

Postface

For many, perhaps most, members of the House of Representatives, it is as Edward Jenison said a “temporary public service.” Their impact on public policy and on the Nation is low, a vote here and there, a comment in committee discussion or floor debate, an amendment, maybe even an enactment, a service to individual constituents, a role model for an ambitious child. For even these, though, it is nearly always an acme of public service, played out from a longer term in lesser political posts and involvements. A member in the House does not surface from the sea fully formed.

Nor does the future member rarely emerge alone. That support ranges from the individual put forward by a dominant political organization to an entrepreneur gathering friends and the interested around him or her. Among the 109 individuals in the Class of '46, longevity in the House seems to have peaked somewhere between those two extremes. A dominant organization may withdraw its support, and coalitions of the moment may not endure. Certainly, the six longest-serving members fell variously on the continuum.

A long career in the House requires that relative independence of candidacy as well as an immersion in the demands and perquisites of the job. There are those who would take the position away apart from the shifts in partisan predilections of the electorate. Those immune from those shifts – in the case of the Class, those from Southern states – were still in a running biannual battle to remain in the job. Staying in the House was most often a never-ending struggle. The “lower house” was designed with that in mind. One had to want to stay and only a handful did not want to. Nearly all of the latter went on to the Senate or tried to. The Class is not too representative of other classes in its tenure, being brought in through a major partisan shift that quickly receded, but it is not too specious to report that the median number of years served by a member of the Class was five.¹

Long tenures, and 37 did serve at least ten years and 16 for twenty or more, provided the opportunity for impact on policy. With the exception of Carl Albert's achievement of the speakership, those accomplishments are largely forgotten for the members of the Class. Olin Teagues' on veterans services and NASA, Edward Garmatz' on the maritime industry, Otto Passman's on foreign aid, John Blatnik's on pollution, William McCulloch's on equal rights may now rate a footnote, but little more. Representatives of long tenure also show a tendency, though not a universal one, to become delegates of the District of Columbia rather than of their congressional districts.

As for public policy in the larger sense, the period from 1946 to 1978 was one of continuity. The welfare liberalism of the New Deal was perpetuated in the Fair Deal and the Great Society.

¹ The median years for the individuals replaced by Class members was also five. For those who replaced Class members it was eight.

Conservative, Republican and Southern Democratic, efforts to reverse that were limited, in large part because of the fear of losing the benefits of the policies to the nation and especially to their constituents. Expansions of the liberal policies occurred, though rarely to the degree its proponents desired.

The one great public policy change during the period was the expansion of equal rights, most obviously to black citizens, but also to everyone else in the country, though in the more universal case it was primarily due to the Warren Court.

As of this writing, a reaction to the continual expansion of equal rights to the more marginal of society has enabled the seizure of power in the national executive and legislative of a clique with the intent to completely reverse not only the expansion of equal rights but welfare liberalism. This is being accomplished not through political means but by using the authoritarian powers granted over time to the presidency beyond the historical practice. Recognizing the dangers to continuity in power by this faction as a result of popular misgiving, those powers are also being used to restrict the electoral franchise. The Judicial Branch may lack the courage and the power to ensure constitutional norms.

Two facts the author draws from this study is that some representatives are very competent and knowledgeable, and they achieve power and accomplishment due to that combination. Secondly, that few representatives, while they may trip on that power, are in office other than to be a force for good, even if our definition of good may not be equivalent to theirs. They may wander over the line, for which we need an active press to call them back and for which we have elections to correct them, but they mean well. Children of the members say that they wanted to help people.

Tenure was a critical component, but so was party. For all but two congresses, Republicans were the minority, and their effectiveness was limited though not eliminated. Republican McCulloch's criticality cannot be overstated, but this was necessary due to equal rights bifurcating the Democratic members. The Republican with the second longest tenure, Paul Dague, left little evidence of his passing, though perhaps it was important within the closed confines of the Committee on Agriculture.

Partisanship has changed since the passing of the Class of '46. The loss of Southern Democrats has diminished Democratic membership, while resulting in a more unified party on policy. The takeover of the Republican Party by the South has also resulted in a unified party through the departure of its northeastern liberal wing. As a result, the Congress has become less effective in making policy, as bipartisan efforts have receded and partisan control has become dominant.

From 1930 until 1994, the Democrats, although divided between their regional wings, ran matters in all but two congresses. Since 1994 through the 2024 election, it has largely been a Republican Congress, though four of the sixteen House congresses have been Democratic and the last two Republican ones have been all but tied between the parties.

Republicans in the earlier 31 congresses were wont to leave from a situation of near permanent minority and by doing so ensuring that status. This may also be true of Democrats in the more recent 16 congresses.

One change that bears noting is the impact of the Supreme Court's "one man, one vote" decision on redistricting and the Court's refusal to rule on gerrymandering. Gerrymandering has a long tradition, but the Court's subservience of districting to numbers and ignoring of all other aspects but a reluctant consideration of race has produced House elections without competitiveness. It must be said, however, that the lack of court oversight before "one man, one vote" resulted in districts also partisanly restricted. They just looked less like bug-spatters; the range of partisan changes in districts from 1952 to 2020 was rather consistent. In the last two elections it has been lower.² Constituents may find it more of a challenge to determine who their representative is now, but then too many did not know in the past. The diminution of the news media since the triumph of the Internet is a larger contributor to ignorance than redistricting.

As for the individuals with enough hubris to assume the role of representatives, to divide their lives and those of their families into rulers and ruled, both with respect to constituents, should we count this as democratic success? Are we better for it? Is it the worst form of government except for all others?

² 1952-60 mean: 32.6. 1962-70: 31.4 (despite the constant redistricting). 1972-80: 34.2. 1982-90: 25.0. 1992-2000: 34.0. 2002-10: 31.8. 2012-20: 30.4. 2022-24: 16.0. Figures from 1954 to 2022 are from Reynolds & Maehr, Table 2-5. Figures for 1952 and 2024 were calculated by the author.