

P R E F A C E



This book both tells a story and uses that story to explore an institutional feature of legislatures that has heretofore gone unappreciated in political science: the organizational cartel. The story is about how the election of the Speaker of the House of Representatives has evolved over the past two centuries from an ad hoc proceeding devoid of partisan structure to a ritualized proceeding that seals near-monopoly control over the tools of lawmaking by the majority party. Stated in terms of a single question, the story asks, how did we get from the world of the first Speaker, Frederick Muhlenberg, to the world of the current Speaker, John Boehner?

This story forms the structure on which a larger, more abstract argument is made: that the history of how speakership elections developed was propelled forward by a desire to establish an *organizational cartel* in the House. An organizational cartel is a device through which the majority party asserts exclusive control over the speakership and other top offices in order to achieve three goals: to control House patronage, distribute authority among important factions of the majority party, and influence the agenda-setting apparatus of the House. This last goal suggests both theoretical and empirical affinity with the *procedural cartel* championed by Gary Cox and Mathew McCubbins (1993, 2005). Needless to say, we have not chosen our label randomly.

As our families, colleagues, and editor have often reminded us, this book has been more than a dozen years in the making, if we trace its origins to the first working papers that went into it. What took us so long? Part of an honest answer is that we were sometimes distracted by other projects, but those distractions probably only added a few months, maybe a year, to the book's gestation period. The real answer is that the book project itself transmogrified after we had signed our contract with Princeton University Press in 2002 and began to write the book in earnest.

Once we shifted gears from writing a series of related papers and articles to writing a book with a unified argument, it became obvious that our original ideas about how antebellum speakership fights fit together needed revision. What originally drew our attention to speakership elections was the spectacle of speakership battles that stretched over days, weeks, and even months. Modern political scientists long for a “hung” presidential nominating convention. We had a topic that was almost as good: a series of hung speakership elections. Very little has been written about these episodes by

employing the tools of modern social science; this seemed to be fertile ground to till.

Because these hung speakership contests, upon first glance, seemed to share some of the structure of modern parliamentary politics, it was natural to jump in, armed with modern theories of social science, to explain their dynamics. At the very least, they seemed like classic examples of chaotic decision making under pure majority rule, which was the setting in which they occurred. It also seemed likely that these episodes should share qualities with bargaining over portfolios in parliamentary systems, and thus would be ripe to explain in light of work by Michael Laver and Kenneth Shepsle (1990, 1994, 1996).

However, as we delved deeper into the stories of speakership battles, we discovered other things. Some were even more interesting than the speakership battles that had initially drawn us to the project. But even within the confines of telling how Speakers were elected before the Civil War, it became obvious that we would also have to understand how elections for other House officers, such as the Clerk and the Printer, proceeded during the same era. One reason is that in trying to understand why the House moved from voting for Speakers by using a secret ballot to using *viva voce* (public) voting in 1839, we had to first understand parallel fights that erupted over electing the Printer. That was our first indication that the antebellum speakership was just part of an intricate puzzle related to the organization of the House. We could not tell the story of electing Speakers without also telling the intertwining story of electing Clerks and Printers.

We later came to realize that the larger puzzle of officer elections was interesting because party leaders used these elections in the service of party building. Therefore, we concluded that in order to frame these antebellum elections, we had to expand our conceptual reach and move beyond the inward-looking theories of legislative coalition building in order to incorporate more outward-looking theories about the construction of mass political parties.

In time we discovered that the antebellum speakership was part of a *matryoshka* nesting doll. As conceived by Martin Van Buren and other architects of the Second Party System, the Speaker, Printer, and Clerk should nest inside a larger congressional party apparatus, with committees nesting inside the Speaker. In addition, the congressional party apparatus should nest within a larger national party organization. The outermost doll should be the president of the United States.

Thus, this project first expanded because it had to link the internal organizational politics of the House with the nationwide political ambitions of party leaders. However, once we had gained some control over the antebellum organizational politics of the House, we then discovered that ending the story at the Civil War was like washing your face after a week of hiking the Appalachian Trail and not taking a shower—something seemed incomplete.

The incompleteness came in recognizing that the organization of the House during the Civil War Congresses marked an inflection point in the history of the chamber. That is, with the election of Schuyler Colfax as Speaker in 1865, the House settled into a pattern of electing House officers that was essentially the same as today. As a result of this recognition, we anticipated dashing off a final chapter that quickly dealt with organizational politics of the House from then to the present. However, we quickly encountered two roadblocks to the swift completion of this task.

First, after reading newspaper accounts of the caucus meetings that nominated Speaker candidates after 1865, we came to realize that protracted struggles over the speakership did not end in 1865—they were only relocated to the caucuses. So this only pushed our antebellum research into a new location. The story was not over. Second, as we started to account for nomination politics after the Civil War, we recognized that our story intersected in profound ways with the advent of the “Reed Rules” and with the model of legislative organization that Cox and McCubbins have used to demonstrate the logic and power of Reed’s system. It was clear to us that the question of “why Reed and not an earlier Speaker” could best be answered by saying, “earlier Speakers could not count on controlling the floor and the committees, which is necessary for his system to work.” This, in turn, required us to consider, what was this thing that Reed relied on?

Our answer, the organizational cartel, became the conceptual framework upon which it was logical to hang the complete narrative. This required a return to the complete narrative, so that the story that progresses from Muhlenberg to Boehner can be told in light of this new framing device.

Despite the fact that this book has taken more than a decade to complete, we could have spent an equal amount of time exploring the questions that our analysis raises about the Senate, the American party system, state legislatures, parliaments in a comparative context, and, indeed, all legislatures in general. We have put down some markers about these topics in chapter 10, but for the sake of everyone involved, we have decided to declare victory and withdraw. Those other questions will occupy some of our time in the future. We especially hope it will occupy the time of many other scholars in the future, including those who believe our framing device is nonsense. Our legacy, we hope, will be that scholars and other observers of legislative politics will no longer take the organization of the House of Representatives—nor of any other legislature at any level of government—for granted.

A project this big accumulates debts along the way. It is traditional to acknowledge these debts in the preface. We do so here with trepidation that we have left someone out. Among the research assistants who have contributed to this effort are Deborah Dryer, Donald Gordon, and Stephen Douglas Windsor. This project has been aided by funding from the Dirksen Center; the Dean of Humanities, Arts, and Social Sciences at MIT; the Workshop in Politics, Economics, and Law at the University of Virginia; and the Kenan

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As our writing was drawing to a close, eight individuals provided invaluable feedback that helped us further focus the manuscript and see the bigger picture. John Aldrich, Richard Bensel, Charles Kromkowski, and Nolan McCarty graciously agreed to meet with us for two days in Charlottesville, Virginia, in the summer of 2009, to help tear apart the first completed manuscript. We benefited immeasurably from their counsel, although they will recognize that we did not always take their advice. (We did take a lot of it, however.) Shortly thereafter, Michael Holt and David Mayhew furnished us with extensive comments that, among other things, helped us get the history right at various points in our narrative. Finally, once the manuscript was 99.44 percent complete, two anonymous reviewers provided us with a set of detailed, thoughtful comments that forced us to sharpen our theoretical argument and better emphasize the role of the organizational cartel in the House's political development.

We wish we could say that with the completion of this volume, we are now able to devote more time to our patient families, who have had to put up with our late nights of working on this manuscript. Alas, as with most rewarding research projects, we find there is now more to do, not less. Still, we could not have completed this book without the support and forbearance of our spouses, Lisa Milligan and Kathy Hess. We thank them from the bottom of our hearts.