

Steering the Senate

The Senate majority and minority leaders stand at the pinnacle of American national government—as important to Congress as the speaker of the House. However, the invention of Senate floor leadership has, until now, been entirely unknown. Providing a sweeping account of the emergence of party organization and leadership in the U.S. Senate, *Steering the Senate* is the first-ever study to examine the development of the Senate's main governing institutions. It argues that three forces—party competition, intraparty factionalism, and entrepreneurship—have driven innovation in the Senate. The book details how the position of floor leader was invented in 1890 and then strengthened through the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Drawing on the full history of the Senate, this book immediately becomes the authoritative source for understanding the institutional development of the Senate—uncovering the origins of the Senate party caucuses, steering committees, and floor leadership. This title is also available as Open Access on Cambridge Core.

Gerald Gamm is Professor of Political Science and of History at the University of Rochester. He is a Fellow of the Massachusetts Historical Society, and he began the research that led to this book as a Fellow at the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars. He is the author of *The Making of New Deal Democrats: Voting Behavior and Realignment in Boston, 1920–1940* (1989) and *Urban Exodus: Why the Jews Left Boston and the Catholics Stayed* (1999). His recent articles have appeared in *American Political Science Review*, *Legislative Studies Quarterly*, and *Studies in American Political Development*.

Steven S. Smith is Professor in the School of Politics and Global Studies at Arizona State University and Kate M. Gregg Emeritus Professor at Washington University in St. Louis. He is the 2023 winner of the Barbara Sinclair Lecture Award for his achievement in promoting the understanding of the U.S. Congress and legislative politics. He is the author of *Politics over Process: Partisan Conflict and Post-Passage Processes in the U.S. Congress* (2017), *The American Congress* (10 editions, 1995–2019), *The Senate Syndrome: The Evolution of Parliamentary Warfare in the Modern U.S. Senate* (2014), *Party Influence in Congress* (2007), *The Politics of Institutional Choice: The Formation of the Russian State Duma* (2001), and more.

Steering the Senate

The Emergence of Party Organization and Leadership, 1789–2024

GERALD GAMM

University of Rochester

STEVEN S. SMITH

Arizona State University

and

Washington University in St. Louis



CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

Cambridge University Press & Assessment
978-0-521-88352-8 — Steering the Senate
Gerald Gamm , Steven S. Smith
Frontmatter
[More Information](#)



Shaftesbury Road, Cambridge CB2 8EA, United Kingdom
One Liberty Plaza, 20th Floor, New York, NY 10006, USA
477 Williamstown Road, Port Melbourne, VIC 3207, Australia
314-321, 3rd Floor, Plot 3, Splendor Forum, Jasola District Centre, New Delhi—110025, India
103 Penang Road, #05-06/07, Visioncrest Commercial, Singapore 238467

Cambridge University Press is part of Cambridge University Press & Assessment, a department of the University of Cambridge.
We share the University’s mission to contribute to society through the pursuit of education, learning and research at the highest international levels of excellence.

www.cambridge.org
Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9780521883528

DOI: 10.1017/9781139029926

© Gerald Gamm and Steven S. Smith 2025

This publication is in copyright. Subject to statutory exception and to the provisions of relevant collective licensing agreements, with the exception of the Creative Commons version the link for which is provided below, no reproduction of any part may take place without the written permission of Cambridge University Press & Assessment.

When citing this work, please include a reference to the DOI 10.1017/9781139029926

First published 2025

Cover image: Berryman, Clifford K. “The Kellogg Pact does not apply to the Senate tariff arena.” Published in *The Evening Star* (Washington, D.C.), September 4, 1929.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

NAMES: Gamm, Gerald H., author. | Smith, Steven S., 1953–, author.
TITLE: Steering the Senate : the emergence of party organization and leadership, 1789-2024 / Gerald Gamm, University of Rochester; Steven S. Smith, Arizona State University and Washington University in St. Louis.
DESCRIPTION: New York, NY : Cambridge University Press, 2025. | Includes bibliographical references and index. | Contents: Individual goals and Senate party organization – Presiding officer, 1789-1914 – Caucus, 1789-1879 – Steering committee, 1856-1913 – Arthur Pue Gorman, the federal elections bill, and the invention of elected floor leadership, 1890-1913 – Leaders and whips, 1913-1924 – Divergent paths and the consolidation of leadership structures, 1923-1944 – Party infrastructure, 1945-1980 – Polarization, competition, and centralization, 1981-2024 – Conclusion.
IDENTIFIERS: LCCN 2025024517 (print) | LCCN 2025024518 (ebook) | ISBN 9780521883528 (hardback) | ISBN 9780521709866 (paperback) | ISBN 9781139029926 (epub)
SUBJECTS: LCSH: United States. Congress. Senate–Leadership. | United States. Congress. Senate–Majority Leaders–History. | United States. Congress. Senate–Caucuses. | United States. Congress. Senate–History. | Republican Party (U.S. : 1854–)–History. | Democratic Party (U.S.)–History.
CLASSIFICATION: LCC JK1161 .G36 2025 (print) | LCC JK1161 (ebook) |
DDC 328.73/0769–dc23/eng/20250722
LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2025024517>
LC ebook record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2025024518>

