

On Capitol Hill: The Struggle to Reform Congress and Its Consequences, 1948–2000. By Julian E. Zelizer. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004. xvi + 359 pp. Index, notes, photographs. Cloth, \$30.00. ISBN: 0-521-80161-3.

Reviewed by Allan J. Lichtman

The Congress of the United States has long been the scorned stepchild of an American political historiography organized around presidential terms and focused on presidential initiatives. Historians have only slowly integrated the institutional reform of Congress into the presidential synthesis of political history. Julian Zelizer, a historian at the State University of New York at Albany (now at Boston University), offers an important counterweight to this historiographic neglect. *On Capitol Hill* expertly mines archival and published sources to describe efforts to reform Congress during the second half of the twentieth century and relate institutional change to the struggle for political power in the United States. This is not a narrow organizational study of Congress, but a rich historical narrative set in the broad context of social and political developments of the era. The work should be of value to all students of modern American political history and, in particular, to business historians interested in the institutional context for policymaking in Congress.

Zelizer argues that the quest for congressional reform unfolds into distinct historical eras. The “Conservative Committee Era” (p. 4), which was dominated by senior southern Democrats, reached its apogee under Franklin Roosevelt and Harry Truman and came under attack from 1948 to 1970 by a liberal coalition, centered in the Democratic Party, united by a commitment to civil rights, and convinced that reformed process would lead to better policies. These reformers scored some successes, with, for example, the enlargement of the House Rules Committee in 1961 to make way for more liberal members, and the Supreme Court rulings of the 1960s on one person, one vote and vote dilution that weakened the electoral base of conservative southern Democrats.

Major reform, however, did not take hold until the period from 1970 to 1979, which Zelizer inelegantly calls “The End of the Committee Era and the Start of the Modern Era” (p. 8). In the strongest section of the book, Zelizer examines the formation

of an external reform network—academics, muckraking journalists, Common Cause, and Ralph Nader’s consumer groups—the effects of scandal and electoral change, and the shifting coalitions battles that gradually changed how Congress works. The reformers imposed campaign finance regulations on Congress—notably contribution limits and disclosure requirements—and established the Federal Electoral Commission as a regulatory agency. They weakened the committee process, strengthened party caucuses, curtailed secrecy, authorized the televising of hearings, and centralized Congress’s budget-making powers. Most dramatically, after the Watergate election of 1974 strengthened their hand, the reformers toppled four committee chairs in the House, ending the supreme power of these kingpins; in the Senate, they eased the requirement for ending filibusters from sixty-seven to sixty votes. “These changes were gradual and were produced by multiple forces, but their cumulative effect was to push Congress into a new era” (p. 176).

The book weakens in its coverage of the new era that began in 1979. With the exception of a useful chapter on cable television, Zelizer compresses this history into but thirty pages of text. The result is a superficial treatment of the changes wrought by the Republican Revolution of 1994. The Republicans led by Representative Newt Gingrich of Georgia, no less than the liberal reformers of an earlier time, promised major change in the operations of Congress. The 1994 “Contract With America,” signed by more than three hundred Republican congressional candidates, begins with a pledge “to bring to the House a new majority that will transform the way Congress works.” Yet the book contains only a compressed analysis of the reforms implemented by the new Republican majority in 1995 and no discussion of the changes in congressional practice wrought by Republicans during the decade of the 1990s. Omitted, for example, are matters of importance to business historians, including the rich discussion of alliances with external groups that Zelizer provides for the era of Democratic dominance. As a case in point, there is no analysis of the “K Street Project,” the strategy devised by Republican legislators allegedly for pushing businesses to hire Republican lobbyists as a condition for doing business in Congress.

Despite fading in the stretch, Zelizer has produced a well-researched, competently written, and politically astute account of congressional reform that is valuable for both its

historical detail and its strong analytic focus. He reaches two important conclusions. First, his study shows that “government institutions *can* be changed in American politics” (p. 270, emphasis in original). Reformers did succeed over time in reshaping the Congress. His second and gloomy finding, however, is that reform failed to transform process into policy, as its proponents had hoped. Rather, the unintended consequences of reform fragmented power in Congress, increased partisanship, turned the media into a war zone, made scandal a routine weapon of politics, and created openings for disruptive mavericks. Zelizer notes, “Congress has not emerged as the dominant branch of government, it is not an icon of efficiency, it has not regained public favor, and it certainly has not become a factory of progressive policy” (p. 270).

Zelizer ultimately shies away from the negative implications of his findings. He holds out the hope that a new wave of twenty-first century reform could gradually create a more democratic, efficient, respected, and responsive Congress. But the burden of his fine historical study suggests otherwise, pointing to the opposite message: that reformers, whether liberal or conservative, would be best advised to focus on the substance of policy rather than on the procedures of Congress.

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