In summer 2011, Washington, DC, and financial markets around the world become consumed with talk of the United States government reaching its debt ceiling, which would force the government to default on several of its loans. By June 1, 2011, members of Congress had introduced 131 different pieces of legislation to address the budget deficit or debt. Some efforts were taken more seriously than others. In the spring and early summer, most attention was focused on the Senate’s Gang of Six, an informal bipartisan group who offered the most comprehensive attempt at a solution.

Between June 1 and July 15, members introduced an additional forty pieces of legislation to address the impending crisis. As time dragged on, it became clear that a solution was not likely to rise up through the rank and file members or even through the normal committee process, so party leaders in Congress became increasingly involved. At first, the leaders picked representatives to meet with Vice President Joe Biden to hammer out an agreement. When the talks broke down in late June, the responsibility for avoiding default ultimately fell on President Barack Obama and Speaker John Boehner (R-Ohio). They negotiated the details of an agreement to raise the federal
debt ceiling and cut spending in a series of high-level talks with very limited participants. Congressional leaders met with their respective party memberships, but these sessions were more informational and designed to make these members feel as if their input was being acknowledged. Indeed, one proposed measure had to be removed from House floor consideration close to the scheduled vote because Republican leaders had not convinced enough of their members to support the bill. Few of the committees that deal with tax and spending matters were involved in the process of crafting the final deal; instead, Speaker Boehner, Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid (D-Nev.) and Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell (R-Ky.) were the primary legislative players in reaching an agreement.

Little time existed between when the final agreement was reached on July 31, 2011, and when default would take effect. The normal legislative process needed to be accelerated to pass the legislation. The rule governing floor debate in the House provided for no amendments and only allowed for an hour of debate. On the following day, the Senate approved the agreement and the president signed it into law. In less than two days, the agreement became law.

The 2011 debt-ceiling story vividly shows the growing importance of party leaders in the contemporary Congress. In this chapter, we outline the processes that were at work to make the leaders so powerful vis-à-vis committee chairs and rank-and-file members. In the first part, we describe the goals of congressional parties. In the second part, we show the conditions that fostered the growth of the party leaders’ powers. In the third section, we outline these powers before concluding in the final section.

**Party Goals in Congress**

With 535 individuals representing the far corners of the American map, predicting congressional action is a tricky business. Political scientists have utilized two features of Congress to make the task more manageable. First, the Constitution dictates and the chambers have developed rules, structures, and institutions that prescribe a more systematic pattern. Second, Richard Fenno (1973) and David Mayhew (1974) have provided analytic leverage for predicting legislative outcomes by outlining the goals of individual members. Mayhew in particular asserted that the easiest way to understand Congress was by starting with the proposition that members of Congress were
“single-minded seekers of reelection.” Even if they have other concerns, these authors reasoned that members of Congress need to secure reelection before even addressing their other goals of passing good public policy and gaining prestige within the institution.

Mayhew and Fenno were developing these arguments as the political parties in Congress were an ideological mess. Most analyses of party polarization in Congress suggest that the parties of the early 1970s were less distinct than at any time since Reconstruction and, quite likely, years before (McCarty, Poole, and Rosenthal 2006; Sinclair 2006; Theriault 2008). While George Wallace’s quip that “there wasn’t a dime’s worth of difference between the parties” was a bit of an exaggeration, the divide between the parties less than thirty years later would reveal more veracity behind the claim than the parties he was criticizing would have thought possible at the time. As the time since Wallace made his famous remark has passed, members’ individual goals are now most easily satisfied through their political parties. In fact, Rohde and Aldrich (2010) advocate a fourth goal to Fenno’s list: being a member of the majority party.

We think it’s helpful to not only appreciate these member goals, but to develop goals for political parties in hopes of understanding the actions that Congress takes and the structures—both formal and informal—it implements. In this section, we outline two goals that the political parties in Congress have: solving public policy problems and achieving majority status.

**Solving Public Policy Problems**

Fenno develops his argument for members’ goals in the beginning of a book that analyzes the congressional committee system. At the time, his focus made sense. In order to pass good public policies, members needed to work through their committees to develop solutions that would then be presented to the floor. Gaining prestige within the institution during that period implicitly meant becoming a committee leader. If members succeeded in climbing the rungs of the committee system ladder, they could both exercise their influence and achieve good policy. Both actions would presumably help them secure their reelection.

In the years after Mayhew’s and Fenno’s seminal studies, members passed a number of reforms that ultimately struck at the core of the committee-based problem solving structure (Shepsle 1978; Sinclair 2002). First, full committees
were mandated to share their staffing and lawmaking powers with subcommittees. Second, the Speaker was given the right to refer bills to multiple committees, which forced committees to either act on legislation or give up their right to affect it. Third, committee leaders were prohibited from exercising the proxies of their fellow committee members who were not in the room at the time of committee votes. Fourth, party leaders established task forces to insure action on particular issues. And, finally, the committee leaders became subject to appointment by the party leaders.

Party leadership was either the repository of the power relinquished by committees as a result of these reforms or it was the cause of the reforms themselves. Regardless of the path chosen, parties are now the primary avenue by which members expect to fulfill their goal of passing good public policy. While committee or member initiatives still play an important role in the process, Congress, in addressing public policy problems, frequently chooses from two alternatives—the Democrats’ proposed solution and the Republicans’ proposed solution. These alternatives and the institution’s track record of adopting them are woven into the parties’ reputations that become the currency of elections.

