

The Senate is the Product of American Politics Woodrow Wilson, 1885



In 1883, 27-year-old Woodrow Wilson abandoned plans for a career in law and turned to the world of higher education. He began doctoral studies in history and politics at Baltimore's recently established Johns Hopkins University. Following the new model of German universities that emphasized the application of scientific research techniques to the study of political institutions, Johns Hopkins offered Wilson a welcoming climate in which to examine the American government. In the early 1880s, observers of that government understood that its central pillar was the United States Congress. In less than two years, and apparently without visiting Capitol Hill, Wilson completed his thesis, which he published in 1885 as *Congressional Government*.

During his undergraduate years at Princeton University in the 1870s, Wilson was deeply influenced by British journalist Walter Bagehot's *The English Constitution* (1873). When he moved on to graduate study at Johns Hopkins, Wilson set out to write a volume on the United States Constitution comparable to Bagehot's. His goal was to abandon political theory in favor of showing how American governmental institutions actually worked—"to present their weakness and strength without disguise." Wilson explained, for example, that contrary to the Constitution's tidy theoretical balance between the state and federal governments and among the three branches of the federal government, "For all practical purposes the national government is supreme over the state governments, and Congress predominant over its so-called coordinate branches." He prepared *Congressional Government* without visiting Congress or conducting research in congressional documents. He gained much of his understanding of the institution through articles by Gamaliel Bradford in the *Nation* magazine, which he had begun reading as a boy. In writing this book, Wilson aspired to the most desirable political office of his day, a seat in the Senate of the United States. He completed *Congressional Government* in 1884. Imitating the structure of Bagehot's *English Constitution*, *Congressional Government* contains two chapters on the House of Representatives, a single chapter on the Senate, and a cursory account of the presidency.

Congressional Government's publication in 1885 earned Wilson a national reputation as an astute political observer. One reviewer proclaimed it as "one of the most important books dealing with political subjects . . . ever issued from the American press." James Bryce, the noted British analyst of American political institutions, called it "a lucid and interesting book" and borrowed from it in

preparing his own seminal work, *The American Commonwealth*. Years later, a more detached reviewer praised Wilson's writing style, while cautioning against the writer's "magisterial omniscience—to some degree borrowed from Bagehot—which is sometimes so effective as to lull the reader into suspension of critical judgment."

Wilson's chapter on the Senate captures that body a few years before it developed formalized leadership structures and about a decade prior to the emergence of a vigorous presidency that would begin to challenge its prerogatives.

Congressional Government

The Senate of the United States has been both extravagantly praised and unreasonably disparaged, according to the predisposition and temper of its various critics. In the eyes of some it has a stateliness of character, an eminency of prerogative, and, for the most part, a wisdom of practice such as no other deliberative body possesses; whilst in the estimation of others it is now, whatever it may have been formerly, but a somewhat select company of leisurely "bosses," in whose companionship the few men of character and high purpose who gain admission to its membership find little that is encouraging and nothing that is congenial. Now of course neither of these extreme opinions so much as resembles the uncolored truth, nor can that truth be obtained by a judicious mixture of their milder ingredients. The truth is, in this case as in so many others, something quite commonplace and practical. The Senate is just what the mode of its election and the conditions of public life in this country make it. Its members are chosen from the ranks of active politicians, in accordance with a law of natural selection to which the state legislatures are commonly obedient; and it is probable that it contains, consequently, the best men that our system calls into politics. If these best men are not good, it is because our system of government fails to attract better men by its prizes, not because the country affords or could afford no finer material.

It has been usual to suppose that the Senate was just what the Constitution intended it to be; that because its place in the federal system was exalted the aims and character of its members would naturally be found to be exalted as well; that because its term was long its foresight would be long also; or that because its election was not directly of the people demagoguery would find no life possible in its halls. But the Senate is in fact, of course, nothing more than a part, though a considerable part, of the public service, and if the general conditions of that service be such as to starve statesmen and foster demagogues, the Senate

itself will be full of the latter kind, simply because there are no others available. There cannot be a separate breed of public men reared specially for the Senate. It must be recruited from the lower branches of the representative system, of which it is only the topmost part. No stream can be purer than its sources. The Senate can have in it no better men than the best men of the House of Representatives; and if the House of Representatives attract to itself only inferior talent, the Senate must put up with the same sort. I think it safe to say, therefore, that, though it may not be as good as could be wished, the Senate is as good as it can be under the circumstances. It contains the most perfect product of our politics, whatever that product may be. ¹

Wilson's chapter on the Senate reflected general popular attitudes about that body in the late 1870s and early 1880s. His writing helped to confirm and publicize the image of the Senate as an arena that attracted the most able political figures of that era. For Wilson, congressional government in the 1880s meant a clumsy and unfocused government by the numerous standing committees of Congress—48 in the House (“the dissociated heads of forty-eight ‘little legislatures’”) and 29 in the Senate—at a time when the House and Senate lacked strong political party leadership structures. Wilson believed congressional parties existed only to help win elections. In shaping and moving legislation, “their discipline is very slack and indefinite.” This produced one of the book's most frequently quoted lines, “. . . it is not far from the truth to say that Congress in session is Congress on public exhibition, whilst Congress in its committee-rooms is Congress at work.” Lamenting the lack of leadership organizations in the Senate, without which there could be no responsible party government, Wilson explained: “No one is *the* Senator. No one may speak for his party as well as for himself; no one exercises the special trust of acknowledged leadership.”

He contrasted the Senate of the early 1880s with the House of Representatives, which he characterized as “a disintegrate mass of jarring elements.” “It is indispensable that, besides the House of Representatives which runs on all fours with popular sentiment, we should have a body like the Senate which may refuse to run with it at all when it seems to be wrong—a body which has time and security enough to keep its head, if only now and then and but for a little while, till other people have had time to think.”

Wilson saw the Senate—a “small, select, and leisurely House of Representatives”—as a more congenial forum for great oratory. He believed great oratory offered the only direct path to effective leadership. Oratory and deliberation were the most important features of representative government.

“Representative government is government by advocacy, by discussion, by persuasion.” “The average ability displayed in [the Senate’s] discussions not infrequently rises quite to the level of those controversies of the past which we are wont to call great because they furnished occasion to men like Webster and Calhoun and Clay.” Wilson encouraged establishment of debating societies using as their model the British House of Commons or the United States Senate.

The Senate Wilson described in 1884 lacked formal leadership posts, but they would develop over time. As many states began to develop primary systems to guide the selection of senators by state legislatures, popular opinion assumed a greater influence in the choosing of senators. By 1900, when Wilson prepared the preface to a new edition, he acknowledged that changes in the Senate, House, and executive branch had made the volume he wrote 16 years earlier “hopelessly out of date.” He went on to publish several other books over the following quarter century and to serve as president of the United States. Among his many books, that first one proved to be his most enduring work. More than 120 years after its initial edition, *Congressional Government* remains a primary text in college history and political science courses.

1. Woodrow Wilson, *Congressional Government: A Study in American Politics* (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin and Company, 1885), 193-5.