Caucus and Conference: Party Organization in the U.S. House of Representatives

by

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Abstract

The House Democratic Caucus and the House Republican Conference have witnessed both similarities and differences over the course of their respective histories. This paper traces the evolution of the two party organizations and examines their current operation. It is concluded that today they differ from each other in fundamental respects. The Democratic Caucus is a discussion forum. It is coalitional and internal in its focus. The Republican Conference is a public relations firm. It is ideological and external in its focus. Both party caucuses are affected by contextual variables. These include majority/minority status and party control of the White House. The most important factor shaping the two party organizations is party culture, which is shaped by each legislative party's previous history and by the two parties' respective constituency base. This examination of the two party caucuses has implications for theory. On the one hand, similarities in the pattern of meetings, participation by members, and occasional sponsorship of retreats and task forces lend credence to positive theories that seek nomothetic explanations of congressional behavior. On the other hand, the evident differences in the day-to-day operation of the two party organizations, the functions that these organizations perform, and the relationship in which they stand to the party leadership, suggest that any explanation will have to take into account inter-party variation.

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Introduction

An observer of the House Democratic Caucus and Republican Conference today cannot but be struck by the differences between the two party organizations.[1] To be sure, there are many similarities. Both caucuses meet at the beginning of each congress in order that the parties can organize for action. Thereafter, both party organizations meet weekly while the House is in session, on Wednesday morning. Attendance at these weekly meetings runs about 50% in both parties, and newer members are more likely to attend than their more senior counterparts. Both caucuses serve as venues for intra-party communication, public relations, and policy consideration. Both are served by elected chairs, vice-chairs, and secretaries. These positions elevate their holders in the party hierarchy and reflect the confidence that their colleagues have in them. Both caucuses provide basic services to members such as providing information on floor activities and pending legislation. Both sponsor annual retreats for members.

Still, the differences are striking. The Republican Conference is served by a staff of around 50. The Democratic Caucus staff is closer to a dozen. Reflecting this difference, the Republican Conference annual budget exceeds $5 million, augmented by funds channeled through a tax-exempt foundation. The Democratic Caucus sponsors no such private funding vehicle and its annual budget is barely a tenth of that of the Republicans. The Republican Conference operates like a large public relations firm, sponsoring a sophisticated web page (GOP.GOV), organizes large issues conferences, has a major outreach program to talk radio and television shows and other media outlets, has monitored campaign contributions by lobbyists, and has been responsible for specific policy portfolios within the GOP leadership group. The Democratic Caucus functions mostly through a series of issues task forces designed to forge Democratic alternatives to Republican legislation, but has no specific policy portfolio, has a less well developed web site, is not responsible for communications strategy, and is generally subordinate to the floor leader and whip organizations.

Several factors contribute to these differences, among which two are central: minority/majority status, and differences in party culture. These factors are historically related. In order to explore this hypothesis, this paper traces the evolution of the two party caucuses with emphasis upon developments since the reform movement of the 1970s. I then provide a description of the caucuses as they have developed during the past two decades. I conclude by offering explanations for the differences between them.

Historical Evolution to 1970

Among organizational structures giving shape to the House of Representatives the party caucuses are the oldest, the most central, and the most amorphous. Since the House operates on the principle of majority party control, party caucuses are essential vehicles through which the parties organize, elect officers, and establish rules. Attempts to trace formal leadership positions are able to identify all House speakers since 1789, Democratic Caucus chairs from 1849, Republican Conference chairs from 1863, and floor leaders and whips from roughly the turn of the twentieth century (Sachs, Vincent, and Rundquist 1997). This suggests that among party leadership positions, that of caucus chair is, next to the speakership, the oldest and most basic. The parties cannot function without an organizing caucus, the caucus requires someone to preside, and the caucus chair is the party leader until other party leaders have been elected.

Still, the position of caucus chair has historically been subordinate to other party leadership positions. Since the emergence of fully articulated party leadership regimes at the turn of the twentieth century (speaker, floor leader, whip, caucus chair, campaign committee chair), the position of caucus chair has ranked below speaker, floor leader, and whip in the party hierarchy. One indication of this is the fact that caucus chairs have been less likely to rise to the highest leadership positions. Among 55 identified Democratic Caucus chairs since 1849, only 6 went on to become speaker, floor leader, or whip. Among 33 Republican Conference chairs since 1863, again, only 6 went on to higher party office. Another indication is the fact that caucus chairs have tended to serve only one or at most two terms. Clearly, these party leadership positions have not been historically either bastions of power or steps to higher leadership office.

An explanation is simple: for most of the history of the House the party caucuses did not do much. These organizations typically met only at the beginning of a congress or congressional session. Each party caucus adopted its rules, elected its candidate for speaker, approved its committee list, and in the case of the majority party, approved rules for the House. These decisions were then ratified by the House at its opening session. On some occasions, where for example the organization of the House was delayed by protracted fights over the speakership, the caucuses were venues for positioning and negotiation. But once the House was organized to do business, the work of the two party caucuses was essentially done. The elected party leadership, on the one hand, and the committees, on the other hand, were the main organizational instruments by which the House did its work.

As will be explored in further depth below, there have been important differences between the Democratic Caucus and the Republican Conference and these differences are related in part to the tensions naturally arising between party leadership, the committee system, and the party caucuses. An efficient legislative party will have a center of gravity that defines an equilibrium for its members. The party caucuses, party leadership, and committee system are potential loci of control. During the fifty years subsequent to the Civil War the Republicans, being often in the majority, developed a party leadership centered regime in which a small coterie including and surrounding the speaker exercised effective control over the party and the House. The party leadership exercised control through the Rules Committee, the power of floor recognition, and control over committee assignments. It had no incentive to want an active conference because the conference was a vehicle through which the progressive minority within the Republican party might assert itself. By contrast, during the fifty years after the revolt against Speaker Cannon in 1910, the Democrats developed a regime in which control was centered in the committee system. Committee chairs became quite powerful, and they had little incentive to want to see their power eroded by an active caucus. The party leaders accommodated to the committee barons, and did not

want dissidents within the caucus to rock the boat. For the Democrats, the internal schism was between the party's southern and northern wings, and that schism was muted by a strong committee system grounded in seniority and a quiescent party caucus.

During a brief interlude after the revolt against Cannon the Democrats flirted with party government through their caucus (Haines 1915). The party had campaigned against Cannonism, and its leaders wanted to present a different image upon taking control in 1913. During the speakership of Champ Clark (D., Missouri) the party's floor leader, Oscar Underwood (D. Alabama) was in effective control. According to Haines, "The essence of Cannonism had been the control of the House by the speaker through his power of appointment of committees and his domination of the rules committee, backed by the power of the majority party caucus; the essence of the new system is direct control of legislative action by the caucus itself" (Haines 1915, p. 696). In empowering the caucus the Democrats were careful to maintain the balance of power between the southern and northern wings. Caucus Rule 7 provided that a two-thirds vote of the caucus was required in order to bind its members (thus enabling the South to protect its vital interests). Under the rule of "King Caucus," Underwood pushed through elements of Wilson's New Freedom. The extent of Democratic control was scarcely less than that which had been exercised by the Republicans under Cannon; only the mechanism was different. But the era of King Caucus did not last long. By 1916 Underwood had moved on to the Senate and the nation became preoccupied with World War I. President Wilson squandered his political capital on the war and his quest for the League of Nations, and in the House of Representatives, power slid slowly into the grasp of the committees.

When the Republicans claimed a majority in the 1918 elections both parties made changes that would have long-lasting consequences. On the Republican side, the conference was divided into three factions: Cannon stalwarts, followers of Nicholas Longworth (R. Ohio) who sought to wrest control from the Cannonites, and progressive insurgents mostly from the West. The Longworth faction took advantage of the reluctance of many members to return the Cannon faction to power. James R. Mann (R. Illinois) was the leader of the Cannon faction and had served as Republican floor leader during the Democratic interregnum. The Longworth faction nominated Frederick H. Gillett (R. Massachusetts), the oldest Republican member, for speaker and Gillett defeated Mann. Driven from the party leadership, Mann engineered a retaliatory coup, proposing a new committee on committees comprised of one member from each state who would be empowered to cast as many votes as were Republican members in that state's delegation. The result was a committee on committees dominated by the large states. Mann, as the member from Illinois, remained disproportionately influential. During the period of Republican control, from 1919 to 1931 the Longworth faction (with first Gillett and then Longworth himself serving as speaker) ran the party with a firm hand. Progressive Republicans were disciplined by the conference while the leadership circle was extended to include loyal western members. As opposed to the tight control exercised by a narrow leadership team under Cannon, and in contrast to the sort of caucus government with which the Democrats had experimented under Clark and Underwood, the Republicans developed the conception of an expanded leadership. The center of gravity remained in the party leadership, however, and not in the committees.

The Democrats also changed the manner in which their committee appointments were made, designating the Democratic members of the Ways and Means Committee as the party's committee on committees. For decades the chair of the Ways and Means Committee had served as the party's floor leader, but by the 1920s the speaker, floor leader, whip, and caucus chair were all elected by the caucus. Thus, the Democrats severed their committee selection process from the

party leadership just as the Republicans had done, albeit in a different way. An explanation for this difference goes to the difference between the two parties. Although the Republicans were internally divided between regulars and insurgent progressives and between large and small state delegations, they were still generally cohesive. With the exception of a small minority of progressives, the majority of Republicans were ideologically congruent. The Democrats were deeply divided between southerners and northerners. The South had interests that were distinct and in many ways incompatible with those of the North. By transferring committee appointments to the Ways and Means Democrats, the party avoided a potential source of conflict. The committee on committees was guided by the seniority principle in making assignments and in nominating chairs/ranking members. This mitigated conflict by providing a automatic process for career advancement and assigning power positions.

By the time the Democrats returned to power in 1931, the party's most senior members had a strong stake in preserving the autonomy of the committee system. There emerged in the decade of the 1930s a new Democratic regime in which the locus of power lay in the committees and their senior, mostly southern, committee chairmen. In this regime, the role of party leaders changed. Instead of driving the legislative process as Underwood had, Democratic party leaders accommodated the power of the committee chairs. The prototypical speaker of the long era of Democratic control of the House was, of course, Sam Rayburn (D. Texas) who served as speaker or minority leader from 1940 until his death in 1962. Rayburn represented a conservative district in a southern state. He had himself been a powerful chair of the House Commerce Committee during the New Deal, forging progressive legislation including securities regulation. He was ideally suited to balance the regional concerns of his southern colleagues, the institutional concerns of the committee chairs, and the progressive policy interests of the national party. Rayburn played the role of broker among the committee chairs. He was always deferential to their power, and could always turn to them for favors on matters that were important to him. He understood that the autonomy of the committee system provided an important buffer between the party leadership and the demands of the more liberal northern Democrats. The deference of the party leadership to the committee structure extended to the autonomy of the Rules Committee and the relative independence of the committee on committees, comprised of the Ways and Means Democrats. When Rayburn needed a rule or an appointment, he could get it; otherwise, he could avoid responsibility for the actions of the committees.