At the broader level, Congress as a body often finds itself unable to ignore particular policy problems. The volume and complexity of national issues has increased over time, leading to increased demands from constituents to pursue more of these issues (Smith 1989). Many government programs are authorized only temporarily, so that committees and the floor take up these issues on a recurring basis (Dodd and Schott 1979; Hall 2004). Party leaders thus must regularly find space for these issues in their chamber’s agenda and the relative costs and benefits of these temporary authorizations are not always predictable (Cox 2004).

Achieving Majority Party Status

The development of party platforms, their contestation during elections and their implementation are the means by which voters cast their ballots in congressional elections (Kiewiet and McCubbins 1991). The economic, military, and social conditions of the country also cast a significant shadow on those contests (Hibbing and Alford 1981; Stimson 2004), as does the record of the majority party in running the institution (Parker and Davidson 1979; Patterson and Magleby 1992). As the victors of individual seats accumulate on election day, a majority party is determined.
Obtaining majority status, of course, is only the first step toward maintaining it. In addition to the conditions beyond their control, majority parties are evaluated on their stewardship of Congress. Elections do not determine which specific policies will become law, but rather serve as opportunities to approve or reject political leaders (Weissberg 1976). Citizens often are asked whether they have confidence in congressional leaders (Lipset and Schneider 1983; Patterson and Caldeira 1990; Patterson and Magleby 1992). Other studies have asked respondents to evaluate the “management of the legislative environment” (Parker and Davidson 1979) or to compare the contemporary institutional leadership with their predecessors (Davidson and Parker 1972). Public evaluations of Congress may be negative when the majority party is ideologically dissimilar from an individual (Jones and McDermott 2009). This is particularly true as elections have increasingly been decided by national factors beyond district concerns (Hibbing and Alford 1981; Stimson 2004; Erickson and Wright 2005; Jones and McDermott 2009), and evaluations of Congress can in turn predict an individual’s feelings about her own representative (Born 1990).

In addition to facing public judgment, party leaders also are responsible for ensuring that rank-and-file members are satisfied with congressional outcomes, often pulling them in competing directions. Party leaders often make decisions based on building majorities in the short term (Cox and McCubbins 1993; Binder 1996). Such a strategy, however, can create or exacerbate internal party tensions that lead to negative future consequences for leaders (Sinclair 1983).

While the public charges Congress with solving public problems, passing major legislation that addresses these problems does not come without costs. First, research shows that major enactments can actually decrease levels of congressional approval (Durr, Gilmour, and Wolbrecht 1997). The record from the 111th Congress (2009–10) shows that the passage of major bills, including the stimulus package, health-care reform, and financial services overhaul, contributed to the Democrats’ demise in the 2010 elections. Second, passing bills—even those that enjoy popular support—often requires members of the majority party to cast uncomfortable votes. The very nature of American elections means that some members are safer than others, and majority parties sometimes need their most vulnerable members, who represent a majority of constituents from the other party, to cast votes that they would rather not. The danger for both the vulnerable majority party member and
her party leaders is that the public also responds negatively to majorities that do not pass legislation.

The Electoral Conditions for Party Leadership in Congress

The tension between the parties’ dual goals of offering solutions to public policy problems and comprising the chamber’s majority was so great that it prevented the Democratic majority from pursuing an explicit party strategy on many issues for much of the post–New Deal era. As conditions changed, however, the incentives for developing a party strategy inside Congress grew. It is to those conditions that we now turn.

Unified Constituencies

As the United States was recovering from the Great Depression and World War II, the Democrats were forging an electoral coalition—which would come to be known as “the New Deal Coalition”—that included white southerners, union members, Catholics, African Americans, and urban dwellers. In helping to bring about the 1932 realigning election, this coalition became the dominant electoral paradigm that delivered both the White House and Congress to Democrats for much of the next fifty years. Even as the New Deal Coalition began breaking down in presidential contests, it remained unified behind Democrats until the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965 forced such internal tensions within the coalition that the ideological fissures between the disparate groups became increasingly pronounced.

As Lyndon Johnson was winning election as president in 1964, Democrats captured more seats in the House (295) and Senate (68) than they would in any Congress since. As a consequence of their greater than two-to-one majority in both chambers, the Democrats were representing a broadly diverse set of constituencies. In fact, Johnson’s Republican opponent Barry Goldwater received a higher percentage of the two-party vote in states represented by Democrats in the Senate than in states represented by Republicans. Furthermore, Goldwater did less than one percentage point better in Republican representatives’ districts than he did nationwide and approximately four percentage points worse in Democratic representatives’ districts.

The 1966 House elections provided even more puzzling results for the partisanship of the constituencies than the 1964 elections. The Democrats
lost forty-seven seats, but those losses primarily came in the North where Goldwater was trounced; the party remained dominant in the South where Goldwater had performed better. The partisan difference between the Democratic and Republican representatives’ districts became even smaller.

