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Meeting the Challenges of Senate Leadership

Brendan J. Doherty, 2006–2007 APSA Congressional Fellow

Political scientists have long acknowledged the substantial challenges of and obstacles to effective majority leadership in the Senate. As each individual senator, regardless of rank or party affiliation, has the right to object to unanimous consent agreements that govern much of the Senate's business, to offer non-germane amendments to pending legislation, and to engage in extended debate that can only be halted by mustering 60 votes to invoke cloture, the agenda of the Senate leadership can be easily derailed. The tendency of senators to obstruct and delay has been exacerbated over the past half century by the rise of individualism and partisanship in the Senate, which has resulted in commensurate increased challenges for Senate leaders (see, for example, Polsby 1971; Sinclair 2005; Davidson and Oleszek 2006).

The Senate majority leader, unlike the speaker of the House of Representatives, has few formal powers. Through the right of first recognition, he, and someday she, determines which legislation will be considered on the floor. He provides vital information to his fellow senators and can grant or withhold favors large and small. In return, he expects the cooperation he needs to ensure that the Senate can function. Due to the super-majoritarian provisions of Senate procedures, bipartisanship is a frequent necessity, though prospects for success are tempered by the minority party's incentives to block or alter legislation that the majority leader seeks to advance. As the public has limited understanding of the procedures of the Senate, the majority leadership faces high expectations and is often blamed for the Senate's slower pace, relative to that of the House. Former Senate Majority Leader Tom Daschle (D-SD) has compared the challenges of Senate leadership to "loading frogs into a wheelbarrow," while another recent majority leader, Trent Lott (R-MS), has likened Senate leadership to

herding cats (Daschle and D'Orso 2003; Lott 2005).

While scholars often emphasize the limitations of Senate leadership, more attention should be paid to the tools that Senate leaders do have. Senators themselves have long acknowledged the difficulties of legislative leadership in the upper chamber of Congress, and have, from time to time, created new tools to aid their leaders in their efforts to advance the party's agenda. As a Congressional Fellow of the American Political Science Association this year, I have had a first-hand opportunity to observe the interactions of a closely divided Senate while working for one of the oft-overlooked instruments of Senate leadership, the Democratic Policy Committee.

The Creation and Evolution of the DPC

Problems of policy coordination and party cohesion led to the creation of the Senate Democratic and Republican Policy Committees (DPC and RPC, respectively) in 1947. The Joint Committee on the Organization of Congress declared in a 1946 report, "There is no unity of command in Congress today. Responsibility for the development and coordination of legislative policy is scattered among the chairmen of 81 standing committees, who compete for jurisdiction and power. As a result, policy making is splintered and uncoordinated." While the Joint Committee recommended the creation of policy committees for each party in each chamber, Speaker Sam Rayburn (D-TX) rejected the proposal out of concern about the diminution of the speaker's power. The Senate embraced the recommendation, and enacted legislation that established both the DPC and the RPC in January 1947 (Ritchie 1997).

From its inception, the DPC has been an extension of the party's Senate leadership, and for most of its history, the party's floor leader has also served as its chairman. During the committee's first 30 years, it functioned in large part first as a board of advisors to the party's leader, and later became a vehicle for forging consensus on party policy. Over the past 30 years, the DPC has been transformed into a body that provides services to the

Democratic leadership and the Democratic caucus. Throughout its history, the role of the DPC has varied depending on the desires of its leader, whether the party held the majority in the Senate and thus controlled scheduling, and whether the party's leaders were working with a president of their own party (Democratic Policy Committee 2007).

Under its first three chairmen from 1947 through 1952, Senators Alben Barkley (KY), Scott Lucas (IL), and Ernest McFarland (AZ), senators on the committee met regularly at the DPC's weekly lunches to provide informal advice on legislative substance and strategic scheduling. The committee's staff was small and geared toward researching proposed legislation for the use of both the leader and the members of the Democratic caucus. It wasn't until 1953 that a new leader began aggressively to use the DPC as a means of effective legislative leadership (Democratic Policy Committee 2007).