Because of the balancing act that Rayburn played with the committees, he was always against an active caucus. Once the caucus had met to elect officers and approve a committee slate, it did not need to meet again. From both Rayburn's perspective and that of the committee barons, caucus meetings could only cause mischief. Within the committee system, the senior members dominated and the southern members were among the most senior. They were also, of course, more conservative than their northern and more liberal colleagues. An active caucus would provide a venue in which northern liberals could pressure southern conservatives. Furthermore, an active caucus ran contrary to important norms that had evolved in the House. These include specialization and reciprocity. Specialization occurred in the committees and subcommittees and reciprocity defined the relations between them. The structured policy apparatus that the committees and subcommittees comprised served the interests of the members it empowered but also served the purpose of good public policy by focusing expertise on policy. From this perspective, caucus governance would lead to poorly considered policy by non-experts. Thus, whether viewed politically or from the perspective of public policy, caucus governance was a bad idea.

A remarkable aspect of the evolution of the House during the long era of Democratic control was the manner by which the Republicans mimicked the Democrats, following what James Q. Wilson in a different context has called the "iron law of emulation" (Wilson 1989) in which one institution parallels the development of another. Instead of challenging the Democratic regime the Republicans adapted to it. The norms that described the "textbook Congress" applied to members from both parties: seniority, specialization, reciprocity, comity, and deference. There was good reason for this development. The most influential Republicans had something to gain and, after the emergence of the conservative coalition in 1937, the party corporately had less to lose. Individual Republican members were empowered in the committee system because most committees operated in a bipartisan manner. Republican ranking members often worked cooperatively with Democrats in the committees and subcommittees. Committees wanted and expected deference on the House floor. They recognized that committee unity was the key to influence on the floor. Bargains were struck in order to bring committees together in support of legislation. Republicans had influence in this arrangement. The conservative coalition controlled policy on the floor in key areas including defense and war policy, civil rights policy, and state control issues. An excellent example was the operation of the Ways and Means Committee. This committee was central to the Democratic regime since its members served as the party's committee on committees. Ways and Means joined Rules and Appropriations as the three most powerful House committees. Yet the Ways and Means Committee functioned in a highly bipartisan fashion. Under its long-time chairman Wilbur Mills of Arkansas, the committee emphasized the importance of bipartisan consensus in the committee in order to attain deference on the floor. Ways and Means bills usually were reported with closed rules that denied opportunities for floor amendments (Conable 1989).

Republican leader Joe Martin of Massachusetts served as speaker during the 80th and 83rd congresses. A close friend of Sam Rayburn, Martin was a solidly conservative Republican whose orientation toward the House had been shaped in Rayburn's "Board of Education," gatherings for late afternoon libations. Like Rayburn, Martin saw little reason to enliven the Republican Conference; instead, he sought to exercise party leadership by putting pressure when necessary on the committees. The result was that the Republican Conference was relatively quiescent during the feudal era, although still somewhat more active than the Democratic caucus. As Speaker Albert once noted, "..to tell you the truth, the Republican Conference has been much more important over the years than the Democratic Caucus."[2] The greater importance of the Republican Conference was due in part to the fact that the party remained in the minority for so long. Lacking control of the committees, the conference provided an outlet for members. The Republicans also demonstrated a greater propensity for fights over leadership positions. Martin was ousted by Charles Halleck (R. Indiana) in 1958 and Halleck was ousted by Gerald Ford (R. Michigan) in 1966.

When John W. McCormack (D. Massachusetts) became speaker upon Rayburn's death in 1962 the House was led by a northern liberal for the first time since Henry Rainey of Illinois had served as speaker in 1933-1934. During the 1960s the number of liberal Democrats increased in the House and the schism between them and their conservative, southern colleagues widened. Northern liberals were frustrated by the power that the southern committee barons exercised, and began to press for institutional reforms that would democratize the House and reduce the autonomy of the committee chairs. McCormack was thoroughly the product of the Rayburn House, and he resisted institutional change. His majority leader, Carl Albert (D. Oklahoma), saw that change was inevitable and realized that his prospective speakership would be shaped by the manner in which the House approached reform. The reformers were led by northern liberals such as Richard Bolling

(D. Missouri) and Phillip Burton (D. California). These members were supported by the liberal Democratic Study Group, whose staff director, Richard Conlon, pressed incessantly for institutional reform. The reformers first demand was for a regular monthly meeting of the caucus, a demand that McCormack resisted for several years. Finally, in 1969 McCormack announced his impending retirement from the House. As heir apparent to the speakership, Albert prevailed upon McCormack to permit monthly meetings of the caucus. The floodgate opened, and the reform era began. The Democratic Caucus was its main venue.

The Democratic Caucus and the Reform Movement

In seeking monthly meetings of the Democratic Caucus and in establishing a Committee on Organization, Study, and Review, the liberal Democrats sought to advance institutional reform and a liberal policy agenda. The party leadership was in favor of reform, cautiously in the case of Speaker Albert, more enthusiastically in the case of Tip O'Neill (D. Massachusetts), who served as first majority whip and then majority leader under Albert. O'Neill, in fact, was a more enthusiastic exponent of an active caucus as whip and leader than he would be as speaker. As a subordinate party leader, his incentive was to build a constituency among a liberal base, and allying himself with the forces of reform was useful. As speaker, his incentive was to hold the party together, and in that context he had to fear divisive caucus meetings. Speaker Albert's attitude toward the caucus evolved during his speakership. In 1971 he expressed concern about its divisive tendencies:

> Mr. Chairman, the Democratic Party in the House possesses no more fervent and dedicated supporter of this Caucus than myself. During the past Session as Speaker and in prior years as Majority Leader, I have lent my unreserved cooperation and encouragement to those whose objective was to make this institution more productive and viable... . Candidly, any prolonged debate this morning as to which Members are more or less for a strong Caucus, which groups may have the superior attendance record, or an acrimonious exchange on intra-party minutiae, will serve little purpose... . The Caucus as an institution bears no relationship to a ping pong table or the tennis court. Its legitimate role is most decidedly not to provide an arena where ideological, geographic, or ethnic Democrats of a certain stripe or coloration may win points or games against equally genuine Democrats of somewhat different backgrounds. Neither, may I add, do I feel the proper role of our Party Caucus to be some type of medieval star-chamber nor Communist Politburo charged with the responsibility of applying a litmus test for political orthodoxy.[3]

Two years later Albert spoke to the goals of the reform movement when he said, "We are hoping that it (reform) will do what we want to do in all of our procedures...one is to make the Congress as representative as possible. You can't do that without making it as democratic as possible.[4] Towards this end, Albert recognized the necessity of a more active caucus. Accepting his party nomination as speaker at the December 2, 1974 organizing caucus, Mr. Albert said, "I think I can fairly say that it has been an important part of my speakership to make the caucus a more important instrument in the operation of the House."[5] If the renewal of the Democratic Caucus had salutary goals, it also had predictable consequences. In part, the caucus became a

vehicle for the leadership to rally support for party positions. An example occurred in January of 1970 when Majority Leader Albert offered a resolution calling upon President Nixon to sign the Labor-HEW appropriations bill.[6] But the use of the caucus by the leadership was less frequent than its use by liberal rank-in-file members. The monthly caucus meetings quickly became venues for all sorts of institutional and policy initiatives pitting party liberals against conservatives and pitting the committee system against the liberal Democratic Study Group. Some examples will illustrate. Immediately, in 1969, members began submitting policy resolutions to the caucus. For example, in April of that year resolutions were introduced calling upon the Ways and Means Committee to report legislation repealing a freeze in AFDC payments proposed by the Nixon administration.[7] During the same month, Congressman Charles Diggs (D. Michigan) requested caucus consideration of the conduct of Chairman John McMillan of the House District Committee. McMillan was accused of using his power as chair to kill legislation by refusing to refer it to subcommittees of appropriate jurisdiction. Diggs, along with a few other liberal Democrats, chafed at the control exercised by the conservative McMillan. In response, McMillan noted that the District Committee operated on the basis of the same rules as other committees, and that it was Diggs's subcommittee itself that had been moribund during the preceding year.[8]

This sort of institutional and political squabbling continued into 1970, as several examples will illustrate. On February 16, 1970 eighteen liberals submitted a resolution calling for the creation of the Committee on Organization, Study, and Review.[9] This committee was established and Congresswoman Julia Butler Hansen (D. Washington) was designated its chair. On May 11, 1970 Congressman B. F. Sisk offered a caucus resolution providing for open elections for party leadership offices.[10] On May 21, 1970, forty-five Democrats proposed the first resolution calling for an end to the war in Vietnam.[11] By December of 1970 the caucus was considering a resolution to place age limits on committee chairmen.[12]

Later that month Caucus Chairman Dan Rostenkowski (D. Illinois) offered his fellow Democrats an analysis of the caucus's operation during 1970. "As Chairman, I have recently spent considerable time reviewing the journals of the 22 meetings that we have had in this Congress. It has become obvious to me that in many instances, the Caucus has had a tendency to divide rather than to solidify the diverse elements of our party. The Caucus must remain a means for promoting unity within the party, not accentuating differences."[13] A comprehensive analysis of caucus attendance reported in July of 1971 showed that the six organizational caucuses in 1969, 1970, and the first six months of 1971 experienced 75% average attendance. Twenty-seven non-organizational caucuses during the same period experienced 44% average attendance. In nineteen of these cases a quorum was lacking. Among non-organizational caucuses obtaining a quorum, All involved substantial issues such as major reform proposals or end-the-war resolutions, or were initiated by the DSG. These data suggest that the caucus activism was generated from the liberal wing of the party, especially the DSG.[14] Caucus attendance was clearly an issue, with some liberals accusing the leadership of scheduling committee meetings in opposition to the caucus in order to depress turnout and deny a quorum. The leadership denied any such intent. Still, an analysis of one non-organizational caucus, that of May 19, 1971, indicated that among 109 members present, 90 were affiliated with the DSG while among 147 members absent, 87 were non-DSG. Thus, 60% of DSG members attended while 82% of non-DSG members did not. Included among the absentees were 13 of 21 committee chairmen, 11 of 13 Appropriations subcommittee chairmen, 22 of 33 Appropriations Committee Democrats, 12 of 15 Ways and Means Democrats, and 6 of 10 Rules Committee Democrats, including then altogether 104 of 162 party leaders as absentees. These data suggest very clearly the pattern of participation in the caucuses and the schism between

younger and more liberal members affiliated with the DSG and the more senior conservative members empowered by the seniority system.[15]

Rostenkowski identified several problems including poor attendance and inadequate notification of the agenda. With respect to attendance, among the 22 caucus meetings in 1970, attendance averaged only 41% of the Democratic membership. While Rostenkowski does not say so, it seems likely that the most frequent attenders were agitated members proposing divisive changes in rules or policy. With respect to dissemination of the agenda, Rostenkowski noted that the caucus had no budget to support distribution of information to members and that all operating expenses of the caucus were carried from his congressional office budget. Tellingly, Rostenkowski sought the power to remove items that had been carried on the caucus agenda for three consecutive months, a clear indication that members were using the caucus to press for institutional and policy changes that lacked majority support.