To systematically measure the underlying partisanship of members’ districts and senators’ states, we calculate the Republican presidential vote advantage (RPVA). This statistic, which is sometimes called the normalized vote, measures the difference between the Republican presidential candidate’s two-party vote in the district and the candidate’s nationwide percentage. For example, 2008 Republican presidential candidate John McCain received 67 percent of the vote in Wyoming but only 47 percent of the vote nationwide, making Wyoming’s RPVA 20 percent.

Figure 11.1 shows the underlying partisan tilt of the districts represented by Democrats and Republicans in the House of Representatives since the 89th Congress (1965–66). In the 1960s, Democrats represented districts where, on average, the Republican presidential candidate performed about five percentage points worse than they performed nationwide. Republicans, on the other hand, represented districts where they did about five points better. Within thirty years, both numbers would doubled.

The Senate's data is presented in Figure 11.2. In the two congresses after the Senate passed the Civil Rights Act of 1964, Democratic senators came from more Republican states than did Republican senators. Only since President Bill Clinton's election have the differences between the senators' constituencies varied in a meaningful way.

Over time, the constituencies represented by Republicans and Democrats have become increasingly distinct. In the 112th Congress (2011–12), House Republicans represent districts that are 23 percent more Republican than the districts represented by Democrats. The difference in the Senate is about half as much. Figure 11.3 shows how the partisan differences between the constituencies have changed over time for both the House and Senate.

Political scientists have pointed to a number of reasons why the constituencies represented by Democrats and Republicans are increasingly distinct, including the design and implementation of partisan redistricting plans (Hirsch 2003; Carson, Crespin, Finocchiaro, and Rohde 2007), the geographic sorting of constituents into like-minded neighborhoods (Oppenheimer 2005; Bishop 2008), the ideological sorting that has occurred within parties (Fiorina 2005) and the extremism of party activists (Fiorina 2005; Brady, Han, and Pope...
The disputes between the proponents of these arguments, while illuminating, are immaterial for our purposes in this article—all of these studies agree that the districts are becoming increasingly distinct.

The growing gap between the two major party constituencies not only tell an electoral story, but also can provide clues to an institutional story. If the constituencies that Democrats represent are increasingly distinct from the constituencies that Republicans represent, the members’ decisions to side with their constituents or their parties are increasingly rare. If members’ partisan identification and constituencies’ partisan tilt point in the same direction, so too do their primary voting considerations, thus decreasing the number of difficult votes they face and lessening the tension between the majority party goals (Rohde 1991; Aldrich 1995; and Aldrich and Rohde 2001).

**Intense Party Competition**

As the Democratic and Republican constituencies become increasingly distinct, the margins between the number of Democratic and Republican representatives has become smaller. In the 1964 election, the Democrats had 130 more seats in the House and 30 more seats in the Senate than did the Republicans.
While these margins are particularly large, they are similar to the margins that the Democrats enjoyed as late as the 1970s.

But for two Congresses—the 80th (1947–48) and 83rd (1953–54)—the Democrats were a majority in the House and Senate from 1933 until 1980. With the Democrats safely in the majority representing an ideologically diverse set of constituencies, Republicans understood that the way they could most influence policy making in Congress was to constructively engage the majority. Because Democrats had so many conservative members and because the Republicans had so many moderate-to-liberal members, Republicans frequently found ideological counterparts in the majority party to help work their will. So long as the Republicans did not mind not being chairs of the committees, policy making in Congress did not regularly decay into partisan warfare.

Republicans achieved majority party status at different times in the different chambers. Heading into the 1980 election, most pundits thought the presidential election between the incumbent, Jimmy Carter, and his Republican challenger, Ronald Reagan, would be exceedingly close. No one thought that the Republicans had a prayer of becoming a majority party in either the House or the Senate. From the 89th to the 96th Congresses (1965–1980), the Democrats, on average, held a twenty-seat margin over the Republicans in the Senate. When Americans awoke on the day after the 1980 election, Reagan’s landslide not only delivered him forty-four states in the electoral college but delivered twelve Senate seats to his party, enough to give Republicans a six-seat majority (see Figure 11.4 for the margin size of the majority party in the Senate).

Prior to 1994, the Democrats’ lock on the House had been as great as it was on the Senate before the 1980 election. From the 89th to the 103rd Congress (1965–1994), the Democrats held an average of 263 House seats—an average margin of ninety-one seats. Only a handful of people in the United States thought that the Republicans could win a House majority in 1994 and most of them worked for House Minority Whip Newt Gingrich (R-Ga.). Gingrich’s national strategy—embodied by the Contract with America—paid off as the Democrats went from a majority of eighty-two seats to a minority of twenty-six seats in what became known as the Republican Tsunami of 1994. Figure 11.5 shows the majority party size in the House of Representatives from 1965 to 2012.

Since the Republicans became competitive in each chamber, the majority size for either party has been almost two-thirds smaller in both chambers. In
FIGURE 11.4 Margin Size for the Majority Party in the U.S. Senate, 89th–112th Congresses (1965–2012)

the sixteen congresses since the Republicans became a majority in the Senate (1981–2012), the majority has held, on average, fewer than fifty-four seats. In the nine congresses since the Republicans became a majority in the House (1995–2012), the majority has held an average of 233 seats, a thirty-one-seat majority. With perhaps only the 2008 election as an exception, the future majority party in both chambers of Congress was never in doubt on the day of the election.

