Party Leadership in the Republican House

R. Lawrence Butler, Rowan University

The growth in the application of modern scientific techniques to the study of politics came at an awkward time for congressional scholars. It coincided with the longest period of one-party rule the House of Representatives had ever seen. Democrats held the majority for an unprecedented forty years from 1955 – 1994. After Republicans were brought to power in the House as a result of the 1994 electoral tidal wave, congressional scholars began to ask a difficult question. Have we developed models of the House of Representatives or of the Democratic House of Representatives? Do our theories apply to a Republican majority Congress as well?

One aspect of congressional scholarship for which this question is particularly pertinent is the study of party leadership. Scholars, led by David Rohde (1991), had concluded that the structure of party leadership in the House had changed fundamentally in the 1970s. The House no longer resembled a fiefdom of committee chairs—the era of conditional party government had begun.

One of the major rallying cries of the Republican revolution was institutional reform of the chamber. While in the minority, Republican leaders had decried what they viewed as the corrupt practices of Democratic leaders. They vowed that they would overhaul the management structure of the House once they took charge. Upon assuming power in 1995, Speaker Gingrich instituted a number of reforms that changed the balance of power between party leaders, committee and subcommittee chairs, and backbenchers. He claimed that the House had fundamentally changed under its new management.

We should not judge, however, this Republican party leadership structure by the reforms of 1995 alone. Changes adopted during the giddiness of victory often do not survive once revolutionary zeal is replaced by the responsibility of governing. Republicans have now had a decade to settle into a stable leadership structure. Gingrich is no longer Speaker and some of the 1995 reforms have been modified. Consequently, we are now in a position to analyze party leadership in the Republican House. Have the Republicans moved beyond conditional party government to a new model of leadership or have they merely adopted variations on a Democratic theme?

This paper begins by assessing whether the "conditions" that led originally to conditional party government still exist. It then moves to a careful analysis of the altered balance of power between party leaders, committee chairs, subcommittee chairs, and caucus members that has developed over the decade. How has the balance changed and is it fundamentally different from the Democratic system of the 1970s? Finally, the paper examines the extent to which the Republicans have succeeded at party governance as compared to their Democratic predecessors.

Conditional Party Government

After decades in which committee chairs dominating the activities of Congress, liberal Democrats in 1975 instigated a series of reforms that overhauled the party structure in the House. Their frustration had boiled over because conservative southern Democrats had been using the seniority system to keep a strangle hold on the most important committee chairmanships. They had used this power to block liberal legislation favored by a majority of the Democratic caucus. Finally, after the Watergate

landslide election of 1974, young liberals gained enough of a majority that they were able to force through a series of changes that established a system later dubbed by Rohde (1991) as conditional party government.

The underlying principle of the reforms was to shift power away from the committee chairs. Instead, power would be vested in the party leadership and also distributed more broadly among caucus members. The rank and file were willing to centralize authority in the party leadership because of the growing ideological homogeneity in the party and the increased polarization of the House. Since most caucus members wanted to move in the same policy direction, they were willing to give party leaders the tools needed to enact the party agenda. However, they also created mechanisms to ensure a larger role for all members in the development and implementation of that policy. Thus, party leaders would have added power but they would be required to consult with the membership to ensure that they exercised it accord with the party's wishes.

To analyze the structure of party leadership, it is helpful to look at it as if it were a four-level wedding cake. On top is the elected party leadership. Underneath that are the committee chairs and the subcommittee chairs. On the bottom are the backbenchers. Let us examine how power was shifted among the layers at the creation of conditional party government.

Party Leaders

A key ingredient of the reforms of 1975 was the creation of the Steering and Policy Committee. Half of its twenty-four members either were members of the elected

party leadership or were hand picked by them. The remaining twelve members were each chosen to represent the interests of the members from a particular geographic region. The Steering and Policy Committee took over the task of making committee assignments and selecting committee chairs. Previously, the members of the Ways and Means Committee made all committee selections and seniority governed the choice of chairs. Additionally, the Steering and Policy Committee would make policy recommendations for consideration by the caucus.