First as minority leader then as majority leader from 1953 to 1960, Senator Lyndon Johnson (TX) transformed the DPC into a tool to help him centralize power, minimize dissent, and manage the ideological divisions in the Democratic caucus. He established unprecedented coordination with committee chairs, requesting that committees report weekly to the DPC staff. Johnson only named to the DPC those senators who were loyal to him, and, in the critical words of Senator William Proxmire (WI), the DPC did not take the lead in "drawing up a general legislative program." Instead the committee was employed by Johnson as a "strategic device and weapon . . . to set up issues in a way that will permit a maximum number of Democrats to go along with the position of the leadership." To aid his efforts, Johnson expanded the committee's staff to help with legislative scheduling, maintain statistics on senators' votes, and serve as part of his leadership team (Caro 2002; Democratic Policy Committee 2007).

The role of the DPC and the tenor of its meetings changed drastically in 1961, when Johnson became vice president and Senator Mike Mansfield (MT) was chosen as Senate majority leader and chairman of the DPC. He would serve in those roles for 16 years, first for eight years when

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Democrats held the White House, followed by eight years during Republican administrations. Mansfield displayed a more hands-off approach, exerting less pressure on committee chairs than his predecessor as he worked to implement the agendas of Presidents John F. Kennedy and Johnson. He also decreased the size of the committee's staff, focusing them on researching significant legislation and floor scheduling. During the presidencies of Republicans Richard Nixon and Gerald Ford, Mansfield led efforts to formulate an alternative Democratic program, and for the first time, with the concurrence of at least two-thirds of its members, the DPC occasionally took committee policy positions on matters as varied as postal rates and the withdrawal of U.S. troops from Vietnam (Democratic Policy Committee 2007).

Following Mansfield's retirement, the DPC underwent a fundamental shift during the leadership of the new Senate majority leader, Robert Byrd (WV). The committee members no longer met, and thus no longer served to give collective advice to the leader or to formulate party policy. Instead, Byrd placed the emphasis of the committee on staff providing services to the leadership and to the caucus, and doubled the number of staff in his first four years as DPC chair. Many policy experts joined the DPC and worked with the staffs of the various committees to provide the leadership with expertise and coordination and aid with legislative scheduling. In 1981, when the Democrats became the minority party in the Senate for the first time in 26 years and no longer controlled scheduling, Byrd again doubled the number of staff in order to provide new communications capabilities that could help Democrats to compete with the bully pulpit of newly-elected President Ronald Reagan. The DPC created television and radio studios to help all Democratic senators communicate with their constituents. In an effort to offer an alternative to Reagan's

agenda, the staff's policy experts produced reports on key issues and advised the caucus on how to function effectively in the minority, helping to craft amendments that senators would offer on contentious subjects such as Social Security (Democratic Policy Committee 2007).

When Byrd stepped aside as floor leader to become chairman of the Ap-



2006-2007 APSA Congressional Fellowship Program. *Front row (l-r):* Vivian D. Catalino, Fares Abdelhafaiez Braizat, Christine A. Guglielmini, Veronica D. Jones, Michelle L. Chin, Robert B. Elliott, Arthur Kellerman. *Second row (l-r):* Ceresa L. Haney, Carmen Green, Suzanne Payne, Miguel Beltran De Felipe, Andrea-Victoria Noelle, Nancy Hardt, Eugene Rich. *Third row (l-r):* Jessica C. Gerrity, Brendan J. Doherty, Simon Rhodes Lomax, E. Strother Murray, Avi Salzman, John Cheves, W. Brent Christensen, Matthew Korade. *Fourth row (l-r):* Jeff Biggs, Bonney Kapp, Kathryn C. Lavelle, Walter C. Wilson, James M. Levy, Michael Stanton. *Fifth row (l-r):* Mohamed Mohamed Bachir Soffar, Dennis Worden, Howard Tuch, Edgardo Christen Hoy Vargas, Joern Holtmeier.

propriations Committee in 1989, Senator George Mitchell (ME) was chosen as the Democrats' new leader. Mitchell departed from tradition when he named Senator Daschle to serve as co-chair of the DPC. To aid them in promoting an agenda to counter that of President George H. W. Bush, Mitchell and Daschle convened occasional meetings of the DPC at which all Democratic senators were welcome.