While the American electoral landscape may be shrinking over time (Shaw 2006), the stakes have drastically risen for the districts and states that remain in play on election day. This phenomenon not only has consequences for electoral politics, but also for how Congress operates internally. The race for majority party status has frequently eclipsed the desire for Congress to solve real problems. The legislative process and the chamber floors have increasingly become arenas for electoral politics. Congress’s declining approval numbers are only one consequence of this transformation in the legislative process.

**Wave Elections**

Electoral competitiveness breaks down into two periods—though with a different date of demarcation—in both the House and Senate. The three most recent election cycles have been distinct. The 2006, 2008, and 2010 elections are all considered “wave” elections, in which the wind has been at the back of one of the parties—two Democratic waves (2006 and 2008) followed by a Republican wave (2010).

These three elections present a stark contrast to the other elections since 1994. In the 1996–2004 elections, one party or another gained fewer than three seats on average in the Senate and fewer than four seats in the House. In the last three elections, first the Democrats (in 2006 and 2008) and then the Republicans (in 2010) gained, on average, more than six seats in the Senate and thirty-nine seats in the House.

Wave elections are not rare in American politics. Since 1964, nine elections have resulted in a swing of greater than twenty seats in the House and a different set of nine elections resulted in a seat swing of at least five in the Senate. The 2006, 2008, and 2010 elections are unique by their inclusion in both sets of elections and that they are the only elections that happened back-to-back-to-back.

Wave elections are not only interesting electorally, but also for the effect that they have on the internal dynamics of Congress. More so than other types
of elections, waves are typically harder on moderates. Status quo elections may see a moderate Republican beat a moderate Democrat or vice versa, but wave elections see more than a few conservative Republicans beating moderate Democrats or liberal Democrats defeating moderate Republicans. Successive wave elections have decimated moderates in Congress.

The Effects on Congress

The interplay of members’ goals and the conditions under which they operate have fundamentally changed how Congress functions as an institution. In this final section, we describe how polarized the political parties are inside the House and Senate. As members are becoming more ideological, they are also ceding more power to their leaders who are exercising it in a number of different ways (Rohde 1991; Aldrich 1995; Aldrich and Rohde 2001).

Polarized Parties

The 2008 elections brought about the most polarized Congress since at least the early 1900s, and there is nothing in the first year of the 112th Congress (2011–12) that suggests it will be any less so. We analyze DW-NOMINATE data in this section to show how polarized the parties have become. These data, which are generated from all nonconsensual roll-call votes in both the House and the Senate, range from -1 (extreme liberal) to +1 (extreme conservative).

The congresses after the 1964 election and into the 1970s were some of the least polarized in modern history. The mean House Democratic DW-NOMINATE during these congresses, which is depicted as the black line running through the black bars of Figure 11.6, was about 0.5 away from the mean Republican DW-NOMINATE, which is depicted as the black line running through the white bars. The black (white) bars show one standard deviation on either side of the mean for the Democrats (Republicans). Beginning in the mid-1970s, the parties’ means started to separate. The partisan divergence was only slightly less pronounced in the Senate (see Figure 11.7).

By the 111th Congress (2009–10), the divergence between the parties had almost doubled in the House to 0.97 and increased by more than 50 percent to 0.82 in the Senate. Not only have the means separated, but the parties have become much more internally cohesive. The infusion of Tea Party members in the 112th Congress and the Blue Dog Democrat losses in 2010 will likely only exacerbate the divide between the parties. The Blue Dog Coalition, which

FIGURE 11.7 Ideology by Party in the U.S. Senate, 89th–112th Congresses (1965–2012)
was formed during the 104th Congress to increase the visibility of moderate and conservative Democrats, represented 21 percent of the House Democratic Caucus during the 111th Congress, but just 13 percent of House Democrats following the 2010 elections.

**Powerful Leadership**

Congressional party leaders have several ways to manage their twin goals of addressing policy problems and maintaining or achieving majority party status. Over time leaders have gained more authority in assigning members to committees. In the House, this includes the powerful Rules Committee, which sets the terms of floor debate. Senate leaders also have become more involved in managing filibusters and the cloture process, allowing them to manage the floor schedule and exert greater control over who speaks on and who may offer amendments to pending legislation.

**Committee Assignments**

A traditional view of parties in Congress is that they tend to be more important in structuring floor debate than they are within committees (Ripley 1967). Because the majority party leaders in Congress have an interest in showing that the institution is dealing with salient public problems, they are increasingly involved in committee deliberations. Congressional committees are critical in the flow of information in legislatures (Porter 1974; Sabatier and Whiteman 1985). They are where public problems are defined, policy alternatives are first debated, and hearings are held to explore new issues (Sheingate 2006). The congressional committee system allows for multiple points of access for interest groups and experts (Baumgartner and Jones 1993), and allows Congress to engage in parallel processing, whereby multiple issues are dealt with at the same time (Workman, Jones, and Jochim 2009). Furthermore, committees are responsible for “reporting” bills to their parent chambers. If the committee process breaks down or runs counter to the wishes of the party leaders, neither party goal in Congress can be achieved.