Moreover, the Speaker was given additional tools to help move legislation through the chamber in a manner designed to achieve the policy outcomes desired by the party. The Speaker was given the power to select members of the Rules Committee, the entity that had been so important to the conservative Democrats' success in bottling up legislation. Also, the Speaker was given more discretion referring bills to committee. He was empowered to grant bills multiple referral to ensure that a single dissenting committee chair could not block the will of the caucus.

Committee Chairs

The major goal of the 1975 reforms was to take power away from the committee chairs. Speakers in previous years had to negotiate with the all-powerful chairs to in order to advance the party's agenda. Now, committee chairs assumed those positions only with the consent of the caucus, potentially by secret ballot. Thus, a chair who was out of step with the party could be removed—and several were. Also, steps were taken to lessen the power of committee chairs over rank-and-file members during floor consideration of legislation. In 1971, the Democrats changed the rules to allow for

recorded votes in the Committee of the Whole, giving members added capacity to pass amendments. Similarly, the Rules Committee was required to make in order for floor consideration any amendment that was supported by at least fifty caucus members. Instead of being able to strong-arm caucus members, committee chairs would have to serve them.

Subcommittee Chairs

The 1975 reforms also weakened the committee chairs by granting greater power to the subcommittee chairs via the Subcommittee Bill of Rights. Subcommittee chairs obtained greater independence because they would be chosen by seniority, not by the head of the full committee. Also, they were guaranteed the right to hire their own staff. Finally, their jurisdictions were clarified to give them more certain authority over their specified policy area

The Rank-and-File

Despite the ideological polarization of the House, caucus members were not willing simply to surrender power to the party leadership. While leaders were given greater authority, the new party structure created mechanisms that mandated consultation with the rank-and-file. This ensured that party leaders would be unable to use their powers in ways unacceptable to the liberal base of the caucus.

One of the mechanisms for drawing members closer to the leadership was to increase the number of positions of power. The 1975 reforms increased dramatically the number of subcommittees and mandated that no member could chair more than one. This

created subcommittee chairmanships for many more members, thus spreading a degree of power to more members and making them a part of the leadership team. In a similar vein, the Democrats expanded the whip system. This created more leadership jobs, but it also gave party leaders the resources to consult more broadly and fully with the members.

Finally, the 1975 reforms provided for the election of certain leaders who had previously been appointed. The Whip and the chair of the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee became elected positions no longer chosen by the Speaker. Similarly, committee chairs were to be nominated by the Steering and Policy Committee but voted on by the caucus. While Steering and Policy always nominated the most senior person to be the chair, the caucus rejected those it deemed to be ideologically out of step with the majority of members, selecting instead more junior members who would support the policy preferences of the caucus.

The 1975 reforms shifted power within the party in two important ways. Party leaders were empowered to set the policy agenda without having committee chairs block the will of the caucus. On the other hand, party members were brought more closely into the leadership structure by increasing the size of the leadership and allowing them a greater say in the choice of leaders. Conditional party government, therefore, centralized authority but made it so that the exercise of that power would be constrained by the will of the membership. As Ronald Reagan might have described it, "trust but verify."

The Republican Revolution

In January 1995, Republicans organized the House of Representatives for the first time in forty years. On the first day of the session, that passed a new set of rules for the

chamber that significantly altered, and in some cases repealed, many of the 1975 reforms that had established conditional party government. Scholars analyzing those first two years of the republican regime described those reforms as having centralized power in the speakership. (See for example Peters, 1997 and Aldrich and Rohde, 1997.)

There can be no doubt that Republicans gave the Speaker a great deal of power. The caucus accepted the reform package that he and his lieutenants prepared with almost without change. During his speakership, Gingrich had virtual carte blanche authority to lead the caucus as he fit. However, the fact that a leader exercises unbridled power does not mean that the underlying system, designed to keep a rein on party leaders, has been abandoned. The first years of Republican rule were unusual in that the party had been out of power for so many decades. Republicans viewed Gingrish as the Moses who had brought them to the promised land. However, unlike in the biblical story, Gingrich continued as the party's leader after it took control. It is no surprise, then, that Republicans would grant him so much power. As the visionary who had brought them to power, they naturally trusted his leadership.