When Mitchell retired in 1995 and the Democrats again became the minority party in the Senate, Senator Harry Reid (NV) joined Daschle as co-chair of the DPC, and they worked to promote the program of President Bill Clinton. Mitchell, Daschle, and Reid continued and expanded upon Byrd's vision of the DPC as an institution that provided services to Senate

Democrats. The committee planned policy events for Democratic senators on and off Capitol Hill, produced reports that focused on both the substance of and party message strategy for the debates of the day, and expanded their television and radio services to include Internet capabilities (Democratic Policy Committee 2007).

When Reid was chosen as the party's whip in 1999, Senator Byron Dorgan (ND) was named co-chair of the DPC. First Daschle and Dorgan, and then, following Daschle's defeat for reelection in 2004 and Reid's elevation to Democratic leader, Reid and Dorgan expanded the committee's efforts to build cohesion in the caucus and serve as a counterpoint to the administration of President George W. Bush. A main focus became oversight of the executive branch. Dissatisfied with Republican oversight of the Bush administration, the DPC created an oversight team that held 22 hearings in the 109th Congress, in which Republicans were invited to participate, on issues ranging from government contracting to pre-Iraq War intelligence (Democratic Policy Committee 2007).

The Current Role of the DPC

My work with the DPC began at a propitious time for a political scientist interested in shifts in the balance of power, executive-legislative relations, and the workings of a closely-divided Senate. A

gain of six seats in the 2006 elections gave the Democrats, along with two Independents who caucus with their party, a 51-49 majority in the Senate, and left Democratic congressional leaders and the Republican president faced with the choice of pursuing at least a degree of bipartisanship or facing legislative stalemate.

The DPC I joined is continuing some of its long-standing roles as well as taking on new responsibilities. The aim of its many functions is to provide services to the Democratic caucus that help the leadership govern more effectively. It continues to produce reports that analyze policy questions, focusing on both policy substance and strategic messaging, often in rapid response to the Bush administration's initiatives, such as the February release of the president's budget proposal. These documents are distributed to all Senate Democratic offices and many are made public with the aim of providing information that enables the caucus to speak with a more unified voice. The DPC also continues its long-standing role of tracking roll call votes and providing offices with customized reports of their senator's voting record.

With a return to majority status and the committee gavels now in Democratic hands, the DPC has shifted its oversight

focus. While in the last Congress it conducted a wide range of hearings under its own auspices, in the 110th Congress the DPC's oversight team is supporting, coordinating, and publicizing the oversight work of the Senate's committees, many of whom have hit the ground running with an aggressive agenda. The DPC is also expanding a project begun in the 109th Congress, in which its New Idea Network taps into the expertise of think tanks, professors, and policy specialists throughout the nation in order to generate innovative solutions to public policy questions.

In order to bring senators together and allow them to engage with leading experts on the nation's most pressing challenges, the DPC continues to sponsor weekly senators' lunches, as well as bi-annual issues conferences. Additionally, the DPC has extended its message project, which focuses on helping Democrats communicate and promote their policy agenda effectively, and have launched new efforts to reach out to Democratic officials on the state level. Recognizing that the nation faces challenges that no party can effectively solve alone, Senators Dorgan and Reid plan to hold several bipartisan summits to address vital questions such as globalization, poverty, and the exercise of American power.

Over the past 60 years, the Democratic Policy Committee has evolved to meet the needs of the times. It has been at various points in its history a group of informal advisors to the leadership, a tool to coordinate with powerful committee chairs and minimize dissent within the party, a vehicle for articulating party positions, and an institution that provides services to the Democratic leadership and caucus. The one constant has been the DPC's role in enhancing the abilities of the party leadership in the Senate to lead effectively and bring the party together. If the authors of the 1946 report by the Joint Committee on the Organization of Congress could convene today, they would see much greater unity of command and coordination of policy making. Many challenges to effective Senate leadership remain and leaders still have great difficulty herding the cats of the Senate and loading frogs into their legislative wheelbarrows. Nevertheless, a better understanding of the tools and formal structures that help Senate leaders wield their formal and informal influence more effectively provides a clearer picture of the workings of the Senate that can help political scientists in both their teaching and their research.

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