Rostenkowski was correct: the Democratic Caucus was becoming more divided. In late 1970 he contributed to that division by withholding the votes of the Illinois delegation for Carl Albert's nomination as speaker. Albert won easily, and in retaliation struck Rostenkowski's name from a list of potential Democratic whips. Then, with Albert's support, Rostenkowski was challenged as caucus chair by Olin Teague (D. Texas), an Albert ally. Rostenkowski's dual defeats removed him from the leadership ladder but did not have any fundamental effect on the operation of the caucus. Throughout the balance of Carl Albert's speakership, until 1976, the caucus remained a potentially divisive venue for reform and policy initiatives. Members regularly offered policy resolutions on issues ranging from Vietnam to school busing. The major reforms of the era were produced by the Committee on Organization, Study, and Review. These included a major fight over a committee reform measure proposed by a committee headed by influential Congressman Richard Bolliing (D. Missouri). In 1975, the caucus ousted three senior committee chairmen, the culmination of the attack on the committee system fostered by rules changes and such direct attacks as that on Chairman McMillan by Congressman Diggs. Even powerful Wilbur Mills (D. Arkansas), the Chairman of the Ways and Means Committee was steamrollered by the caucus. In 1974 a junior member of the committee, William Green (D. Pennsylvania) brought a petition to prevent the committee from seeking a closed rule on a tax bill (Russell 1974).[16] Green wanted to kill the oil depletion allowance on the House floor. This use of the caucus to override the Ways and Means Committee's long standing policy of seeking closed rules on tax bills epitomized the tension between the traditional power of the committees and the rising power of liberals through the caucus. It also illustrated the situation in which the party leadership was placed. Responding to a reporter's question about the Green resolution, Speaker Albert spoke as follows:

> Press: Is the oil depletion bill going to come out of Rules on Thursday?
> Mr. Albert: That is what I have been told.
> Press: Are you still taking a hands-off attitude with the Ways and Means Committee?
> Mr. Albert: I haven't been instructed to do anything.
> Press: Didn't the caucus instruct the Rules Committee?
> Mr. Albert: The instruction was to the Rules Committee, but not to me.
> Press: As a member of the caucus, are you going to referee the fight?
> Mr. Albert: No I am not. I have not told the Chairman or the Committee what to do. They have their own responsibilities as

> committee members and as Members of Congress. I was not instructed to do this. There was no instruction to the members of the caucus to do this. If the way is to instruct the Speaker to instruct the Rules Committee to instruct the Ways and Means Committee, I don't think it would get very far. You know we have tried at times to make it possible for the leadership to have a little more control over legislation, but it doesn't work unless you have cooperation.[17]

Speaker Albert's ambivalence about the caucus was most clearly revealed in the fight over an anti-school busing resolution in 1975. While most of the policy initiatives in the caucus had come from the left, this one came from the conservative, southern wing of the party. It was proposed that the caucus instruct members of the Judiciary Committee to produce a constitutional amendment that would create a right for a parent to send a child to the school closest to home. Caucus Rule 8 (previously 7) had provided that no member could be bound on a matter of constitutional principle, personal conscience, or instructions from constituents, but the Democrats deleted that rule in order to head off Republican charges that King Caucus had returned. Anti-busers now hoped to push their anti-busing resolution through the caucus. Albert drew the line and sponsored the motion to table the resolution. While he had acquiesced in the oil depletion instruction, he would not tolerate the caucus being used to force through a dubious constitutional amendment. Ironically, Caucus Chair Phillip Burton had been a main advocate of using the caucus to promote liberal causes. The anti-busing resolution demonstrated that a pile-driving caucus could hammer the left as well as the right.[18]

By the time he retired from the House in 1976, Carl Albert must have felt that the caucus cat had been let out of the bag for good. During his entire six-year tenure as speaker, an active Democratic Caucus had been a consistent feature of the landscape. The rising liberal wing of the party, led by the DSG, had succeeded in pressing its reform agenda through the caucus. The Democratic Caucus Rules had grown from being a single short page to becoming an entire operations manual. The liberals had been less successful in pressing for policy alternatives. Anti-war and anti- school busing resolutions regularly failed to command caucus majorities or failed to produce floor legislation. But nonetheless the committee system was on notice that an active caucus was looking over its shoulder.

It is perhaps surprising, therefore, how quickly the caucus became moribund again during the Carter administration. Monthly meetings were poorly attended, there were few policy resolutions, and the caucus staff was essentially inactive. Several factors help explain this rapid regression of the caucus. One important factor was that the reform movement had run its course. The appetite for reform had been sated, and did not rise again. A second important factor was that the Democrats controlled the White House. Policy would now be initiated at the other end of Pennsylvania Avenue, and the task of congressional Democrats was to rally behind the program of the Carter administration. The third important factor was the hostility of Speaker Tip O'Neill, Majority Leader Jim Wright, and Majority Whip John Brademas to an active caucus. These leaders saw an active caucus as an impediment to their own leadership of the party. As it developed, the Carter administration proved maladroit in dealing with the Congress, and an active caucus would become a vehicle through which rifts with the administration would be exposed. Since the reform movement had produced open caucus meetings, the party would be showing its dirty laundry in public. It was one thing to have an open discussion critical of the Nixon administration, another thing to bare criticisms of the Carter administration by House Democrats. Alongside this concern

was a latent intramural squabble. The caucus activism was clearly identified with the leadership of Congressman Phillip Burton. Burton had served as caucus chair during the 95th Congress and then narrowly lost election as majority leader to Jim Wright in the organizing caucus for the 96th Congress. During his tenure as caucus chair, the caucus met in regular monthly and additional special meetings in which pending rules, legislation, and reform proposals were extensively discussed. Burton was a major proponent of an activist caucus. His sometimes heavy handed leadership drew criticism from conservative members (Taylor 1975). He was closely allied with Richard Conlon and the DSG. Any activity at the caucus was viewed by the party leadership as a stalking horse for Burton's ambition. Whether true or not, this perception made the party leadership even more unfriendly to caucus activism. Caucus Chair Tom Foley (D. Washington) had been a Burton supporter. His own leadership ambition now required him to work cooperatively with O'Neill, Wright, and Brademas. He chose, therefore, to allow the caucus to sleep rather than to rile it (Granat 1983).

The Renewal of the Democratic Caucus

Circumstances changed again with the election of Ronald Reagan and a Republican Senate in 1980. The House Democrats suffered substantial losses, reducing their majority to twenty-six seats. Even before the election outcome was known Speaker O'Neill had begun to chafe at the lack of party discipline (Cohen 1980). On September 23rd the DSG sent a circular letter to Democrats calling for greater use of the caucus as a vehicle for defining positions for the party. Views diverged as to whether the caucus could seek to enforce discipline or only serve as a venue for dialogue. One factor inhibiting party discipline and an active caucus had been the Democrats substantial majority. As the 1980 election approached Democrats projected a sixty seat majority in the 97th Congress. The twenty-six seat majority they retained called for greater party discipline. Forty-seven conservative Democrats associated with the Conservative Democratic Forum (CDF) would hold the balance of power.

The new chair of the Democratic caucus was Congressman Gillis Long, a moderate from Louisiana. Long brought to the caucus a new staff director, Al From, from the Carter White House staff. Long and From decided that the caucus should be used as a vehicle for defining a new party message.[19] Under Long's leadership the caucus held the first of what would later become an annual issues conference in January of 1981. He also established a Committee on Party Effectiveness (CPE), comprised of thirty-six members who met every Tuesday (Herrnson and Patterson 1995). Membership was drawn largely from among younger and more moderate members, although representatives from the larger informal caucuses such as the CDF and Black Caucus were included. The CPE became a primary vehicle for issue articulation and message development. Long, of course, had ambitions to higher leadership office. The CPE was described by one participant as the "Gillis Long for Speaker Committee," reflecting his stake in building a constituency among newer and more moderate Democrats. The CPE piloted the use of caucus task forces to address issues. It avoided legislation per se in order to avoid conflict with committee jurisdiction. While Speakers Albert and O'Neill had each used party task forces to develop legislative proposals, this was the first time that the caucus systematically fostered issue discussion. At the same time, the caucus avoided member service activity such as a legislative digest, leaving that to the well-respected DSG Legislative Reports.

The results of these efforts were soon apparent. In April of 1981 the caucus issued a statement of economic principles. The statement captured attention in the national press and the

editorial boards of major newspapers such as the New York Times ("Text of Statement on Economic Matters Adopted by the House Democratic Caucus" 1981; Tolchin 1981). The manifesto, an attack on Reaganomics, sought common ground among Democrats in opposition to the Reagan budget and tax cuts. Even as Long sought to move the caucus toward policy and message consensus, other Democrats pressed for sanctions against disloyal members. Long resisted these efforts. "When I ran for chairman of the caucus, I pledged to try to unify - and not purify - the Democratic members of the House... . I would hope that we can achieve unity without disciplining members" ("Punish Those Who Bolt" 1981). Long had strategic reasons for opposing sanctions. Not only would sanctions have divided the caucus, those liable to be punished included many who might support him in a bid for higher leadership office.[20]

By the end of 1981 the caucus had created several policy task forces including an economic task force headed by Richard Gephardt (D. Missouri). These task forces sponsored field hearings around the country to publicize the effects of the Reagan economic program and were a logical extension of the statement of party economic principles (Herrnson and Patterson, 1995). These Caucus task forces were prototypes for similar efforts extending over the next two decades. In September of 1982 the caucus produced a comprehensive policy document labeled the Yellow Book because of its yellow cover. This was the first effort to define a comprehensive vision for the party (House Democratic Caucus 1982). The Yellow Book was a prelude to the Democratic mid-term elections conference and sought to set the stage for the Democrats 1982 campaign. Thereafter, the Democrats held regular annual issues conferences, at first in Washington and later at the Greenbriar resort in West Virginia. They created two tax-exempt foundations to funnel contributions from lobbyists to help defray the expenses. The press called attention to the influence the lobbyists hoped to purchase. Thereafter, the members paid their own way and the lobbyists were limited to traveling on the train on the way to the retreat. Gillis Long continued to press for a new national Democratic party message during his two terms as chair of the caucus. While avoiding stepping on the toes of committee and subcommittee chairs, he pressed the Democrats to refine their message to voters. By the end of 1982 Long was recognized for having revitalized the caucus (Cohen 1982). Critical to his success was an early decision to close caucus meetings to the public. The opening of the caucus meetings had been an artifact of the reform movement's glasnost. The effect was to stifle the caucus as a place for vigorous debate. The Democrats, licking their wounds from the 1980 election, were happy to withdraw into closed caucus sessions to discuss the party's future (Granat 1983). The nature of the caucus policy discussions was different than during the heyday of reform in the early 1970s. Then, members would petition for caucus meetings in order to propose resolutions or offer instructions. The goals were legislative. Under Long, the caucus was a forum for general policy discussion rather than specific legislation. This was consistent with Long's larger goal of reorienting the national Democratic party. The Democratic Caucus became more actively oriented toward the national party, and sought to influence the shape of the party platform in the 1984 elections (Hook 1984).

