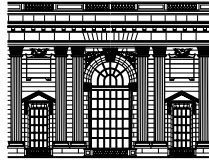


CHAPTER ONE



Northwest corner of the Russell Senate Office Building, long-time residence of the Republican Policy Committee.

Why the Policy Committee Was Created



[Historical antecedents of the Policy Committee from the Committee on the Order of Business of the nineteenth century to the Steering Committee formed in 1944. The impact of the Legislative Reorganization Act of 1946, and the role of Senator Robert A. Taft.]

“**T**here is no unity of command in Congress today,” concluded the Joint Committee on the Organization of Congress in 1946. “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.” As a solution, the Joint Committee proposed creating majority and minority policy committees in both houses of Congress. Although the House of Representatives that year rejected the proposal, the Senate embraced the idea and passed it as separate legislation applying only to itself.¹



Senator William B. Allison (R-IA)

The Senate modeled its policy committees after the Republican Steering Committee, which dated back to the late nineteenth century. After the Civil War, Republican senators, as the majority party, had sought a more orderly method of scheduling floor actions. In 1874, they created a Committee on the Order of Business—popularly known as the Steering Committee. During these early years, the Steering Committee assisted the Conference by drawing up a broad outline of business for the session and by scheduling the

weekly legislative agenda. At first, Republican Conference chairmen also chaired the Steering Committee. Iowa Senator William Allison, who chaired both the Conference and the Steering Committee from 1897 to 1901 and again from 1904 to 1906, requested all standing committee chairmen to list bills that warranted floor action and then evaluated their replies. The Steering Committee then informed the Conference which bills would be taken up in what order, often with recommendations on policy decisions for the party.²

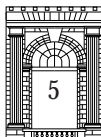
As the dominant political party from the Civil War through the Roaring Twenties, Republicans had elected presidents in fourteen out of eighteen elections and held the majority in the Senate in thirty out of thirty-six congresses. But having earned credit for the prosperity of the 1920s, the party took the blame for the Depression of the 1930s. The election of 1936 reduced Republican ranks in the Senate to their nadir, leaving only 16 Republicans to face 76 Democrats. Over the next decade, the party steadily rebounded until it achieved a Senate majority of fifty-one to forty-five in 1947.

Throughout the New Deal and most of the Second World War, Oregon Senator Charles L. McNary had served as Senate Republican leader. With his party's diminished ranks and his own aversion to formal organizational structures, McNary suspended the election of an assistant leader or whip, discontinued the Steering Committee, and rarely called meetings of the Conference.

Revival of the Steering Committee in 1944

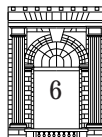
The death of Minority Leader McNary in February 1944 precipitated a revival of the Steering Committee. The Republican Conference reorganized and elected new leaders and reconstituted the committee with nine members, including the chairman of the Conference, the floor leader, and whip as ex officio and six other senators appointed by the chairman of the Conference and voted upon by the Conference. Robert Alphonso Taft of Ohio, already recognized as the de facto Republican leader of the Senate, was elected Steering Committee chairman. Taft had come to the Senate in 1939 and quickly gained a reputation as a brilliant legislative tactician. Thoughtful, diligent, and partisan to the core, Taft disapproved of presidential dominance over the legislative process during the New Deal years and saw the Steering Committee as the best tool for restoring Congress' ability to set the agenda. Taft also wanted to rebuild a conservative majority to dismantle President Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal and prevent new liberal initiatives.³

Taft was a firm believer in preparation and expertise, and had ambitious intentions for the Steering Committee. To staff the committee, he made use of a resolution that had been enacted in 1941, when the United States had entered the Second World War, providing research assistants to the majority and minority leaders. The majority leader, Senator Alben Barkley, had paid his secretary with the funds allocated for a research assistant, while the minority leader, Senator McNary, had never filled the post.⁴ In April 1944, Taft hired George H.E. Smith, a lawyer and economic research fellow at Yale, giving him the title of secretary of the





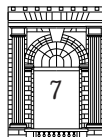
Senator Robert A. Taft (R-OH)



Steering Committee of the Senate Republican Conference. Smith was charged with developing a coordinated and “affirmative” Republican legislative policy for the postwar years. “For twelve years the Party has been on the defensive,” Smith argued. “The Party ought to be done with . . . playing second fiddle to somebody else’s tune. Especially when that tune (the New Deal’s) has become so sour.” Smith promised a Steering Committee that would promote teamwork among Senate Republicans, “so that every speech, every bill, every parliamentary tactic, and every opening in the New Deal armor will be exploited to the full.”⁵