ISBN 978-0-521-88352-8 Hardback
ISBN 978-0-521-70986-6 Paperback

Cambridge University Press & Assessment has no responsibility for the persistence or accuracy of URLs for external or third-party internet websites referred to in this publication and does not guarantee that any content on such websites is, or will remain, accurate or appropriate.

Cambridge University Press & Assessment
978-0-521-88352-8 — Steering the Senate
Gerald Gamm , Steven S. Smith
Frontmatter
[More Information](#)

In memory of Dick Fenno

Contents

<i>List of Figures</i>	<i>page</i> ix
<i>List of Tables</i>	xi
<i>Preface and Acknowledgments</i>	xiii
1 Individual Goals and Senate Party Organization	I
2 Presiding Officer, 1789–1914	23
3 Caucus, 1789–1879	51
4 Steering Committee, 1856–1913	97
5 Arthur Pue Gorman, the Federal Elections Bill, and the Invention of Elected Floor Leadership, 1890–1913	151
6 Leaders and Whips, 1913–1924	227
7 Divergent Paths and the Consolidation of Leadership Structures, 1923–1944	271
8 Party Infrastructure, 1945–1980	305
9 Polarization, Competition, and Centralization, 1981–2024	353
10 Conclusion	393
<i>Appendix</i>	405
<i>References</i>	437
<i>Index</i>	461

Figures

1.1	Size of Senate parties, 1789–1889	page 18
1.2	Size of major Senate parties, 1857–2025	19
2.1	Terms of presidents pro tempore, as percent of all days in Congress	35
4.1	Size of parties, 1861–1913	100
4.2	The Republican steering committee “experiment,” 1882	120
4.3	Number of references to caucus committees, by year, 1861–1913	134
5.1	News coverage of pre-1889 elections of Democratic caucus chairmen	163
5.2	News coverage following Gorman’s resignation in 1898	188
6.1	Size of parties, 1911–25	231
6.2	Mean percent of senators voting on roll-call votes, by Congress, 1789–2020	232
6.3	Number of pages for floor remarks listed in the index of the <i>Congressional Record</i> , for majority leader, top committee chairs, and all senators, by Congress, 1899–1940	252
6.4	Number of caucus meetings, by Congress, for Democrats (1903–64) and Republicans (1911–64)	263
7.1	Size of parties, 1923–44	273
8.1	Size of parties, 1941–83	307
8.2	Appropriations for Senate parties (parties combined), 1947–80	322
8.3	Number of party-based staff, Democrats and Republicans, 1935–2015	323
8.4	Frequency of <i>CQ Almanac</i> issue stories mentioning floor leader with a meaningful policymaking or strategy role, 1945–80	341
8.5	Frequency of <i>Washington Post</i> stories mentioning Senate leaders, 1945–80	347
9.1	Size of parties, 1947–2025	357
		ix

9.2	Party polarization in the Senate, 1945–2019	359
9.3	Appropriations for party offices, in millions of dollars, House and Senate, 1947–2018	367
9.4	Number of Republican staff members by party office, 1979–2017	368
9.5	Number of Democratic staff members by party office, 1979–2017	368
9.6	Number of measures and nominations subject to cloture motions, 1961–2020	375
9.7	Number of floor votes related to amendments, by year, 1969–2022	378

Tables

2.1	Methods for Senate committee assignments, 1815–64	<i>page</i> 33
5.1	Years of prior service of caucus chairmen	165
5.2	Caucus chairmen, with number of times identified in news accounts as leaders of their party in the Senate	169
10.1	Functions of Senate leaders	395
A.1	Senate Republican leadership	405
A.2	Senate Democratic leadership	406
A.3	Presidents pro tempore of the Senate	409
A.4	Senate Republican committee on the order of business (through 1913)	424
A.5	Senate Democratic committee on the order of business (through 1892) and steering committee (1893–1913)	431

Preface and Acknowledgments

This book has been germinating in the background of our lives—and, at critical moments, in the foreground—for much of our careers. The origins of this project go back to 1995. Strom Thurmond, Robert Byrd, Ted Kennedy, Daniel Patrick Moynihan, and Joe Biden were all sitting senators. Bob Dole was the long-time Senate Republican leader, Tom Daschle had just become the Democratic leader, Newt Gingrich was the new speaker of the House, and Bill Clinton was in his first term as president. It was hard for us, or for anyone we knew, to imagine the Senate—or Washington—growing any more polarized along partisan lines than it had already become.