Democratic Caucus chairs are limited to two terms, and in 1985 Congressman Richard Gephardt was elected caucus chair to replace Long.[21] Gephardt had first been elected to the House in 1976, and during his eight-year career had established himself as a leader among the younger generation of Democrats. He had played pivotal roles on tax, budget, and health issues, and was known for a limitless capacity to talk and to listen. Under his leadership, the caucus extended the techniques that had first been developed by Gillis Long. The annual issues conference became a weekend long retreat to which families were invited. Policy experts were invited to make presentations in working sessions from which the press and lobbyists were excluded. The goal of

the annual retreats became explicitly party building, which connoted not only building consensus on policy but also fostering interpersonal relationships (Hook and Calmes 1986)

An important aspect of Gephardt's leadership was the focus on message and communication. He organized a rump group of a dozen or more Democratic members who met regularly to discuss party message and communication strategies (Ehrenhalt 1984). He created a "Message Board" that included roughly 40 House Democrats who were charged to carry the party message to the public (Herrnson and Patterson 1995). In the wake of Walter Mondale's devastating defeat in the 1984 election, the Democrats felt that it was more vital than ever before that they reshape the public's impression of the party. Their elected leader, Speaker Tip O'Neill, evoked the image of an Irish, ward-heeling politician that was easy for the Republicans to caricature. Although Charles Stenholm of Texas, the leader of the CDF, hinted at a challenge, Gephardt instead sought to reshape the public's impression of the party by a more effective communications strategy and by repositioning the party on some policy issues.

A major effort was undertaken in 1987 to influence the party platform for the 1988 election. While under Long there had continued to be a fault line between the committee and subcommittee chairs and the caucus policy task forces, Gephardt was able to recruit the committee and subcommittee leaders to participate in issue task forces leading to the creation of comprehensive policy statements issued by the Democratic Caucus to the national party platform committee.[22] A message team headed by Congressman Mike Synar of Oklahoma was created to work on daily and weekly message. Here, the House Democrats emulated the Republican White House and its communications operation, which offered the media a "message of the day." The emphasis on media, message, and outreach represented a turning point in the evolution of the caucus. Heretofore the caucus's orientation had been primarily inward. Its goal had been to address matters of importance to members and to try and build unity within the party. That had been Gillis Long's stated goal. Long's other goal, however, had been to change the national party image. That required a public relations strategy that was first developed under Gephardt. This linkage between the House Democrats and the national party was new. Under Rayburn, congressional Democrats had avoided any linkages with the national party because the national party was dominated by northern liberals and the Democrats' House majority depended upon the Solid South. In the 1980s, electoral realignment slowly homogenized the two major parties bringing each congressional party in to closer alignment with the national party (Rohde 1991). One consequence was to facilitate cooperation between the legislative and national parties.

By the end of the 1980s the Democratic Caucus had become a very different institution than in any of its previous incarnations. It met more regularly, was a lively venue for intra-party discussion, utilized issue task forces and message teams to shape public debate, and developed an affirmative public relations strategy for the membership. Intra-party tensions remained. Committee barons such as John Dingell, Jack Brooks, and Dan Rostenkowski disliked the caucus, viewing it as intrusion on their committee domains. Tip O'Neill had not been aggressive in seeking to use the caucus as a vehicle for the leadership. His successor, Jim Wright was far more inclined to push for party positions on legislation and to seek unity through the caucus in support of them. Wright was in constant tension with Rostenkowski and Dingell, both of whom were viewed as potential rivals for the speakership. Underlying both the evolution of the caucus and the tensions within it, however, was a single, overriding fact: the Republicans held the White House. For so long as Reagan and Bush were in charge of the executive, the congressional Democrats were on the defensive. It was in this context that the trends of the 1980s emerged. In the 1990s, these trends would be further accentuated. Before discussing the most recent developments in the evolution of

the Democratic Caucus, however, it will be useful to consider the evolution of the Republican Conference since the reforms of the 1970s.`

Evolution of the Republican Conference

The most important factor shaping the evolution of the Republican Conference in the past thirty years was that the party remained in the minority until 1995. The role of a minority party caucus differs essentially from that of the majority party. The majority party has the responsibility to govern and the power to fix the rules. It controls the committees and sets the agenda. Its caucus will naturally be in greater tension with the committee system and will offer opportunities for members to promote serious legislative goals. The question facing the majority caucus is always, "how shall we govern?" By contrast, the minority party's caucus can only be a discussion forum because the minority cannot write the rules, set the agenda, or enact a program. There are some advantages in this situation. Because the party cannot govern, it is freer to talk. Debate can be more robust, more oriented toward policy and ideas than toward strategy and tactics.
Lacking access to institutional positions of power such as committee and subcommittee chairmanships, congressional Republicans proliferated party leadership positions through the Republican Conference. In addition to the positions of floor leader, whip, campaign committee chair, and conference chair, the Republicans added positions of conference vice-chair, conference secretary, research committee chair, and policy committee chair. These party leadership positions became the vehicles through which leadership ambition was channeled. One result was a greater propensity for competition in filling them. Democrats usually avoided challenges to incumbent party or committee leaders, but Republicans demonstrated less reluctance to take on a fight. When positions became vacant, robust competition was normal. A further consequence was to offer Republican party leaders incentives to use their positions creatively to promote their preferred policies.

Thus, in the 1980s conference chair Jack Kemp was an apostle for tax reform and supply-side economics and used his party leadership position as a platform to promote his ideas.
In the early 1980s, just as Gillis Long was using the Democratic Caucus to shape a Democratic Party message, a group of Republican back-benchers led by Newt Gingrich (R. Georgia) sought to do the same thing for the Republican Party. Organized as the Conservative Opportunity Society (COS), the young Republican conservatives sought to nationalize House elections by shaping their ideological context. Their political strategy was to offer a Republican alternative to welfare state liberalism for which they held the Democratic Party to stand. The Republicans had held their first issues conference in 1983 in Baltimore (Broder, 1983). Beginning in the early 1980s these became annual events often dominated by COS members and ideas. The Republican Conference offered a venue for COS to press its ideas and to seek to build intra-party consensus. Gingrich's goal was to create a more aggressive Republican minority grounded on conservative principles that would offer voters a reason to give the party a majority.

While the conference provided a venue for COS, the group did not emanate from the conference and was not the creation of its chair, Jack Kemp. Kemp was indeed a leader among the younger Republicans, joining with Gingrich, Trent Lott (R. Mississippi), Connie Mack (R. Florida), and Vin Weber (R. Minnesota) to form the “five amigos” whose goal it was to shape a new ideological plinth upon which the party could stand (Stengel 1996). Among them, Kemp (the conference chair from 1981 to 1987) and Lott (the Republican Whip from 1981 to 1989) were in the elected leadership. But neither Kemp nor Lott would remain in the House. Lott joined Mack in

moving to the Senate and Kemp left the House to pursue the presidency, later serving as Secretary of Housing and Urban Development in the Bush 41 administration. It was Gingrich and Weber, allied with Robert Walker (R. Pennsylvania) who were the driving forces behind COS. Thus, while the Republican Conference was an important venue for COS, COS functioned independently of the official party apparatus and was not an artifact of the party organization in the same way that CPE was for the Democrats.

Through the 1980s the Republican Conference underwent a steady, if subtle transformation, one expressed more by ideological orientation than by institutional change. In part, this reflected the underlying realignment of the electorate as the South moved steadily into Republican hands and the party became increasingly defined by its southern and western members. In part it was due to the steady pressure of COS members who sought to energize the party through the politics of ideas. In part it was due to Republican members' increasing frustration in serving in the minority. In part, it was due to the increasingly heavy-handed manner in which the Democrats controlled the House and its floor agenda. A key event occurred in 1985 when the Democrats seated their own candidate in a disputed Indiana election in spite of the fact that the election board in Indiana had certified the Republican candidate as the winner (Connelly and Pitney, 1994). Republicans became more cohesive and more willing to challenge the Democrats. The conference began to meet weekly in the late 1980s, a further indication of the manner in which GOP members were bonding. Still, the conference was divided between moderate and more conservative members and between an older generation of members whose institutional orientation was toward the committee system rather than the party apparatus and a younger generation of members who wanted to use the party apparatus in order to take control of the committees from the Democrats. Gingrich was the leader of the latter group and was in regular tension with Floor Leader Bob Michel (R. Illinois). Each man wanted to use the conference meetings for his own purposes, Gingrich to push ideas and Michel to contain Gingrich.

The main factor shaping the Republican Conference's role in the 1980s, however, was the fact that the party controlled the White House. Under Republican presidents, the party's role as one observer put it, was to sustain presidential vetoes. This deference to the presidency was a natural byproduct of the American system of separated powers. Still, it created complications for COS in its drive to reshape the Republican Conference and take control of the House. It asked the House Republicans to play defense instead of offence, diminishing their prospects for taking control. Of course, in a presidential system the roles of the majority and minority parties can be convoluted. The House majority party may find itself in opposition to a president of the other party; a House minority party may find itself a subordinate arm of a government dominated by a president of the same party. The permutations made possible by the separation of powers require no further elaboration. In this case, the Gingrich faction among House Republicans wanted to go on the offensive against the majority Democrats, even while the Bush administration was cutting legislative deals on the budget, environment, disabilities legislation, and other important public policies. In 1990, Gingrich led a revolt against the budget deal that Bush had struck with congressional Democrats, seriously eroding his standing with the party base. A turning point in the evolution of the conference took place in 1989. President Bush nominated Texas Senator John Tower to become Secretary of Defense and the Senate defeated the nomination. Bush then nominated GOP Whip Richard Cheney (R. Wyoming) and the Senate confirmed the nomination. In a hotly contested election Newt Gingrich defeated Edward Madigan (R. Illinois), a protegé of Bob Michel, to become whip. This was the first entry of the COS leadership to the party leadership

and a harbinger of things to come. While the House Republicans were supposed to play defense, Gingrich wanted to play offensive hard ball.