One way in which committee agendas can shift and respond to new issues is through changes in membership (Adler 2002). Party leaders have a great deal of authority over the committee assignment process, which has been called a “giant jigsaw puzzle” (Goodwin 1970; Shepsle 1978). Leaders can use committee assignments to reward certain members, bargain with others and strengthen their positions within the party (Masters 1961), though leaders use
this power selectively (Ripley 1967). Former Speaker Nancy Pelosi (D-Calif.) called the 110th Congress’s freshman class her “Majority Makers,” giving them prime committee assignments and legislative responsibilities to the frustration of some more senior Democrats (Leahy 2007).

Party leaders also may use their authority to bypass the seniority system and appoint (or have elected) committee chairs more closely aligned with their goals. Figure 11.8 lists the number of committee chair “seniority violations” from the 104th to the 110th Congresses.

After gaining control of the House in the 104th Congress, the Republican Conference adopted a party rule that seniority would no longer be the sole criterion for naming committee chairs. They also adopted term limits, preventing any member from serving more than three consecutive congresses as chair of a particular standing committee. While seniority is still the primary factor in determining committee chairs, fund-raising and party loyalty are now also taken into account.

The Republicans’ changes were not necessarily new; Democratic majorities have committed seniority violations to ensure that committee chairs worked
to advance collective party interests. Rep. Les Aspin (D-Wis.) successfully challenged House Armed Services Committee Chairman Melvin Price (D-Ill.) in the 99th Congress, gaining control of that committee on promises that he would more vigorously oppose President Ronald Reagan’s defense initiatives (Smith and Deering 1984). More recently, the Democratic Caucus voted in 2008 to replace House Energy and Commerce Committee Chairman John Dingell (D-Mich.) with Pelosi ally Henry Waxman (D-Calif.). Dingell had been the senior Democrat on that committee for three decades, but Waxman was seen as more willing to work with Democratic President-elect Barack Obama on energy legislation (Kane 2008). Still, after the Republican revisions to the committee system, party unity and donations to the party’s congressional campaign funds became the most significant determinants of gaining the nomination to chair a committee (Deering and Wahlbeck 2006; Cann 2008). Parties and party leaders can advance their collective interests through the placement of committee chairs, not just the assignment of rank-and-file members to particular committees.

The Power of Party Leaders during Floor Debates

The House Rules Committee has long been considered a position from which members can increase their levels of prestige within the institution (Fenno 1973). The Rules Committee is responsible for setting the terms of debate in the House, including the length of time a bill will be on the floor, the number of amendments allowed, and which members will be permitted to offer those amendments. Over time, the Rules Committee has become an arm of the Speaker, as a way to fulfill multiple goals and manage the tension between solving problems and serving the needs of party members. Limiting the number of floor amendments allowed on a particular piece of legislation reduces uncertainty for the majority party about what alternatives might be proposed, shapes the chamber’s policy decisions, and reduces the probability of defeat (Bach and Smith 1988).

In response, the minority party has become more creative in responding to the increasing restrictions on their ability to alter legislation on the floor. Even under closed rules (where no floor amendments are allowed), the minority party is traditionally allowed to offer a “motion to recommit” a bill back to committee with the understanding that the committee would then make specific changes to the bill. The motion to recommit has become a vehicle for the minority party to force cross-pressured majority party members into tough
votes. During a March 2007 debate over a bill to grant the District of Columbia greater representation in Congress, the Republican minority offered a motion to recommit that would have added a provision allowing DC residents to own handguns, in opposition to city ordinances. Many conservative Democrats were inclined to vote in favor of the motion, and Democratic party leaders pulled the bill from the floor rather than force their members to vote against the National Rifle Association’s position.

Power in the Senate is more decentralized, and Senate party leaders are traditionally thought to have less control over floor outcomes than their House counterparts. The Senate majority leader, in consultation with the minority leader, has the burden of developing Unanimous Consent Agreements, which act as the Senate’s counterpart to House Rules. As the Senate floor has become less manageable, UCAs have increasingly become intricate agreements between the leaders, specifying even the most minute procedures for establishing the parameters of floor debate (Gold 2008).

As the floor organizers for their parties, the leaders have also taken the primary responsibility for organizing and squashing filibusters. Although filibusters are traditionally viewed as the providence of individual senators whose intensely held preferences or constituent support for a particular position lead them to obstruct the consideration of legislation (Wawro and Schickler 2006), Senate leaders over time have taken a larger role in driving the filibuster-cloture process. Table 11.1 lists the percentage of cloture petitions filed by the Senate majority leader in each congress since 1971. Not only have these figures risen sharply over the past forty years, they likely under-emphasize the majority party’s role in the cloture process because many of the other cloture petitions filed are often done so by the majority whips. In the apparent aberration of the 107th Congress, for example, Democratic Whip Harry Reid filed more cloture petitions (38) than did Democratic Majority Leader Tom Daschle (23). Including Reid’s activity in that congress’s calculation reveals that the majority party leadership initiated 90.1 percent of the cloture petitions during the 107th Congress, in line with the historical trend.

Increased party leader involvement in the filibuster-cloture process serves several purposes. Some senators may be more likely to support the cloture petition out of party loyalty or solidarity with the leadership (Lee 2009). A leadership-driven cloture effort also elevates attention to the issue and potentially the level of support for a proposal. Leaders have an interest in cloture efforts because the majority is interested in enacting its broader legislative
agenda, so initiating a cloture petition allows members to have a better idea of the floor schedule and how many agenda items (and of what variety) the chamber will be able to process at one time.