Steve was at Minnesota in 1995, trying to track down an account of Senate party development for a book he was writing, and Gerald, a young assistant professor at Rochester, had become interested in congressional history. Dick Fenno connected the two of us, thinking there might be a promising collaboration somewhere in there, perhaps a paper or two.

The Senate, we both knew, was not an easy institution to study. It is a small body and a continuing body, tracing its membership, without interruption, to 1789. Its rules are few and change slowly. “The rules of the Senate are practically unchanged from what they were at the beginning,” Henry Cabot Lodge had written in 1893 (526), and, apart from the adoption of a cloture rule, little substantial had shifted over the next century. The Senate’s members are famously independent and undisciplined. The presiding officer is a ceremonial position. Its party leaders struggle to corral their fellow senators. And its primary feature often seems to be a sturdy resistance to simple majority rule. The Senate, in short, has never been the modern House with its strong speaker, powerful rules empowering the majority party, and, depending on the historical moment, either a vigorous committee system or strong parties. Whatever the

era, the Senate is a chamber where leadership institutions heave and buckle under pressures of partisan competition and factionalism. The Senate's unending story is the struggle of the majority party to govern.

So three decades ago, we set out to solve two interlocked mysteries: How did the main features of Senate party organization and leadership emerge and develop over time? And what explains the broad process of institutional innovation in the Senate and, more generally, in legislatures? This book represents our best effort to solve these puzzles, which we contend are fundamental to understanding the institutional development of what has often been called, sometimes without irony, the world's greatest deliberative body.

Thus we uncover the origins of the central leaders of the modern Senate—the majority and minority leaders—showing that these positions trace their beginning to Arthur Pue Gorman, a Democratic senator who in 1890 mustered his caucus on the floor to obstruct and ultimately defeat passage of a landmark voting rights bill. Since party leadership grew out of the party caucuses, we reconstruct the origins of the party caucus. We find that the caucuses emerged in 1841, when Henry Clay brought discipline and cohesion to his fellow Whig senators—and we excavate the beginnings of what became the Republican steering committee, which, led by Nelson Aldrich and William Allison, managed the Senate at the turn of the last century. And we show how the institutions forged in the nineteenth century were consolidated, strengthened, extended, and fortified by innovations through the twentieth and into the twenty-first centuries.

Every major institutional innovation, we contend, represented a rational response, by individual senators and by the Senate parties, to moments that demanded coordination and collective action. These moments, we find, were frequently created by factional tensions within parties and exploited by entrepreneurial politicians. But always, we conclude, institutional innovation in the Senate—dramatic new changes in party structure, organization, and leadership—represented responses to periods of intense competition between closely balanced parties. It was in those times, when control of the Senate was in doubt, that majority and especially minority parties were most likely to innovate. Once new institutions emerged, they rarely disappeared. So each generation in the Senate inherited a set of institutional solutions and then built new institutions on top of the old foundation stones. The Senate of 2025, we conclude—highly centralized, with an unprecedented network of party organs—is the apotheosis of more than two centuries of institutional change.

For sources for this project, we ranged widely—to official Senate publications, to the minutes of the two Senate parties, to contemporary books and journals, to biographies of senators, to personal papers, to extensive studies by historians, journalists, and political scientists. But our most important source

Preface and Acknowledgments

xv

by far proved to be newspapers. Since the first decades of the nineteenth century, newspapers across the country, but especially in big cities, covered the House and Senate in great detail. While they may have covered Congress through different partisan lenses, they almost never disagreed on the basic facts of what was happening on Capitol Hill. And the best newspapers—in Washington, New York, Boston, Baltimore, Chicago, and other cities—posted their finest journalists to Congress, who competed with one another to present the fullest accounts of what was happening behind the closed doors of caucus meetings. Ultimately, we (and our research assistants) read tens of thousands of these stories, which together detail the behind-the-scenes construction of Senate party organization and leadership.

Doing this research in the 1990s and early 2000s was an act of brute force. It meant tracking down newspapers on microfilm and then sitting for hours in front of microfilm readers to find stories on Senate party organization. This necessitated a focus on the first weeks of each Congress, when organizational decisions were likeliest to be made, and allowed little attention to the remainder of each two-year period. Apart from the *New York Times*, no newspaper in the nineteenth century or first half of the twentieth century had a published index, so there was usually no way to sift through stories without reading every page of every newspaper.