Ten years have passed now and Gingrich is no longer speaker. We are now in a position to examine the leadership structure established by the Republican majority without Gingrich's shadow impairing our vision. Let us examine the changes in leadership structure as they have evolved over the ten years of Republican rule. Do they mark a return to the boss era of the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries or are they simply a variation on the Democratic theme of conditional party government.

First, however, we must examine whether the underlying necessary "condition" for conditional party government still exists. If the House of Representatives is not as

polarized as it was in 1975, we would not expect conditional party government to continue. However, it is widely believed that American politics is perhaps more polarized than ever. (See for example Bond and Fleischer, 2000.) Figure 1 presents a measure of polarization in the House of Representatives for every congress since 1975. As a measure of ideology, we use Poole and Rosenthal's DW-NOMINATE scores. We then apply the formula 1 - [St.Dev(Majority)]/[St.Dev.(All)] where St.Dev.(Majority) is the standard deviation of the DW-NOMINATE[1] scores for majority party members and St.Dev.(All) is the standard deviation for all House members.[2] Table 1 shows that ideological polarization in the House has indeed continued to rise over the past thirty years. Thus, it is possible that conditional party government could still be in effect.

Party Leaders

The Republican majority made very few changes in the powers of the party leaders. Democrats had strengthened these positions dramatically during their era of conditional party government and Republicans essentially mimicked their rivals. In 1995, Republicans placed an eight-year term limit on the office of Speaker. They abandoned this reform, however, in 2003. The only other structural change in the power of party leaders was the repeal of multiple referral of legislation. This had been instituted by the Democrats to keep a single hostile committee chair from blocking legislation desired by the caucus. The downside, however, was the "too many cooks" syndrome. One of the reasons why House Democrats were unable to bring the Clinton health care reform bill to the floor in 1993 was that it had been referred to three separate committees, each with its own idea of what a reformed system should look like. Merging those bills

proved impossible. So while Republicans repealed the practice of multiple referral that Democrats had intended as a method of strengthening party leadership, they did so because it was unworkable, not as an effort to weaken the Speaker.

The most important difference between the two party leaderships was not structural. The Republican Committee on Committees, the counterpart to the Democratic Steering and Policy Committee, often went beyond seniority in recommending committee chairs to the caucus. While the caucus ultimately selected the committee chairs, Democratic party leaders had automatically submitted the name of the most senior member for approval. Republican party leaders often reached down into the committee ranks to pick their nominee for caucus approval. This gave the party leadership greater leverage over the committee chairs, who knew that they were beholden to the leaders for their position of power.

Committee and Subcommittee Chairs

The Republicans majority in 1995 reserved its biggest changes for the powers and selection processes of committee and subcommittee chairs. Gingrich eliminated three committees that primarily served Democratic constituencies, Post Office and Civil Service, Merchant Marine and Fisheries, and the District of Columbia. He also capped the number of subcommittees per committee at six, with exceptions made for Appropriations and Government Reform. The overall effect of this streamlining was to eliminate twenty-five subcommittees—and one-third of the committee staff. Thus, fewer Republicans were made participants in leadership by being given a subcommittee to chair.

The Republicans also changed the balance of power between the full committee chair and the subcommittee chairs. They abolished the portions of the subcommittee bill of rights that had allowed subcommittee chairs to select their own staffs. They also eliminated the seniority system for granting subcommittee chairmanships, granting the full committee chair more flexibility in the selection. The net effect of these reforms was to give the full committee chair greater authority and flexibility to shape the legislative agenda of the committee and to push bills to the floor.

However, additional changes were made to ensure that committee chairs used their expanded powers to advance the will of the caucus. Six-year term limits were established to keep chairs from building a fiefdom to advance their own agendas within the policy jurisdiction of their committee. This also encouraged chairs to aggressively push legislation because they would have power for only a short period of time. At the end of six years, a new member of the committee would take over the reins.

