

Thursday, March 26

U.S. Senate and House: Roles and Elections

I. Review of key ideas

- Since 1832, national party conventions select presidential nominees on majority vote
- Through 1968, nearly all convention delegates were selected by state parties
- First presidential primary, New Hampshire in 1916, only listed delegates
 - First listed candidates in 1948
 - Through 1968, these were only “beauty contests”
- Chaos of 1968 Democratic national convention led to McGovern-Fraser Commission
 - Opened up delegate selection to rank-and-file voters
 - Spurred modern system of using primaries and caucuses to select convention delegates
 - Democrats: proportional, 15% minimum
 - Republicans primarily winner-take-all

II. Role of U.S. House and Senate

Read aloud Article I, Section 7, paragraph 1—all revenue-raising bills start in House

Read aloud Article I, Section 8

Broadly — all laws relating to the national interest start in the House or Senate as a “bill.”

Sponsors and co-sponsors.

Filed with appropriate Committees.

Marked-up in hearings.

If voted out of Committee, sent to full House/Senate for approval. Rules Committee determines how bill is debated — how long each side has to speak, for example. Speaker of the House has broad discretion over which bills come

House: simple majority only

Senate: recent overuse of filibuster rules mean usually need 60 votes to pass anything. Reconciliation bills are exception.

Can use example of Affordable Care Act in 2009-10. Also McCain voting down repeal bill in 2017.

Usually different versions of same bill pass each House. Joint Committee appointed to create new version. Final votes. If pass, to president for signing or veto. 2/3 needed to override.

III. Elections

Framers intended House to have high levels of turnover—elections every two years by geographically-contained small-ish segments of voters. Rapid response to changes in public opinion.

Tend more to respond to presidential elections. Lower, more partisan turnout in midterm elections.

2018: Democrats net 41 seats after 2016 for 235-200 majority

2014: Republicans net 13 seats in Obama's 6th year to pad majority to 247-188

2010: Republicans net 63 seats after Obama win in 2008, winning back House with 242-193 edge

2006: Democrats net 31 seats to win back House 233-202 in 6th year of Bush

2002, 1998 exceptions: 8 seats and 5 seats

1994: Republicans gain control of House for first time since 1954, netting 54 seats and 230-204-1 edge.

Used to be much closer elections on average—Mayhew “Vanishing Marginals” 1973. Now most Representatives win reelection relatively easily

Districts redrawn every 10 years by state legislatures. No guidance in Constitution. Thus easy for political parties to control process to maximize their advantage.

The word “gerrymander” comes from Elbridge Gerry, the Massachusetts governor who supervised the redrawing of his state's legislative districts (U.S. House, state senate, state house) to advantage his Democratic-Republicans following the 1810 U.S.

Census. One new state senate district resembled a salamander, leading to the term “Gerry-mander” to describe the drawing of legislative district lines for partisan advantage.

Voting Rights Act of 1964—majority-minority districts.

Partisanship and sophisticated data tools have allowed both parties—but mostly Republicans—to “rig” districts for them. This leads to GOP fearing primary challenge more than general election.

Senate would be more deliberative—six-year terms, staggered every so 1/3 up every two years.

Used to be more “split-ticket voting” —but now states mostly blue up and down ballots.