Filibuster and cloture efforts also are costly to members in terms of time spent gathering supporters, managing the floor effort (either in support of or opposition to a proposal) and whipping votes on either side of the cloture petition. Because party leaders are already expected to undertake these tasks for nonfilibustered legislation and have the staff resources to do so, the costs for leaders to initiate filibuster and cloture efforts are much lower than they are for rank-and-file senators. The continuous communication that typically occurs between Senate party leaders may be used to schedule cloture votes at times convenient for members of both parties. Lowering the cost of filibusters and cloture efforts for rank-and-file senators not only increases the likelihood of support or opposition to a filibuster (Wawro and Schickler 2006; Koger 2010), it also allows other senators to use that time to develop legislation, perform constituent service, or work towards their other goals.

### Table 11.1 Percentage of Cloture Petitions Filed by Senate Majority Leaders

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Congress</th>
<th>Majority Leader</th>
<th>Percentage of Petitions Filed</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>92</td>
<td>Mike Mansfield, D-Mont.</td>
<td>21.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>93</td>
<td>Mike Mansfield, D-Mont.</td>
<td>38.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>94</td>
<td>Mike Mansfield, D-Mont.</td>
<td>23.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>95</td>
<td>Robert C. Byrd, D-W.Va.</td>
<td>87</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>96</td>
<td>Robert C. Byrd, D-W.Va.</td>
<td>86.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>97</td>
<td>Howard H. Baker, Jr., R-Tenn.</td>
<td>54.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>98</td>
<td>Howard H. Baker, Jr., R-Tenn.</td>
<td>70.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>99</td>
<td>Robert Dole, R-Kan.</td>
<td>61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>100</td>
<td>Robert C. Byrd, D-W.Va.</td>
<td>90.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>101</td>
<td>George J. Mitchell, D-Maine</td>
<td>73.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>102</td>
<td>George J. Mitchell, D-Maine</td>
<td>78.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>103</td>
<td>George J. Mitchell, D-Maine</td>
<td>67.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>104</td>
<td>Robert Dole, R-Kan./Trent Lott, R-Miss.</td>
<td>65.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>105</td>
<td>Trent Lott, R-Miss.</td>
<td>52.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>106</td>
<td>Trent Lott, R-Miss.</td>
<td>83.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>107</td>
<td>Trent Lott, R-Miss./Thomas A. Daschle, D-S.D.</td>
<td>40.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>108</td>
<td>William H. Frist, R-Tenn.</td>
<td>71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>109</td>
<td>William H. Frist, R-Tenn.</td>
<td>73.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>110</td>
<td>Harry M. Reid, D-Nev.</td>
<td>88.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>111</td>
<td>Harry M. Reid, D-Nev.</td>
<td>95.6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Source: US Senate 2011.*
that help secure reelection. Increased involvement in the filibuster-cloture process provides yet another way for congressional parties to solve collective action problems for their members (Aldrich 1995).

**Conference Committees and Negotiations Between Chambers**

If the House and Senate pass different versions of the same bill, party leaders in each chamber typically appoint members to a joint conference committee to reconcile those differences and provide a single piece of legislation to be voted on (subject to chamber approval of a motion to appoint conferees). The only restriction on these appointments is that a majority of conference committee members must generally support the bill under consideration, and as such most members appointed to conference committees also sit on the original committee of referral. Committee members can thus use the deference afforded their position and influence over the conference process to shape final legislative outcomes. This power to shape the legislation at the final stage is often more important than a committee’s ability to provide the initial legislative proposal considered on the floor (Shepsle and Weingast 1987). Conferees also often are advocates for their respective chamber’s desired policy over their own personal preferences (Kiewiet and McCubbins 1991), and majority party leaders can use the fact that conference reports are not subject to amendment to achieve outcomes that favor the party instead of a particular committee.

Party leaders also are taking a more direct role in avoiding conference committees altogether by negotiation between the floors of each chamber. The number of public laws that were subject to conference committee negotiations dropped steadily from 13 percent in the 103rd Congress to 5 percent in the 109th Congress. Instead, one chamber will simply adopt the other’s version of a bill, or a bill will be amended by each chamber in turn until a final agreement is reached. This development has decreased the committees’ abilities to shape the final legislation. Engaging in this “ping-pong” strategy also allows majority party leaders to avoid filibusters in the Senate and House motions to instruct conferees, which could potentially advise or require House conferees to adopt certain negotiating positions contrary to the majority’s wishes (Oleszek 2009).

**Other Examples of Legislative Authority**

Party leaders can play a direct role in policy debates by sponsoring high-profile legislation themselves rather than relying on committee chairs or
other members to initiate. During the debate over raising the federal debt ceiling in 2011, Speaker of the House John Boehner took the lead in proposing and negotiating the terms of an agreement with the Senate despite a policy background primarily in education and labor issues (he had previously served as chair of the House Education and Workforce Committee). He did so in part because the House Republicans’ budget proposal authored earlier in the year by Budget Committee chair Paul Ryan (R-Wis.) had been controversial for its spending cuts, particularly to entitlements such as Social Security and Medicare, and had been rejected by a Democratic-controlled Senate.