During the Bush 41 administration the chair of the Republican Conference was Congressman Jerry Lewis (R. California). Lewis had fought his way up the GOP leadership hierarchy, serving first as research committee chair, then policy committee chair, and then, when Cheney moved from conference chair to whip, defeating Congresswoman Lynn Martin (R. Illinois) to become conference chair. Lewis was a moderate whose power base in the House was enhanced because he also served as the California representative on the party committee on committees, giving him as many votes as there were California Republican members in the committee appointment process. Under his leadership the conference staff prepared comprehensive legislative proposals for use by GOP members and candidates on the stump. Two examples were the American Family Act and the American Economic Opportunity Act. These were comprehensive legislative proposals that sought to define party positions for electoral consumption. Of course, for so long as the Democrats controlled the House they had no chance of enactment. But they were precursors of the Republican "Contract With America" that would play so important a role in the 1994 elections. Republican Conference staff also provided a member subscription service to provide issue analyses similar to those provided on the Democratic side by the DSG. The staff grew to about a dozen in number, but staff funding was provided by borrowing clerk hire from member offices. The total conference budget was about $1 million per year. Lewis worked closely with Michel. The floor leader would appoint task forces on substantive policy issues and the conference would staff them. They also prepared special orders, visuals, organized town meetings, and media outreach. In all of these activities, the Conference was under direction from the leadership. One clear contrast between the Republican Conference and the Democratic Caucus was the fact that the GOP leadership produced its own legislative agenda each year as a blueprint for the party. The product of conference task force deliberations, the leadership agenda sought to provide common ground upon which the legislative party could stand.[i] One indication of the underlying change taking place in the Republican Conference was Lewis's eroding position (Hook 1990). Conservatives in the California delegation moved to oust him from his position as the California representative on the committee on committees, arguing that as conference chair he had too much power (Miller 1990; Stewart 1990). Actually, COS was behind the move as a first step in undermining Lewis's position in order to challenge him as conference chair. In 1993 Congressman Richard Armey (R. Texas), a Gingrich ally, unseated Lewis and became conference chair (Kuntz 1992). Now COS controlled the second and third party leadership positions. Armey, a former economics professor, had strong policy views and used his control over the conference to push them. The conference staff worked for Armey and no longer was a directly supportive of Michel. Armey set up his own tax-exempt foundation, produced his own policy statements, and functioned autonomously of the floor leader. The policy and research committees, supposedly devoted to current and long-term issues respectively, were subordinated to the conference chair. Armey's role as conference chair represented both a consolidation and a diffusion of power. On the one hand, his independence from Michel reflected the split in the conference between the young Turks and the older moderates. On the other hand, Armey demonstrated that a conference chair could consolidate the complicated conference apparatus that had evolved during the preceding two decades. At the same time, the Conference under Armey's leadership took a turn toward a more active public relations focus that would continue to evolve under John Boehner and J.C. Watts.

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By the time the Republicans took control of the House in 1995, their conference had become a much more active, ideological, policy-oriented, and politically aggressive institution. It was by then dominated by COS members. The "Contract With America" represented a major step in the direction of party government through the conference. Such a defined legislative platform would have been unthinkable for the Democrats. With the election of Newt Gingrich as Speaker, the House would stride and stumble through an experiment in party government that would provide a new and enlarged role for the conference.

John Boehner: the Operator

Upon seizing control of the House Newt Gingrich and his circle of top advisers sought to impose a new regime in which control resided in the party leadership. Gingrich was particularly concerned to establish control over the committee system. Committee staffs were reduced by one-third, committee chairs were term-limited, the speaker controlled nomination of committee chairs, the leadership approved all committee staff directors, and a small advisory committee was formed to shape party policy. Gingrich even dispensed with the committees entirely in favor of legislative task forces in drafting key parts of the "Contract With America" (Balz and Brownstein 1996; McSweeney and Owens 1998). The top Republican leadership was comprised of Gingrich, Majority Leader Richard Armey, Majority Whip Tom Delay (R. Texas), and Conference Chair John Boehner (R. Ohio). Boehner was the only non-southerner among them and was generally regarded as somewhat less ideological than the other GOP leaders. The Republican regime was an odd combination of central control and delegated functions. Party policy was to be set by the speaker and his advisory committee. Committee chairs and Appropriations subcommittee chairs were asked to swear fealty to the leadership as a condition of their appointment. Subordinate party leaders, while elected by the conference, understood their role to be that of team players. At the same time, each party leader was delegated functional responsibility. This included the regular functions of floor operations for the majority leader and vote-counting for the whip. The conference chair was assigned the communications portfolio.

Under this arrangement Dick Armey and Tom Delay established clear functional domains. Armey and his staff were charged with floor operations, which initially required the Republicans to figure out how to run the House. This task was made all the more daunting by the demands of the Contract. Delay and his staff set up the most vaunted whip operation in the history of the House. Boehner was tasked with promoting party message. His job was complicated because Speaker Gingrich wanted to shape the party message himself. Gingrich had a parliamentary conception of the House in which he, as leader of the legislative majority, would serve as the primary voice of the party to the public. He saw himself as co-equal to the president and constitutionally superior to Senate Majority Leader Robert Dole (R. Kansas). The result was that Gingrich assigned communications to Boehner but would not let go of it himself. As Gingrich's public approval ratings sank in the wake of the government shutdowns of December 1995 and January 1996, the Republicans were caught in a dilemma: their leader had placed himself at the point of their communications strategy and yet he was becoming their biggest liability. Gingrich's difficulties made it difficult if not impossible for the Republicans to sustain a cohesive message. Gingrich's temperament exacerbated the situation, since he was given to sudden swings in mood and strategy to which the conference communications apparatus had to react.

Under Boehner the Republicans sought to implement a coordinated communications strategy. Each member was served by a communications director/press secretary.

Communications directors met weekly to disseminate information and coordinate message. The conference continued to publish a weekly legislative digest providing basic information about pending legislation. The flow of communication was in general top down. The leadership wanted the members to know what message they should be conveying in their districts and in their contacts with the media. Boehner's job was to sell Gingrich's vision. The problem was that Gingrich consumed all of the oxygen around him. The speaker made his own press, and so whatever Gingrich said or did was what the press wanted to cover. Communications strategy became idiosyncratic rather than systematic, the opposite of what was intended. Boehner found himself counterpunching in two directions: on the one hand, he had to defend Gingrich and the party against Democratic attacks; on the other hand, he had to respond to the vicissitudes in party position emanating from the speaker's office. Gingrich insisted that his staff approve of conference produced materials. He would not allow Boehner to have any influence over what he said. This put Boehner in an untenable position.

Boehner also innovated in developing the Conference as a resource for members. These included such things as training of staff, providing letter templates, and providing best practices training. The Conference conducted retreats for new staff, for chiefs of staffs from members offices, and for district chiefs of staff. The latter would be flown to Washington for two days of training in order to foster best practices and ways to promote press relations back into the district. A part of this full-service approach was a trend away from content and toward message. Instead of the traditional legislative briefings, members would receive "Boarding Passes," bulleted talking points for district consumption. At the same time, the Conference moved to the cutting edge of technology, taking the first steps toward an Internet presence, promoting a talk radio initiative, sending "blast faxes" to thousands of party apparatchicks to communicate the party message on issues of the day.

Boehner was entrepreneurial. He first made his mark in the House by joining in the "band of seven" Republicans who sought to make an issue of the House Bank scandal (Eaton 1995). Faced with constraints in developing communication strategy, he sought additional roles. Like other party leaders, he developed a leadership PAC, the Freedom Project through which in the 1997-1998 election cycle he distributed over $200,000 to Republican candidates (Eaton 1998). He became heavily involved in the Republican "K Street Strategy" aimed at pressuring lobbyists to increase contributions to Republican PACs (Maraniss and Weisskopf 1995). Boehner formed the "Thursday Group" which consisted of representatives of Republican-leaning organizations who were given access to policy makers in return for their contributions. Democrats contended that the Thursday Group was illegally coordinating independent campaign expenditures with the Republican leadership and called for an investigation by the Federal Election Commission. Boehner was also criticized for handing out contribution checks from tobacco interests on the House floor. He became the point man for the Republicans in launching a law suit against Democrat Jim McDermott (D. Washington) who was accused of releasing an illegal tape-recording of conversations between Speaker Gingrich and Republican members in connection with the Ethics Committee's investigation of the speaker. And when, in the 1996 election, organized labor committed $35 million to elect Democrats to the House, Boehner was designated to organize and lead the Republican response, which took the form of an attack on trade unions and their role in the political process (Novak 1996a; Novak 1996b). All of these activities were distinct from Boehner's role as conference chair, and they indicated the extent to which, under the Republican regime, party leaders took on non-traditional roles.

Boehner was a member of Speaker Gingrich's inner circle from an early point. He had helped manage Gingrich's campaign to become the party whip in 1989. He was an early advocate of the Contract. He took the lead in pushing for its enactment, even switching positions on congressional term limits to do so. It is interesting, therefore, that he did not survive the Gingrich speakership. In 1997 he was implicated in the plot to oust Gingrich from the speakership. While he claimed to have been exonerated in a tense meeting of the conference, in fact he was tainted (Rees 1997). When, in the face of consecutive election losses in 1996 and 1998, Representative Bob Livingston (R. Louisiana) announced a challenge to Gingrich, Gingrich decided to resign from the speakership and the House. Livingston then stunned his colleagues by resigning from the House as well, and in desperation the conference turned to Chief Deputy Whip Dennis Hastert (R. Illinois) as their new speaker. Majority Leader Armey and Boehner were challenged in the conference. Armey survived the challenge with Hastert's support, but Boehner was defeated by Congressman J.C. Watts (R. Oklahoma). Boehner's defeat by Watts was both simple and complicated. It was simple because the party needed a scapegoat and Boehner was it. It was complicated because Watts's main contention in challenging Boehner was that he had done a poor job in handling communications, a criticism that of course implicated Gingrich as well. Still, some members felt that the conference was insufficiently responsive to their needs under Boehner and this likely cost him votes.[ii]

J.C. Watts and the Public Relations Firm

As the only African-American Republican in the House, Watts had already attained a great deal of national visibility. He had been prominently featured at the 1996 Republican convention and had been selected to respond to President Clinton's 1996 State of the Union address in a nationally televised speech. He was much sought after for member campaigns and had appeared in many congressional districts. A former star football player at the University of Oklahoma, a former Democrat, a Baptist minister, and a stirring public speaker, Watts offered the promise of a more effective message and a more effective messenger. His mantra was communications, both within the conference and to the media and public.

Unfortunately, Watts stepped into a messy organizational situation with little experience upon which to draw in dealing with it. As usual, there was almost a complete turnover at the conference staff as Watts staffers replaced Boehner loyalists. Boehner had depleted conference resources during the 1998 campaign and so there was little money with which to operate. Watts had a conception of where he wanted the conference to go, but was slow to develop the organizational infrastructure to make it happen. This led to a series of snafues in 1999. One basic function of the conference was to provide weekly press briefings for member press secretaries, including information packets. These were not well done and did not prove useful to members. As a result, attendance was very poor. Reliance on conference-supplied information packets was especially important for newer members. More senior members were already patched in to the committee system or other leadership positions. The new members were critically important, however, since the party would rely on retaining their seats in order to retain its majority. At one point Majority Whip Tom Delay issued an information packet from the whip's office directly challenging a core function of the conference staff. Watts made an issue of it and Delay backed off (Eilperin 1999). Watts and his staff recognized, however, that they needed to improve the operation. Difficulties such as this were due in part to staffing problems. The staff was hurriedly pulled together and not all members proved effective. Those who had come over from Watts's

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district office had a steep learning curve; those who were brought in with some experience in the leadership brought the wrong lessons with them from their prior experience. The difficulties extended to scheduling Watts's time. For example, on one occasion a press event was scheduled for a member and Watts was so late arriving that the media had already left.

