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William M. Morrow, Congressional Committees

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BOOK REVIEWS

MORROW, WILLIAM M. *Congressional Committees*. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1970, 261 Pp.

Eighty-five years ago Woodrow Wilson lamented the organizational characteristic of Congress by noting:

The privileges of the Standing Committees are the beginning and the end of the rules. Both the House of Representatives and the Senate conduct their business by what may figuratively, but not inaccurately, be called an odd device of disintegration. The House both virtually deliberates and legislates in small sections.¹

More recently, members of the Joint Committee on the Organization of the Congress, again noting the organizational weaknesses of Congress, made it their aim "to search for a practical means to make Congress a more effective institution for carrying out its basic modern functions; the legislative function, the oversight function, and the representative function."² The anti-establishment cynic, taking note of the accomplishments of the first session of the Ninety-First Congress, might somewhat irreverently paraphrase the late Winston Churchill and note that never have so many done so little in such a great deal of time—at least not since 1933.

Despite the fact that the stated purpose of William Morrow's work is to "describe and analyze the role of congressional committees"³ within the framework of the American political system, he has indirectly assumed the responsibility for placing some of the major criticisms directed toward Congress into a political perspective. This, to say the very least, is a considerable task which could involve a work several times the length of Morrow's study. It is much to the author's credit that he has selectively chosen his material so as to give students of Congress as well as informed laymen a rather thought provoking analysis of the role of committees in the development of congressional policy.

After examining the formal and informal dimensions of committee organization and relations between the executive and congressional com-

1. W. WILSON, *CONGRESSIONAL GOVERNMENT: A STUDY IN AMERICAN POLITICS* 62 (1956).

2. JOINT COMMITTEE ON THE ORGANIZATION OF THE CONGRESS, *ORGANIZATION OF CONGRESS: FINAL REPORT*, H.R. REP. NO. 1414, 89th Cong., 2d Sess. 2 (1966).

3. W. MORROW, *CONGRESSIONAL COMMITTEES* 1 (1970).

mittees, Morrow presents eight conclusions each of which reflects the congressional committee's position in the American political system—a system chiefly characterized by its “brokerage” politics. Morrow concludes:

- (1) The structure of congressional committees represents the natural legislative response to the growing complexity of modern policy problems as most often expressed by the executive branch. . . .
- (2) Committees generally tend to reflect and reinforce the decentralized character of the American political system. . . .
- (3) The constitutional and political roles of committees sometimes coincide and sometimes conflict. . . .
- (4) Committee behavior in legislative oversight, like that in policy screening, shows the influence of both political and constitutional inputs. . . .
- (5) Within Congress the prestige committees are more cohesive or ‘integrated’ than those committees of lesser status. . . .
- (6) Committees generally tend to amplify the electoral role of political parties at the expense of the policy or programmatic role. . . .
- (7) House committees tend to be more conservative and anti-executive in outlook. . . .
- (8) In total, the committee system is representative of the ‘multiple pressure pattern’ of American politics. Being so characterized, it is a spokesman for incrementalism rather than for rationalist comprehensive plans.⁴

Students of congressional behavior will probably take issue with at least one of Morrow's conclusions. The data necessary to validate the author's fifth conclusion is conspicuously absent. He relies exclusively on the works of Manley⁵ and Fenno.⁶ Their concern was with the House Committees on Ways and Means, Education and Labor, and the House and Senate Appropriations Committees,⁷ not with all of the standing, select, joint, or special committees of Congress. The author's conclusion may be valid, however, we are asked to accept that conclusion

4. *Id.* at 229-32.

5. Manley, *The House Committee on Ways and Means: Conflict Management in a Congressional Committee*, AM. POL. SCI. REV. 59 (Dec. 1965).

6. R. Fenno, Jr., *The House of Representatives and Federal Aid to Education*, in *NEW PERSPECTIVES ON THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES* (R. Peabody and N. Polsby eds. 1963). For an exhaustive study of the appropriations process see R. FENNO, JR., *THE POWER OF THE PURSE, APPROPRIATIONS POLITICS IN CONGRESS* (1966).

7. *Id.* See also note 5 *supra*.

without the benefit of empirical data.

On the other hand, that is probably one of the more important features of Morrow's work. There is very little statistical data standing in the reader's path. Although it may be scientifically dangerous for the author to reach such a sweeping conclusion as his fifth finding, it is pleasing (and I say this as one from the "empirical" school of political science) to speculate with the author on the future of Congress much in the manner of the late Illinois legislator T. V. Smith. Students of congressional behavior have been flooded with data. Now, the author appears to be saying, let's address ourselves to the pressing matter of deciding on what the future holds for Congress—whether it is as the first, second or third branch of government.

What are some of the more pressing problems facing Congress? In what I personally regard as the more important section of Morrow's book he explores the "incremental" pattern of decision-making which characterizes the congressional process. While this approach to decision-making facilitates a maximum amount of negotiation, accommodation and compromise, it does not meet the expectations of the "rationalists" who are reluctant to compromise on principle in the development of public policies. Congressional committees, reaching decisions in an incrementalist manner, accentuate this conflict between the political "pragmatists" and "rationalists."

Morrow concludes that Congress may improve its position in the development of public policies in any of four manners. First, decisions could be reached on the basis of what is known as "radical incrementalism," a method by which continuing programs would be given a cursory annual examination. This would presumably liberate a great amount of time for committees to consider some of the pressing policy-problem areas of the American polity. Second, greater emphasis could be placed on increased specialization. A greater reliance, for example, could be placed on professional staff assistance. Third, Morrow suggests that legislative party reform would be one vehicle for improving the policy making position of Congress. Once realized, institutions such as the "seniority system" would be of decreasing importance in determining committee chairmen. Finally, a greater amount of inter-committee cooperation, or what Morrow refers to as "inter-committee integration," might facilitate professionalization in decision-making.

One wonders how politically viable these alternatives are in the face of the very carefully developed thesis of Morrow. Regardless, the reader can be reasonably certain after reading Morrow's book that change, whatever its form, will be incrementally realized.

Whatever the professional disposition of the reader, whether

“empirical” political scientist, legalist or interested laymen, *Congressional Committees* deserves thoughtful attention in time that is often described as an era of the “decline of Congress.” This book is an indispensable aid in conducting a political analysis of the role of congressional committees in the development of American public policy.

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