Boehner experienced difficulty keeping his caucus unified in voting on the debt ceiling legislation. The initial House vote was postponed because Republican leaders could not convince enough of their party’s members to vote in favor of Boehner’s proposal. After finally reaching the 218 votes needed for passage, the bill was again tabled by the Senate. Boehner, Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid, and President Obama finally negotiated the terms of an agreement that received bipartisan support in the House. Despite his initial struggles to keep the Republican caucus unified, Speaker Boehner’s lead role allowed him greater latitude to negotiate with other political leaders and find a solution that would allow the US government to continue operating. Failure to do so likely would have severely damaged the House Republicans’ reputation for effective governance.

Party leaders also can prioritize specific pieces of legislation that address salient issues. Beginning with the 106th Congress (1999–2000), the Speaker of the House has had the authority to assign specific legislation to the bill numbers HR 1–10, and this was later expanded to allow the minority leader to designate legislation to HR 11–20. A similar authority exists in the Senate, though in keeping with that chamber’s character the practice is more informally determined and the number of bills subject to such designation may change from congress to congress. In the 110th Congress, Speaker Pelosi used this authority to mirror her party’s “Six for ’06” electoral platform and prioritized legislation on the 9/11 Commission’s recommendations, raising the minimum wage, stem cell research, and energy policy. When Republicans obtained the majority in the 112th Congress, Speaker Boehner designated legislation that would repeal the major health-care law previously enacted by Democrats, prohibit federal funding for abortion, and limit health-care product-liability lawsuits. Leaders typically do not reserve these important pieces of legislation for themselves. Rather, they aim to highlight committee
leaders or other members to take the lead in these efforts (see Table 11.2 for the sponsors of these reserved numbers from the 106th to the 111th Congresses). Such an exercise of discretion only increases the leaders’ power.

Party leaders in Congress have recently found other avenues for influencing the policy process. In order to further highlight her party’s position on energy policy, Speaker Pelosi created a Select Committee on Energy Independence and Global Warming in 2007. House Energy and Commerce chair John Dingell objected to what he saw as an intrusion on his committee’s jurisdiction, so the select committee was not given any legislative authority; its role was purely advisory. Still, this move allowed Pelosi and the Democratic Caucus to expand the scope of information it received on energy and environment issues, and the House Resolution creating the select committee also called for the standing committees (including Energy and Commerce) to produce energy legislation by a certain date. Because the select committee was authorized in legislation separate from the House Rules that are adopted at the beginning of each congress, Speaker Pelosi was given the authority to name all of the committee’s members, giving her further power to decide who participated in House deliberation and decision making on those issues.

A similar authority arose in the 112th Congress. Legislation enacted in 2011 to raise the federal debt ceiling created a Joint Select Committee on Deficit Reduction that was charged with making formal recommendations on how to reduce the federal deficit by $1.5 trillion over the ensuing ten years. The committee was comprised of three members from each party in each

### Table 11.2 Bills Reserved for the Speaker, 106th–112th Congresses

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Congress</th>
<th>Bills Reserved</th>
<th>Party Leader Sponsor</th>
<th>Committee Chair Sponsor</th>
<th>Rank and File Sponsor</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>106th</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>107th</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>108th</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>109th</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>110th</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>111th</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>112th</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

chamber who were directly appointed by each chamber’s party leaders. As seen in Table 11.3, the leaders managed to strike a balance between serving the needs of their respective parties and solving the problem of deficit reduction by selecting a mixture of members with leadership ties and committee chairs and members with experience processing finance and budget issues.

### TABLE 11.3 Balance Between Party and Expertise on the Joint Select Deficit Reduction Committee

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Member</th>
<th>Relevant Position, 112th Congress</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>House</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Republicans</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Co-chair Jeb Hensarling, R-Texas</td>
<td>House Republican Conference Chairman</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dave Camp, R-Mich.</td>
<td>House Ways and Means Committee Chairman</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fred Upton, R-Mich.</td>
<td>Joint Taxation Committee Chairman</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Democrats</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rep. James Clyburn, D-S.C.</td>
<td>Assistant House Democratic Leader</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rep. Xavier Becerra, D-Calif.</td>
<td>Vice Chair, House Democratic Caucus</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rep. Chris Van Hollen, D-Md.</td>
<td>Member, House Ways and Means Committee</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Senate</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Democrats</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Co-chair Patty Murray, D-Wash.</td>
<td>Senate Democratic Conference Secretary</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Max Baucus, D-Mont.</td>
<td>Chair, Democratic Senate Campaign Committee</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>John Kerry, D-Mass.</td>
<td>Member, Senate Budget Committee</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Republicans</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jon Kyl, R-Ariz.</td>
<td>Senate Republican Whip</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rob Portman, R-Ohio</td>
<td>Member, Senate Finance Committee</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pat Toomey, R-Pa.</td>
<td>Member, Senate Budget Committee</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Served in Office of Management and Budget under President Ronald Reagan</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Former chair, Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Fund-Raising

Party leaders are assuming a larger role in raising money for congressional campaigns. As individuals they tend to be prolific fund-raisers, but because they also tend to be electorally safe, their fund-raising prowess is usually on behalf of their more vulnerable colleagues. Increasingly, leadership PACs have been used to distribute money throughout their caucus Table 11.4 lists the amount of money raised by congressional party leaders for their leadership political action committees during the 2010 election cycle, rounded to the nearest ten thousand dollars.