At the same time, Republicans went well beyond the Democratic reforms of the seniority system. Violations of seniority in the selection of committee chairs became routine. Although the most senior member is more likely to be named chair than any other, there is usually an open competition for the slot. The Republican committee on committees sorts through the applicants and makes its recommendation to the caucus, which makes the final selection. Thus, any member who wants to chair a full committee will need to show his or her dedication to the party leaders and to advancing the party's agenda

The Rank-and-File

The members of the Republican caucus have the final word in the selection of party leaders and committee chairs. As the data on party polarization show, there is far less ideological diversity in the caucus than in years past. Thus, the rank-and-file are in a position to demand that their policy views be reflected by party leaders and committee chairs. Because of terms limits, chairmanship elections are a frequent occurrence. These elections, therefore, provide the opportunity for members to deliberate over the policies they wish each committee to pursue and to examine which candidate would be best at achieving that goal.

Candidates for committee chairs, as a result, have to make their appeals both to the party leaders and to the caucus members. Since party leaders have flexibility in deciding which member to recommend for the chairmanship, the caucus has the ability to influence that initial step in the process. Party leaders cannot hide behind seniority if they suggest a candidate who is not favored by the caucus. Brewer and Deering (2005) note that those seeking committee chairmanships curry favor by raising large amounts of money through their leadership PACs and distributing it to members. Not only are they buying support, they are showing their willingness to help the party retain its majority. Without majority status, every Republican would lose substantial power. Thus, the constant turnover of committee chairs has the added benefit of helping Republicans retain power, the highest goal of everyone in the party.

Chairmanships, however, are not merely fundraising contests. At the end of the process, chairmanship candidates will have to make a presentation to the Committee on Committees explaining why they should lead the committee and how they would advance

the party agenda. As Cohen (2005) reports, this presentation is merely the end of a two-year process of building support. He quotes chairmanship candidate as saying that the four "keys" to victory are "demonstrated legislative leadership, political teamwork, a vision for the committee, and seniority." The choice is not purely ideological--it is based on who the party believes will best lead the committee to their desired outcome. Determining the nature of that outcome is ultimately a joint effort of the party leadership and the rank-and-file.

To summarize the reforms of 1995, it is clear that the relative balance of power among the four layers of the party has changed. Subcommittee chairs have been made subservient to committee chairs. Party leaders have gained greater influence over committee chairs through the selection process. Committee chairs have been given stronger tools to run their committees, but they must use those tools to advance the party's agenda rapidly. The rank-and-file are more constantly engaged in determining the direction of the party because of the constant elections for committee chairs.

Although have rearranged power within the party, the overriding philosophy is that of conditional party government. An ideologically unified party empowers its leadership to achieve the members' policy goals. However, they also create mechanisms to ensure that that power is being exercised in a manner that serves the will of the members. Democrats achieved this by creating a participatory structure in which most members have a voice as subcommittee chairs. Republicans, by contrast, use competitive elections as a means of keeping party leaders and committee chairs in line. Both methods achieve the same goal, they just do it in different ways.

Effectiveness of the House Republican Leadership

Measuring the relative success of party leadership is not as easy at it might seem. Scholars of party leadership in the House of Representatives have used a variety of indicators to measure the extent to which party leaders are serving effectively. Most indicators involve some combination of measures of party unity and partisanship. The logic behind them is to measure how well the majority party sticks together on votes where the two parties disagree.

Unfortunately, party unity and partisanship are not the same thing as party effectiveness and party strength. There are times when a party need not be unified to get its way. Furthermore, sometimes a very unified majority party can be defeated by an even more unified minority. We thus will assess the relative effectiveness of the Republican party leadership by using the Majority Party Strength Index. Inspired by the responsible party government literature, this indicator measures how frequently the majority party is able to guarantee itself victory by being so unified that minority party votes become irrelevant.[3] In such instances, the majority party is acting like a responsible party in a parliamentary system.