By the end of 1999 Watts had largely resolved problems in staffing and organization. Under his leadership the Republican Conference developed a new profile, one that most closely fits that of a public relations firm. Watts's central premise was that effective communication called upon the party to think of itself as a brand name. Voters are like consumers. Just as beer drinkers are going to drink beer, voters are going to vote. The questions are, which brand of beer will they buy and which candidate will they support? With respect to political parties, the calculation is more complicated, since parties promote numerous product lines (candidates and policies). They are like conglomerates, and their goal is to merge various product lines to promote a corporate image. Of course elections involve much more than party identification or preference; they hinge importantly on candidate image and issue definition. But in Watts's view the main purpose of party communication strategy should be to shape the corporate image of the party in order to provide a context in which both candidates and issues could be given shape.

One of Watts's main goals, then, was to improve the Republican image as measured by the public's response to the base polling question, which party do you most trust to lead the House of Representatives, Republicans or Democrats? Under Gingrich, the Republican poll numbers had fallen precipitously into the 30% range and Watts's goal was to push it to or above 50%. Toward this end he established a tax-exempt organization named the New Models Foundation, through which contributions could be channeled to pay for polling operations and other conference needs (Eilperin 200b). For all of their criticism of President Clinton for polling on every decision every day, the Republicans were active in polling as well. Watts contracted with a private polling organization run by a former high-ranking Gingrich aide for a monthly base opinion poll designed to test the public's response to the House Republicans' brand name. The results have been favorable. The GOP was at 35% favorability when Watts came in. By 2000 they were at 53% and they were at 55% as of February 2001. Each percentage point translates into 2 million voters. Other elements of the Republican organization conducted polls devoted to specific campaigns or issues. The conference polling addressed the legislative party itself.

Polling was only one aspect of the conferences's extensive outreach efforts. These also included a major initiative to promote the party on talk radio and television, the creation of GOP.GOV, a very sophisticated web site linking the conference to individual member home pages and providing the public with access to information about party initiatives and positions, efforts to reach out to local media markets and to frame issues for local consumption, organizing special events such as conferences, and a mini-K Street operation.[25] An indication of the different scope of the Republican Conference operation in comparison to that of the Democratic Caucus is this: the Republicans have more staff running GOP.GOV than the entire staff of the Democratic Caucus. The talk radio/tv initiative aimed to position the party to produce talking heads on any issue at any time. Radio and television producers came to rely on the conference staff to produce members for appearances because it made their jobs easier. Since talk radio is dominated by conservative shows, the conference was especially useful in facilitating appearances in that venue. One challenge facing the party was that the most visible talk tv shows such as Tim Russert's and Chris Matthews's catered to personal friends and favorites of the shows' hosts and/or producers. This put the party message at risk. Russert and Matthews both like Senator John McCain (R. Arizona), for example, but McCain is usually off message for the party and tends to draw attention away from

the House and to the Senate. Counteracting these naturally occurring tendencies became a principal objective of the conferences media-relations staff. An excellent example of the conference media capacity occurred during the Florida vote recount in November and December of 2000. The Bush team was preoccupied with the recount itself and there was a need to mount a public relations offensive to defend the Bush position. The conference staff recruited a half-dozen members who, armed with talking points, were dispatched to television and radio talk shows. A boiler room operation was created so that the conference could mount an immediate response to developing events.

In addition to such outreach efforts, the conference has a small policy staff charged with thinking about long-term policy development. This staff is in effect a miniature think-tank whose task is to consider how the party should position itself for the future. An example is the conferences "full impact strategy," which looks at long-term voting patterns and the effects of demographic changes. The Republicans are well aware that the party's demographic profile will, if sustained, put it in the minority in another generation. The party does not draw enough support from Latinos and Asian-Americans and its support in the African-American community is dismal. In order to address this Congressman Watts was charged by the leadership with a minority outreach effort. One manifestation of this was Watts's "Faith-based Initiative," which sought to place religiously sponsored organizations on the same footing as secular organizations in applying for federal funding for the delivery of social services. The conference held a major conference in the summer of 2001 to support the faith-based initiative and the participants included many representatives of Africa-American congregations from around the country and in particular from the South and from urban areas. With the support of black leaders such as Rosa Parks and Andrew Young, they won the support of 18 Democrats in the face of the strong opposition of the Democratic leadership. The term "full impact" refers to the need for the GOP to convey to minorities the effect of Republican policies on them. For too long, Watts believes, the Democrats have been able to convince minority groups that their policies alone serve their interests. The Republicans believe that they can persuade minorities that Republican policies serve those interests better. An example was an invitation by the conference to 118 presidents of historically black colleges and universities (HBCUs) to attend a meeting on education policy as it affects their institutions.

The policy dimension of the conference operation is facilitated by Speaker Hastert's approach to the party leadership. Unlike Gingrich, who subscribed to the principle of delegation but avoided its practice, Hastert genuinely believed in delegating authority. This extends to the revitalization of the committee system as well as to empowering the subordinate party leaders. Each elected party leader has a policy portfolio on behalf of the leadership. Congressman Watt's portfolio included minority outreach, faith-based initiatives, and domestic terrorism. These are issues that are important to Watts and his constituencies, and the speaker looked to him for leadership on these issues. As a member of the leadership team, Watts had input on all major issues and legislation. He was instrumental, for example, in persuading Hastert to disaggregate the 2000 tax bills. Previously, the Republicans has pressed enactment of comprehensive tax legislation, setting up large numbers for the Democrats to attack and fostering a macroeconomic debate. Watts argued that by offering series of smaller bills the party would be able to tell each story discretely and better convey to voters the impact on them. A good example was the inheritance tax, which the Republicans labeled the "death tax" to good political effect and wrapped in the image of the small farmer and business. The relationship between Watts and Hastert was important in shaping Watts's role as conference chair. Hastert, the former high school wrestling

coach, and Watts, the former quarterback, related to each other as coach and star player. Watts took guidance from Hastert, but Hastert knew that in the end it was Watts who had to perform.

Within the House Republican party, Watts oriented the conference toward the committee system. Under Gingrich, the committees' role had been systematically diminished so that there was little incentive for the conference to establish liaison with the committee leaders and their staffs. Hastert had returned the House to regular order, and so relations with the committees became more important. Watts inherited a group of staffers whose job it was to produce the weekly legislative digest. These staffers found themselves with little to do once the digest was finished. Watts reconstituted them as an office of committee relations and tasked them with establishing ongoing links with committee staffs to ensure good communication. Intra-party communications were consequently much improved.

A similar pattern occurred at the leadership level. Watts's chief of staff met regularly with the chiefs of staff of the other party leaders in a group that fashioned itself the "joint chiefs of staff." Their close working relationship minimized the potential for conflict within the leadership group, much to be valued after the debacle of the attempted Gingrich ouster. With the election of a Republican administration, the joint chiefs also began to meet weekly with the White House communications office. These meetings afford opportunities to coordinate message and to share information. The force of political party is often not strong enough to overcome the separation of powers imposed by the Constitution. House, Senate, and administration Republicans sought to work cooperatively but each institution was guided by its own political and institutional imperatives, which communications mechanisms could only partially offset.

J.C. Watts elevated the Republican Conference to a new level of operation. Its annual budget of around $5 million per year was ten times that of the Democratic Caucus. Its staff numbered in the dozens, occupying nearly a full hallway in the Longworth House Office Building. The conference staff sought to enhance both intra-party and external communication. For the first time, the party had a coherent strategy for selling its brand name to the electorate. Within the leadership, the conference chair had a clearly defined role. That role included serving as a spokesman for the party. Watts had been initially cautious in seeking a prominent media role lest he be perceived as upstaging the speaker, majority leader, and whip. As the conference gears meshed in 2000, he raised his public profile and became more active in serving as party messenger. How effective was the public relations firm? There is only one good measure of the effectiveness of a political party operation: the party must win at the polls. In the 2000 election, the Republicans held their House majority in the face of a fierce effort by the Democrats to reclaim control. The House Republicans succeeded in repositioning the party, defining the issues upon which it would campaign, and coordinating message with the Bush campaign. The foundation of this effort was put in place by the conference effort to sell the party's brand name.

The Democrats in the Minority

During the Bush 41 administration the Democratic Caucus chair was Congressman Steny Hoyer (D. Maryland). Hoyer was a moderate Democrat who inherited a caucus that had been relatively active under the leadership of his predecessor, Richard Gephardt. Hoyer continued the activities with which the caucus had come to define its role, including the annual retreat, issue task forces, and media outreach. His caucus vice-chair, Vic Fazio (D. California) was also the chair of the campaign committee. While Hoyer and Fazio had a good working relationship, Fazio in fact was in the more influential position due to his dual role. Hoyer pushed task forces on policy

matters, creating conflict with committee chairs who viewed any caucus task force as a potential intrusion into their domains. Caucus task forces were somewhat desultory, working for months or even a year in producing position papers. Much of the caucus's energy was taken up with the several scandals that plagued the House during this period, including those associated with the House Bank, the House Restaurant, and the House Post Office. In addition, Speaker Jim Wright was under assault by the Gingrich-led Republicans for violating House ethics rules. Matters came to a head in 1989 with the near simultaneous resignations of Wright and Democratic Whip Tony Coelho (D. California). Tom Foley became speaker, Dick Gephardt floor leader, and a race ensued between Hoyer and David Bonior for the position of party whip. Bonior defeated Hoyer handily in a victory for the liberal wing of the party over its moderates. Hoyer may have lost support among committee chairs who had opposed his use of task forces, and he may have suffered the consequence of serving as caucus chair during a period of turmoil and scandal. The completion of his two terms as caucus chair coincided with the Republican takeover of the House. For the first time in two generations, the Democrats would be in the minority. How would this affect the operation of the caucus?

Fazio succeeded Hoyer. There were some advantages to serving as caucus chair in the minority. The conflicts that Hoyer had encountered with committee chairs would no longer be a factor. The caucus chair was now the third instead of fourth highest leadership position. Lacking control over the committees, the Democrats faced the challenge of forging party positions on policy and legislation. This automatically made the caucus a central forum for party deliberation. This became all the more true in light of the Republican effort to circumvent the committee system in enacting its legislative program. Even if Democrats had aspired to work with Republicans in committee, the Republicans would not let them. For the Democrats, the caucus became the only game in town.

Initially, the party was reeling from its electoral defeat. This led to a spate of meetings in early 1995 as the party sought to find its bearings and to develop a strategy to counter the Republican "Contract With America" juggernaut. Staff recall one week in which the caucus met five times. These meetings aimed at strategy rather than policy. The Democrats' goal was clear: to defeat any part of the Contract they could. The only question was, how? With the Republicans driving a predetermined issue agenda, issues conferences seemed besides the point. The Democrats deferred their annual retreat for several months until the Contract period was over. Cast in the minority, the Democrats had to rewrite their rules to reflect their new status. Would members removed from committees be entitled to return upon resumption of the majority? How would staff be assigned under reduced circumstances? Who would control party resources?