The digital revolution transformed our research and allowed us to discover deeper, more compelling, and more convincing accounts than we ever could have done in the age of microfilm, paper, and a paucity of indexes. The origins of party caucuses, the emergence of steering committees, the invention of floor leadership, and most of what we know about the twentieth-century Senate: all of this is grounded in digitized newspapers, where we could search using keywords and find stories and newspapers that were otherwise lost. We have drawn on many databases, but the most important, especially for the nineteenth- and early twentieth-century chapters, have been ProQuest Historical Newspapers, America's Historical Newspapers, and Chronicling America: Historic American Newspapers. We are both in great debt to our respective university libraries for providing access to these rich databases in the 2010s and 2020s, but also for all they did in those olden days when we relied on interlibrary loan and reels of microfilm.

We have accumulated abundant debts in writing this book. Legions of undergraduates at the University of Rochester have worked as research assistants through the years, reading microfilm and searching through digitized databases, and we are grateful to all of them. A handful, who did work in the last stages of this project, we single out by name—Redd Brown, Hugh Curran, Alec Ellison, Zach Lawlor—but our gratitude extends to every student who assisted it. At the University of Minnesota and Washington University in St. Louis, we were assisted by an extremely talented set of graduate students:

Eric Lawrence, Anthony Madonna, Ian Ostrander, Hong Min Park, Jason Roberts, Elizabeth Rybicki, and Ryan Vander Wielen. During Gerald's year at the Woodrow Wilson Center, in many ways the project's formative year, he relied on the generosity of the center, the excellent help of Brian Roraff, and the work that Sarah Binder, Eric Lawrence, and Forrest Maltzman did in welcoming him into the fellowship of congressional scholars.

For three decades, we have benefited from the patience and support of a superb community of scholars whose work focuses on Congress, with many specializing in the history of Congress. We have learned from many people through the years—and at multiple meetings of the American Political Science Association, the Midwest Political Science Association, and the Congress and History conference, as well as in talks we have been invited to give at universities and opportunities to discuss drafts of this manuscript with students and faculty. We have also enjoyed unstinting support from experts on Capitol Hill—Stanley Bach and Elizabeth Rybicki, at the Congressional Research Service; and Richard Baker, Daniel Holt, Betty Koed, Heather Moore, Donald Ritchie, and Wendy Wolff, all in the Senate Historical Office. Finally, we are grateful to Reb Brownell for welcoming us to the Capitol, sharing research with us, and arranging for two meetings between us and Senator Mitch McConnell.

Our colleagues and students—at Minnesota, Washington University, Arizona State, and Rochester—have had our backs these thirty years. They have heard innumerable stories about this book and only sometimes appeared to lose their patience with our interminable timelines. During these years, Steve directed the Weidenbaum Center, Gerald chaired his department, and both of them made time almost every Friday morning to check in with each other with updates big and small. Our colleagues, our friends—in our departments and throughout the profession—kept believing in our capacity to see this work to fruition.

Of course, we owe our greatest debts to the ones we love.

For Gerald, the support of his family has sustained him all these years. His father, Stephen, and stepmother, Celia, have been with him every step of the way, along with his siblings, their spouses and kids, and the rest of his extended family. Now Tahmede brings kindness and courage to every day. But more than anyone it has been Charles on whom Gerald has come to rely—his best friend, his true love, his support, the person who challenges Gerald constantly to do new things and get old things completed at last.

For Steve, the love and encouragement of his wife, Liz, motivates him every day. Liz is a brilliant scholar, wonderful mom, and the best friend anyone could have. Tyler, Shannon, Maxine, Alice, and Ruby, whose lives are simply inspiring, have provided the love and joy that he always carries with him.

We dedicate this book to Dick. He was the single greatest congressional scholar and teacher of the last century, probably of all time. But that is not why

Preface and Acknowledgments

xvii

we make this dedication. It is instead to Dick as we knew him for so many years. He was a colleague, a mentor, someone always in our corner, and, with his wife, Nancy, a true and constant friend to us both. We miss his generous spirit and we remember, no matter how many years pass, the sound of him whistling as we walk down the third-floor corridor of Harkness Hall.

Cambridge University Press & Assessment
978-0-521-88352-8 — Steering the Senate
Gerald Gamm , Steven S. Smith
Frontmatter
[More Information](#)



Majority Leader Joe Robinson (D, Ark.) in May 1937. He served as Democratic leader for almost 14 years.

Library of Congress, Prints & Photographs Division, photograph by Harris & Ewing, reproduction number LC-DIG-hec-22734