Figure 2 shows the level of the Majority Party Strength index for congresses from 1975-2004. With the exception of the first Republican congress in 1995-1996, Republicans have been far less able to act like a responsible governing party than were the Democrats when they controlled the Congress. However, this comparison is somewhat misleading. As can also be seen in Figure 2, Republicans are working with a much smaller majority than were the Democrats. The largest Republican majority was 54

percent, whereas the smallest Democratic majority in the postreform era was 56 percent. Thus, even though Republicans have been remarkably unified in their voting, it has often not been enough to guarantee themselves victories on roll call votes.

Nonetheless, the pattern of party strength throughout the years of Republican control is quite telling. In the first Gingrich congress, the Republican party leadership was nearly as strong as its Democratic predecessors had been. However, the measure drops sharply in subsequent congresses, bottoming out in the wake of Gingrich's ouster as Speaker. Since then, Hastert has steadily restored the strength of the party leadership. However, given the problems inherent in working with such a small party, there is a limit on how effective the Republican party leadership can ever be.

Concluding Thoughts

The study of leadership often resembles "chicken and egg" analysis. When party leadership is functioning perfectly, the caucus is in perfect accord with the leaders. In such cooperative circumstances, we cannot observe whether the caucus is following its leadership blindly or whether the leaders are perfectly mirroring the will of the caucus. Or perhaps the truth is some combination of the two. It is only when conflict arises and the two are pulling in opposite directions that we can determine who is really calling the shots.

For that reason, it is hard to say definitively whether or not power in the Republican Congress has been centralized in its leadership or whether conditional party government still exists. To date, there has seldom been much difference between the wishes of the party leaders and the conservative base of the party. Nonetheless, two

incidents stand out as examples in which the rank-and-file appear to have prevailed over the party leadership.

During Gingrich's second term as speaker, he was nearly removed from office by his lieutenants. Key members of the Republican leadership had become disenchanted by his leadership and plotted to remove him from the position. Gingrich discovered the plot, squashed it, and remained in power. At the end of that congress, however, Gingrich found himself in even deeper trouble. Many conservative members of the caucus had grown weary of "caving in" to the Clinton administration on policy issues. Gingrich had told them that these compromises were necessary in order to maintain their congressional majority. Nonetheless, the Republicans lost seats in the House for the second consecutive cycle. When it became public in the wake of the Clinton impeachment that Gingrich had also been cheating with an intern, his support among the rank-and-file collapsed and he stepped down as speaker. Where party leaders had failed, the caucus had succeeded.

More recently, conservative House members have grown dismayed in the past few years over the lack of spending restraint by the Congress. The Republican Study Committee formed and now boasts nearly half the caucus as members. Early this year, conservatives forced Speaker Hastert to include mechanisms in the budget to reduce spending. In recent days, conservatives brushed aside Hastert's selection to temporarily replace Tom DeLay as Majority Leader after he stepped down to battle indictments related to campaign fundraising. Hastert recommended David Dreier (CA) for the position but conservatives insisted that the Whip, Roy Blunt (MO), who had worked

cooperatively with the group in spending cuts, take over most of the Majority Leader's duties. Hastert was forced to back down on his selection in the face of this rebellion.

As tension rises among House Republicans in the coming months, we are likely to see more fissures between party leaders and the caucus. At that time, we will have a better handle on whether the Republican leadership structure is a variation on conditional party government or a more centralized system. At present, however, it appears that the mechanisms are in place to allow the caucus to restrain party leaders if they go astray. If the conservative members of the Republican Study Committee fall in line behind party leaders, it will not be because they had no means to change course. It will be because they chose not to.

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Notes

[1] For a complete description of DW-NOMINATE scores, see McCarty, Poole and Rosenthal, 1997.

[2] This measure of polarization is similar to one proposed by Aldrich, Rohde and Berger, 1999. As specified in this paper, the measure would take a value of 0 if both party caucuses were distributed identically across the ideological spectrum. It would take a value of 1 if all majority party members voted together on every roll call.

[3] For a more detailed description of the Majority Party Strength Index, see Butler 2003.