columbia accidents brought Congressional investigations of NASA)
2. Approve or not Presidential appointments to federal agencies
3. Pass legislation to regulate federal agencies: Clean Air Act, Environmental Protection laws, Civil Rights laws, etc.
4. Budget - #1 check of Congress of Executive Branch and federal bureaucracy is \$ i.e. “power of the purse”

B. Congress Fights Back Against Modern Presidents

1. **Historically, Congress has only overridden less than 7% of presidential vetoes >>> 2/3 majority of both houses is hard to get**
2. War Powers Resolution (foreign policy)
3. Budget:
 - a. *Budget & Impoundment Control Act* (1974) - requires Cong. to monitor gov. revenues & expenditures (response to Nixon’s refusal to spend moneys allocated by Cong.)
 - b. *Congressional Budget Office* (CBO) - to counteract OMB; advises Congress on likely economic effects of spending programs and provides info. On the costs of proposed policies