Their most compelling concern was to keep the caucus together on legislation. The worst case would find substantial numbers of Democrats defecting to vote with the Republicans. Their best hope was to find policy alternatives that could command the support of most Democrats. Caucus task forces were appointed but their role was now different. Instead of focusing on long-term policy, they dealt with short-term legislative alternatives. They were the mirror image of the Republican task forces that were being used to craft legislation outside the committee process. The Republicans would grant to the Democrats motions to recommit with instructions, and the Democrats wanted to offer recommital motions that most or all Democrats could support. The leadership sought to integrate the ranking committee and subcommittee members into the task forces with varying success. Some still resisted becoming involved in caucus policy making while others embraced the opportunity to shape the party's response to the Republican program.

Public relations were an important part of these activities. The Democrats wanted to shed light on the Republican "horrors," as they regarded aspects of the GOP program. They decided to conduct caucus-sponsored hearings on Republican legislation but the Republicans would not give them a room in which to hold them. So, the caucus rented tents and held hearings on the Capitol lawn. This was sufficiently embarrassing to cause the Republicans to relent and make available hearing rooms. The caucus staffed worked with interest-group allies to publicize the evils of Republican legislation and the virtues of Democratic alternatives. It was necessary to coordinate message and legislative strategy. The caucus dealt with the former, the whip organization with the latter.

All aspects of strategy and tactics were superintended by the floor leader. It is ironic that Richard Gephardt finally attained the object of his ambition to become the leading House Democrat just as the party lost its majority. It is even more ironic that in some respects he was more powerful within the party as minority leader than he would have been as speaker (Kahn 1994). As speaker, Gephardt, like his Democratic predecessors, would have been constrained by the fractious nature of the caucus and the centrifugal force of the committee system. Cast into the role of minority leader, he no longer had to worry about committee barons and the Democrats had powerful incentives to cooperate toward the universally shared goal of regaining control of the House. In fact, Gephardt quickly swept power into his own hands, controlling the leadership budget made available to the Democrats by the Republicans. There was good news here since the Republicans reduced funding to committees and increased funding to the party leaderships. Gephardt wanted to establish as much authority within the caucus as he could in order to better coordinate and shape party strategy and message. Under this scheme communications and polling were run out of the minority leader's office. The whip was responsible for floor operations. The caucus chair and staff dealt with issue development. The campaign committee dealt with recruitment and fund raising. All worked closely together. Gephardt loved meetings and believed that intra-party communication was the key to effective party organization. He met daily with a group of about thirty party leaders to plan strategy. The caucus continued to sponsor the annual retreats and issue task forces. Under Fazio, the annual retreats assumed a slightly different character. Instead of focusing largely on issues, they now incorporated confidence-building measures. Members were broken out into discussion groups led by facilitators. The goal was to enhance unity by fostering understanding. Members representing diverse constituencies were grouped together. This represented a further evolution of what I have elsewhere labeled the therapeutic tendency of contemporary House culture. The goal was to cause members to transcend narrow calculations of interest to come to better interpersonal understanding and acceptance. The hope was that this would build unity and lead to cooperation. Fazio called it "community building." Thirteen task forces were appointed each involving a ranking member. These task forces worked throughout the year to produce position papers for the party as well as alternatives to Republican legislative proposals. Caucus meetings became more disciplined than they had been in the past, run on a tighter schedule and with agenda's set by the leadership. Fazio, Gephardt, and Bonior and their staffs worked closely together. All of this was done with minimal staff, however, numbering around ten at the caucus itself.

One major area was press relations. Two members of Gephardt's staff coordinated message. A message task force was headed by Congresswoman Rosa deLauro (D. Connecticut). A member of the caucus staff met weekly with member press secretaries. Attendance at these meetings was better than attendance at the caucus itself. The caucus meetings would draw roughly a third to half of the Democrats, but the weekly staff briefings would draw staff from most Democratic offices. Memoranda were distributed summarizing the week’s activities, previewing the following week, and offering talking points to members, many of whom would be traveling to districts over the

weekend. The role of the caucus chair was to some degree defined by the circumstances and was to some degree fluid. The relationship of the caucus chair and other party leaders, especially the floor leader, was of critical importance. Gephardt's style was to control resources but to delegate responsibility. This meant that caucus chairs had room to define their own approach. Both Fazio and his successor, Martin Frost (D. Texas) had close relationships with Gephardt.

In the 106th and 107th congresses the Democratic Caucus, under Martin Frost, has continued to focus on policy. Task forces addressed various policy issues, including health care and immigration. Participation in caucus task forces is increasingly popular. Marginalized by the Republicans in the committee rooms, Democratic members have sought other venues for policy involvement. The weekly caucus meetings are venues for intra-party dialogue. External experts are sometimes invited to speak to the caucus. An example was a caucus meeting devoted to the Bush administration's proposal to open a portion of the Alaska National Wildlife Refuge to oil exploration. Advocates of union and environmental perspectives addressed the caucus. When in the minority, the caucus becomes more of an open discussion forum. This affords opportunities for dissenters to use caucus meetings to express disagreement with party policy. Dissenters are sometimes the most active participants in caucus meetings, leading to frustration among other members. At the same time, dissenters may come to feel isolated within the caucus, as was the case with five southern members who switched to the Republican party in the 104th Congress, claiming that they could get no hearing from their former Democratic colleagues. A caucus chair can affect the tone of caucus meetings according to the extent to which dissent is tolerated and discussion is focused or unfocussed. Frost, like Fazio, had served as chair of the campaign committee before becoming caucus chair. His goal has been to get Democrats thinking politically. The Republican majority was narrow, and the Democrats wanted to define policy positions that would attract voters.

The picture of the Democratic Caucus that emerges is that of a discussion forum. Under Richard Gephardt the House Democrats functioned like a large club and the caucus hosted meetings of club members. The historical diversity of the party and its underlying coalitional nature gave shape to club membership. The condition of serving in a narrow minority provided incentive for intra-party cooperation toward the shared goal of winning a majority. Relieved of the responsibility of governing, the Democrats emulated the previous Republican minority in seeking to use the legislative process to create issues rather than to pass laws. The Democrats identified the issues of most concern to voters and sought to define party positions on those issues that would appeal to them. The caucus played an important role in developing and articulating issue positions for the party. Chairman Frost served as one of several messengers for the party, holding press conferences and appearing in the national media.

Caucus and Conference

Legislative party caucuses are a species of being given definition by their basic role in organizing the party for action: setting intra-party rules, electing party leaders, nominating a candidate for speaker, approving committee slates, and providing forums for intra-party dialogue. Positive theory casts the House as a vehicle for party government or as a mechanism for information exchange (Cox and McCubbins 1993; Krehbiel 1991). Clearly the party caucuses serve both purposes. To the extent that the respond to institutional imperatives and member needs, their functions are in many ways similar and even identical. These congruencies tempt us to offer generic explanations of caucus organization and behavior consistent with the ambition to produce an overarching theory of legislative behavior. Our review of the evolution of the Democratic

Caucus and Republican Conference enables us to identify the many ways in which the two party organizations are similar in structure and function, and how the pattern of their respective evolutions follows parallel courses. It is not coincidental that fifty years ago the two caucuses met rarely and now they meet every week. The focus on the many similarities, along with the search for a comprehensive theoretical explanation, however, may tempt us to de-emphasize the plain differences between the two caucuses that have been described. In concluding this discussion, I want to draw attention to some key differences and offer some account of the factors that contribute to them.

The fact that the party caucuses have varied between periods in which they were moribund and periods in which they were intensely active provides a sufficient indication that there have been permutations in the role that they have played. The fact that the Democratic Caucus and Republican Conference have varied considerably in the role they have played is a sufficient indication that the two parties have been shaped differently by their historical experience. A variety of factors have contributed to these differences, among which are electoral realignment, control of the House, the separation of powers, and party culture. Electoral realignment has been the primary factor contributing to the transformation from the inactive caucuses of the feudal era to the active caucuses of today. The transformation of the South from Democratic to Republican control, the homogenization of the two parties, and the competition for control of the House have created the conditions for active party caucuses. It was the pressure of new liberals in the Democratic Caucus that pushed it into activism in the 1970s and it was the pressure of new conservatives in the Republican Conference that drove its activism in the 1980s. The long period of Democratic control was grounded in the party's coalition of southern conservatives and northern liberals. An active caucus would have threatened that coalition. When it was undermined by realignment, an impediment to an active caucus was removed.

The Democrats sixty-year hegemony shaped the party's culture. The party built and maintained its majority by forging relationships with union, civil rights, environmental, and other groups. The Democrats practiced retail politics and relied upon local organizing to win elections. It enacted public policies responsive to the needs of key constituencies. It accepted Tip O'Neill's aphorism that "all politics is local." For the Democrats, people were always more important than money as the life-blood of politics. When its caucus became active in the 1970s, it is unsurprising that the party's core interest groups would become partners in shaping House reform and in pressing for liberal policies. Those relationships have been sustained, and the Democratic Caucus still functions by working with sympathetic interest groups in the practice of retail politics. At the same time, the fact that the Democrats controlled the House meant that the committee system would be of central importance to the party. It is the committees, after all, and not the caucus, that produce legislation. The Democratic Caucus was always in tension with the committee system and the committee barons did not want an active caucus. When the caucus awoke, it attacked the committee system. The party leadership sought to conciliate this dispute even as its hand was strengthened by the reforms. Still, the Democrats always subordinated their caucus to the committees and when the reform movement was spent the caucus became inactive. When the caucus was reactivated in the 1980s, it was as a discussion forum and did not threaten committee hegemony. Nor was it a vehicle for the majority party leadership to express control.

The Republican Conference was shaped by its long period in the minority. Having no responsibility for governing, the conference remained dormant during the long decades of the feudal era. It awoke in the 1980s because a new generation of members wanted to challenge the Democrats politically. The conference became a venue for politics and ideology. Its orientation

was external rather than internal because the Republicans were focused on winning elections while the Democrats were obligated to pass laws. The Republicans worked with external interest groups supportive of their philosophy of government as well as did the Democrats, but the Republican interest-group nexus was grounded on money rather than people. Where the Democrats might rely on organized labor to conduct a poll or run an advertisement, the Republicans would ask their business supporters for contributions to their campaigns, PACS, and tax-exempt organizations. When the Republicans took control in 1995, the leadership exercised firm control in and through the conference. There was no deference to committees. Even when the party returned the House to regular order under Speaker Hastert, the committees did not attain the degree of autonomy that they had experienced under Democratic control. The Republicans enforced term limits on committee chairs, and the committees were responsive to the direction of the leadership. The Republican Conference developed into a substantial operation with a large budget and staff and a mission to sell the party message to the public.