Party leaders also often have institutional prerogatives that allow them to recruit and help elect new members, work to reelect incumbents, and achieve other electoral goals. The chairs of the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee (DCCC) and Democratic Senatorial Campaign Committee (DSCC) serve as members of the party leadership and are directly appointed by the highest ranking party leader in their respective chambers. The National Republican Campaign Committee (NRCC) and the National Republican Senatorial Committee (NRSC) chairs are elected by the chamber’s party membership with significant input from party leaders. These committees

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Member</th>
<th>Position</th>
<th>Leadership PAC Receipts (in millions of dollars)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Eric Cantor, R-Va.</td>
<td>House Minority Whip</td>
<td>$4.41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>John Boehner, R-Ohio</td>
<td>House Minority Leader</td>
<td>$3.15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Steny Hoyer, D-Md.</td>
<td>House Majority Leader</td>
<td>$2.81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>James Clyburn, D-S.C.</td>
<td>House Majority Whip</td>
<td>$1.59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jon Kyl, R-Ariz.</td>
<td>Senate Minority Whip</td>
<td>$1.22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nancy Pelosi, D-Calif.</td>
<td>Speaker of the House</td>
<td>$1.21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mitch McConnell, R-Ky.</td>
<td>Senate Minority Leader</td>
<td>$1.17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Harry Reid, D-Nev.</td>
<td>Senate Majority Leader</td>
<td>$1.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pete Sessions, R-Texas</td>
<td>NRCC Chair</td>
<td>$0.99</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>John Cornyn, R-Texas</td>
<td>NRSC Chair</td>
<td>$0.97</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chris Van Hollen, D-Md.</td>
<td>DCCC Chair/Asst to the Speaker</td>
<td>$0.92</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bob Menendez, D-N.J.</td>
<td>DSCC Chair</td>
<td>$0.88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dick Durbin, D-Ill.</td>
<td>Senate Majority Whip</td>
<td>$0.56</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Center for Responsive Politics 2011a.
raise a substantial amount of money, which can then be targeted to close and important races, determinations of which also are made by party leaders (see Table 11.5 for the amount of money these campaign committees have spent in each election cycle since 2000).

Heading these committees also can serve as a stepping stone for those who hope to ascend to more powerful positions within their caucus. Both Mitch McConnell (R-Ky.) and Bill Frist (R-Tenn.) served as SRCC chair before being elected to the party’s chamber leadership (majority whip and majority leader, respectively), and Senate Democrats created a special leadership position for Chuck Schumer (D-N.Y.) once his term as DSCC chair expired (Raju 2010).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Election Cycle</th>
<th>DCCC</th>
<th>NRCC</th>
<th>DSRC</th>
<th>NRSC</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2000</td>
<td>$107</td>
<td>$148</td>
<td>$105</td>
<td>$95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2002</td>
<td>$104</td>
<td>$204</td>
<td>$147</td>
<td>$127</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2004</td>
<td>$93</td>
<td>$186</td>
<td>$88</td>
<td>$79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2006</td>
<td>$141</td>
<td>$178</td>
<td>$122</td>
<td>$90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2008</td>
<td>$177</td>
<td>$118</td>
<td>$163</td>
<td>$94</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2010</td>
<td>$164</td>
<td>$132</td>
<td>$129</td>
<td>$68</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Center for Responsive Politics 2011b.

**Conclusion**

In the 1950s, the American Political Science Association (1950), in entering the real world of politics, bemoaned the lack of internal coherence and consistency within the congressional political parties. The voters, the report argued, did not have clear choices when they cast their ballots and, as a consequence, could not hold their members or the institution of Congress accountable for the decisions that they made. Stronger parties would clarify the elections and make democracy function more smoothly in the United States.

What the report asked for became reality (Sinclair 2002). The role of parties inside Congress has grown tremendously since the 1950s and nothing in the current Congress or in the conditions outside Congress suggests that that trend will change in the short term. As the districts and states represented by the respective parties have become more homogenous and as the wave elections have
drowned a disproportionate number of moderates, party leaders have grown ever more powerful, which helps them simultaneously pursue the party goals of addressing public problems and achieving majority status. The close margins that currently divide majority parties from minority parties only exacerbate this cycle. The end result is party polarization and a transformation of the legislative arena into an electoral battlefield.

The American public now has coherent parties and they have rendered their verdict—an abysmal approval rating for Congress. How Congress sorts itself out as it tries to resurrect its sagging numbers remains unclear. What is clear is that the party leadership will play an instrumental role in either raising the public’s affection for Congress or driving the final nails in the coffin of an institution in disrepute.

References


Brady, David W., Hahrie Han, and Jeremy C. Pope. 2007. “Primary Elections and Candidate Ideology: Out of Step with the Primary Electorate?” Legislative Studies Quarterly 32, 1: 79–106.


References

Endnote


Endnote

1. Poole and Rosenthal (1997) generate these data so that they are comparable across congresses within party systems. More care should be used in comparing these scores across chambers.