In sum, the Democratic Caucus is coalitional, it works with and through external interest groups, it is subordinated to the committees, and its focus has been more internal than external. The Republican Conference is ideological, it runs on money, it functions more autonomously from the committee system, and its focus is more external than internal. Given these basic differences, one may yet identify variables affecting both party caucuses. One is majority/minority status. When either party is in the majority, its caucus will stand in a different relationship to the committee system than when the party is in the minority. The minority party caucus has a certain freedom to be irresponsible that the majority party caucus does not enjoy. The caucus chair is likely to be more influential in the minority than in the majority because the caucus itself is a more important venue when the party does not control the committees. Majority/minority status interfaces with the separation of powers. When the party caucus enjoys party control of the presidency, its function is altered. There is an obligation to support the administration's program and the practical fact that the administration speaks with a louder voice. When in the majority, the party caucus will seek to enact administration bills. When in the minority, it will seek to sustain presidential vetoes. When the party caucus faces a hostile White House, it will go on the attack. When in the majority, it will seek to pass party legislation challenging the administration. When in the minority, it will seek to defeat administration proposals and will criticize them if enacted.

These contextual factors shape the role of caucus chair. Yet there is considerable variation in the manner in which individual chairs have approached the office. This is because among all legislative institutions, the caucuses are the most amorphous. To be sure, each caucus has an operational manual defining its rules and procedures. The Democratic Caucus Rules read like a body of parliamentary law, the Republican Conference Rules read like an operations manual for a civic league. But both give definition to their respective organizations. Beyond this, the caucuses are very much what their individual chairs seek to make of them. There is in the first instance a virtually entire turnover of staff from one chair to the next. Only a few operational staff are likely to be retained by the new chair. Instead, the new chair brings staff from his previous leadership position, member office, or hires new staff of presumed loyalty. The caucuses are thus refreshed with every change in leadership and every caucus chair has to chart a course.

This turnover is related to the essentially political character of the office. The position of caucus chair is generally regarded as a step to higher leadership office. Certainly those who seek and hold it are likely to have higher leadership aspirations. Actually, the position has not served as a frequent stepping-stone to higher office, as we observed at the outset. In recent decades, only Tom Foley and Dick Gephardt on the Democratic side, and Dick Cheney and Dick

Armey on the Republican side, have ascended to higher office. Other caucus chairs of known ambition did not go further. This suggests that the quality of service as caucus chair makes a difference. The position offers an opportunity to demonstrate leadership potential. Members take the measure of the chair, who they come to know well because of regular interaction. This opportunity obviously cuts both ways.

We have not discussed the role of subordinate caucus officers including the vice-chair and secretary. The vice-chair assumes responsibilities as assigned by the chair, and the position has varied in degree of activism. Its value, as one former vice-chair put it, is that it "puts you in the room." The secretary is a largely functional and symbolic position. Both parties have demonstrated a tendency to utilize these positions to include women members in the leadership group. Since 1975 five of eight Democratic Caucus vice-chairs have been women and during the same period three of six Republican Conference vice-chairs have been women. Among these fourteen vice-chairs only two, Vic Fazio and Steny Hoyer went on to become caucus chair and none rose to a higher leadership position. On the Republican side, Lynn Martin and Jennifer Dunn (R. Washington) sought election to higher office and were defeated. The recent election of Nancy Pelosi (D. California) as the Democratic Whip proves both points. Pelosi had not served in a prior leadership office. She won election over Steny Hoyer, the second time that he had been defeated in seeking the whip position. Martin Frost, the caucus chair, did not enter the competition.

Additional evidence supporting the contention that the position of caucus chair is not an assured path to higher office comes from J.C. Watts's decision in July of 2002 to retire from the House. Generally regarded as a rising star in the Republican firmament, Watts saw his leadership opportunities diminished with Majority Leader Dick Armey's decision to retire. With Tom Delay the evident choice to become Majority Leader, Watts faced an uncertain future. Also, Watts had apparently come to feel marginalized in the party's leadership structure (Mitchell 2002; VandeHei 2002). The conclusion seems clear: neither the position of chair or vice-chair is likely to lead to higher office and the election of women to the position of vice-chair has not led to advancement to higher office in either party. [iii]

The Democratic Caucus and Republican Conference thus emerge as hybrid organizations, sharing many characteristics but differing in important ways. Both caucuses have become more active and promise to remain that way. The days in which new members deferred to senior members has gone for good, and the caucuses are a primary venue for new members. This similarity offers solace to positive theory, while their differences suggest that any comprehensive theory of the House of Representatives will have to account for variation in party culture. Democrats and Republicans do not do business the same way. This contention, of course, raises the issue of what one means in referring to party culture. Freeman (1986), in studying the national party conventions, remarked upon the evident differences between the cultures of the two parties deriving from their respective constituency bases. This study offers evidence to support her thesis. When we look at the functioning of the two party caucuses and observe evident similarities, we take note of the common role that they play in the legislative process. When we look at the very different ways in which the two legislative parties use their caucuses in other respects, we are led to consider differences traceable to the way in which they are shaped by their respective party cultures.

Endnotes

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1. This paper reports preliminary findings on research into the evolution and operation of the House Democratic Caucus and Republican Conference. The research draws upon primary source archival material in the Carl Albert Collections at the University of Oklahoma (cited in footnotes), secondary media sources, and confidential interviews with members of Congress and their present and former staff members. I want to thank Lynsey Morris for her research assistance. I would like to thank Bill Connelly, Christine Degregorio, Richard Forgette, Paul Herrnson, Jack Pitney, and David Winston for their comments on the paper. Of course the two party organizations go by different names, the Democratic Caucus and the Republican Conference. In this paper I will use the generic term "caucus" when referring to both organizations, but will refer to each by its proper name in referring specifically to it.

2. Carl Albert, Press Conference, June 24, 1974. Carl Albert Collection, Carl Albert Center Archives, University of Oklahoma.

3. Carl Albert, Press Conference, June 24, 1974. Carl Albert Collection, Carl Albert Center Archives, University of Oklahoma.

4. Carl Albert, Press Conference, February 21, 1973, Carl Albert Collection, Carl Albert Center Archives, University of Oklahoma.

5. "Early Democratic Caucus for the Organization of the 95th Congress," December 2, 1974, p. 37. Carl Albert Collection, Carl Albert Center Archives, University of Oklahoma.

6. Carl Albert, Press Release, January 21, 1970, Carl Albert Collection, Carl Albert Center Archives, University of Oklahoma.

7. Don Fraser, et. al., Letter to Dan Rostenkowski, April 3, 1969. Carl Albert Collection, Carl Albert Center Archives, University of Oklahoma; William F. Ryan to Dan Rostenkowski, April 7, 1969. Carl Albert Collection, Carl Albert Center Archives, University of Oklahoma.

8. Charles Diggs, Dear Colleague, April 14, 1969, Carl Albert Collection, Carl Albert Center Archives, University of Oklahoma. Charles Diggs to John McMillan, April 3, 1969, Carl Albert Collection, Carl Albert Center Archives, University of Oklahoma. John McMillan to Dan Rostenkowski, April 14, 1970, Carl Albert Collection, Carl Albert Center Archives, University of Oklahoma.

9. Brock Adams, et. al., Dear Colleague Letter, February 16, 1970. Carl Albert Collection, Carl Albert Center Archives, University of Oklahoma.

10. B.F. Sisk to Dan Rostenkowski, May 11, 1970. Carl Albert Collection, Carl Albert Center Archives, University of Oklahoma.

11. Ferdinand St. Germain, et. al. to Dan Rostenkowski, May 21, 1970. Carl Albert Collection, Carl Albert Center Archives, University of Oklahoma.

12. Wright Patman to Olin Teague, December 5, 1970. Carl Albert Collection, Carl Albert Center Archives, University of Oklahoma.

13. Rostenkowski, Fellow Democrat, December 16, 1970. Carl Albert Collection, Carl Albert Center Archives, University of Oklahoma.

14. See Caucus Attendance Summary, no date, Carl Albert Collection, Carl Albert Center Archives, University of Oklahoma.

15. See: Carl Albert to Herman Badillo, April 27, 1971 (not sent); Carl Albert to Parren Mitchell, May 24, 1971; Analysis of May 19 Caucus Quorum Call; Notes on Caucus Problems (no date). Carl Albert Collection, Carl Albert Center Archives, University of Oklahoma

16. William Green, Dear Colleague, May 28, 1974, Carl Albert Collection, Carl Albert Center Archives, University of Oklahoma.

17. Carl Albert, Press Conference, June 4, 1974, Carl Albert Collection, Carl Albert Center Archives, University of Oklahoma.

18. Memorandum to Chairman Rodino, October 22, 1975; Phillip Burton, Dear Colleague, November 13, 1975; Statement of the Honorable Peter Rodino, November 19, 1975. Journal of the Democratic Caucus, November 19, 1975. Carl Albert Collection, Carl Albert Center Archives, University of Oklahoma. See also (Cromley 1975).

19. The events recounted here were the first steps leading to the creation of the Democratic Leadership Council. I rely in part on Jon Hale"s excellent account (Hale 1995).

20. The debate in 1981 over punishing defectors to the Reagan tax and budget bills echoed a similar debate in 1974. At that time it was advanced that since the caucus controlled committee assignments and chairmanships, holding either might depend upon support of party legislation. The theory then was that while the caucus rules had historically provided that no member could be bound on the floor to a vote contrary to conscience or constituency instruction, members could be instructed by the caucus to report bills from committees. This was what was at stake in the case of the Green resolution on the oil depletion allowance discussed above. The caucus at that time struck Rule 8 (formerly Rule 7) providing for instructions in general, but substituted a provision enabling the caucus to instruct the Rules Committee with respect to modified closed rules. In 1981, liberal Democrats wanted to punish conservatives who supported Reagan. This would have been an entirely different matter. History has demonstrated that legislative caucuses are very poor vehicles for imposing party discipline by instructions and sanctions. See ("Amnesty Extended to Democratic Defectors" 1981.

21. Long and Al From moved from the caucus to promote the creation of the Democratic Leadership Council. Long died in 1985. From went on to become the national director of the DLC and was instrumental in promoting Bill Clinton's chairmanship of the organization and eventual run to the White House in 1992.

22. A number of these reports are to be found in the Glen English Collection, Carl Albert Center Archives, University of Oklahoma.

23. Robert H. Michel and Newt Gingrich, "Dear Republican Colleague," February 6, 1990. Mickey Edwards Collection, Carl Albert Center Archives, University of Oklahoma.

24. Boehner proved quite resilient, transferring his operation to the House Education Committee where he became the principal House architect of President Bush's education reform bill. Working closely with Massachusetts Democratic Senator Ted Kennedy, Boehner pushed the education bill to enactment. This was the same John Boehner who had led the charge to abolish the Department of Education in 1995. In fairness, the Bush bill contained principles for which Boehner had consistently fought, including standards and the use of block grants to the states. Still, it is fair to say that once Boehner was set free from the Gingrich leadership team he sought to establish legislative credentials and to moderate his image (Straub 1995).

25. The main K Street operation was transferred to Whip Tom Delay on the argument that it was more consistent with the whip function. On GOP.GOV see: Eilperin 2000a; Eilperin 2001.

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