Smith recorded the first minutes of a Steering Committee meeting on Friday, April 28, 1944. At that meeting, Steering Committee members discussed tactics and strategies for the session and heard a word of caution from the floor leader, Senator Wallace H. White, Jr., who commented that he was opposed to taking party positions “unless he had the votes to make his position effective.” During its first year of renewed operations, the Steering Committee invited all Republican senators to attend to discuss general legislative problems and also set up joint discussions with Republican leaders in the House of Representatives. Similarly, the Steering Committee met with representatives of the Republican Senatorial Campaign Committee, to coordinate efforts for the 1946 campaign. A review of the first year’s activities led the committee to extend George Smith’s position for another two years and authorize him to hire two additional research assistants.⁶

Once a week, summoned by formal notices, the Steering Committee met in the Republican Conference room in the Senate Office Building (later named the Russell Senate Office Building), to consider the legislative program before the Senate and determine whether any party positions were involved. It prepared recommendations for action by the Conference, and advised Republican senators on legislative matters. Its staff conducted research, prepared studies, reports, speeches, bills, resolutions, and related memoranda for Republicans on committees or as individuals. Initially, the staff worked out of a corner of the Minority Conference room in the Senate Office Building. Since the Military



Affairs Committee also used the room for hearings, the Steering Committee staff often had to sit in the hall until the hearings adjourned.⁷

At Senator Taft's suggestion, the Steering Committee contacted the ranking Republican on every Senate committee encouraging these senators to assume prime responsibility for measures before their committees,

At Senator Taft's suggestion, the Steering Committee contacted the ranking Republican on every Senate committee encouraging these senators to keep the Steering Committee informed of developments that required party attention.

both in committee and on the floor, and to keep the Steering Committee informed of developments that required party attention. "If you contemplate any legislation (other than local and private bills), I should be greatly obliged if you would communicate your interest to me or to Mr.

George H.E. Smith, Secretary of the Steering Committee, whom you will find at all times in the Minority Conference Room," Senator Taft wrote. "Mr. Smith is prepared either to afford research assistance himself or, if the work becomes too heavy, to arrange for research by the Republican National Committee or other organizations which are interested in the particular subject."⁸

The Steering Committee sought to help Republican senators become better informed on pending issues. George Smith arranged for a series of evening meetings that some referred to as a "night school" for senators. When an international meeting was held at Bretton Woods, New Hampshire, in July 1944, to create the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, Smith arranged to have speakers argue for and against the proposals. However, Republicans took no party position on the Bretton Woods agreement. "Every Senator is free to do what he pleases," Smith explained. "We are for some things and against other things and not the same men are for the same things, and so on. Party agreement on principles is a very difficult thing to secure."⁹





Senators (left to right) Robert A. Taft (R-OH), Everett M. Dirksen (R-IL), and Kenneth S. Wherry (R-NE).

Impact of the Legislative Reorganization Act of 1946

During the Seventy-ninth Congress, from 1945 to 1946, the Steering Committee filtered items of business for the Conference. It also considered when it might be advisable to poll all Republican senators “as a guide to the Steering Committee.” Seeing a need to define party policy, Senator Taft outlined key measures that the Senate faced during that Congress and, as the minutes noted, he “concluded by discussing the possibility of formulating a rounded Republican program in the broad field of social welfare.” Taft believed that Senate Republicans could develop alternative health, education and social welfare programs that would be more cost-conscious than the Truman administration’s proposals and would allow a postwar tax cut.¹⁰

The Second World War had seriously increased the legislative workload. During the war, Illinois Representative Everett Dirksen delivered an address on “What Is Wrong With Congress?” which was reprinted widely between 1943 and 1945. Dirksen proposed a major congressional reorganization, an idea embraced by members of both parties. In 1945, the Joint Committee on the Organization of Congress was established and chaired by a Progressive Republican, Senator Robert M. La Follette, Jr., of Wisconsin. The following year, La Follette’s committee proposed reducing the number of standing committees and tightening their areas of jurisdiction, providing professional staff for committees and additional staff for members, and expanding the Legislative Reference Service (forerunner of the Congressional Research Service).¹¹

The Joint Committee recommended that the Senate and House establish policy committees for each party, with federally funded staffs. This idea had several authors. In 1943, the political scientist Roland Young had called the party conferences ineffective in determining policy because “most Members of Congress prefer to be free agents.” Young proposed “legislative cabinets” composed of all House and Senate committee chair-

men, who would meet periodically to develop a coordinated program of legislation. Young’s recommendations were seconded by George B. Galloway, staff director of the Joint Committee, who envisioned a joint “central committee of Congress.” But Robert Heller, a Cleveland-based management

consultant, warned that a joint policy committee would be too large, would not work when the two houses were controlled by different parties, and would “violate the bicameral principle.” Heller instead recommended that each house establish its own majority and minority policy committees to coordinate the work of the standing committees, communicate

Taft believed that Senate Republicans could develop alternative health, education and social welfare programs that would be more cost-conscious than the Truman administration’s proposals and would allow a postwar tax cut.

Senate Version of the Legislative Reorganization Act of 1946

S. 2177

79th Congress, 2nd session

Majority and Minority Policy Committees

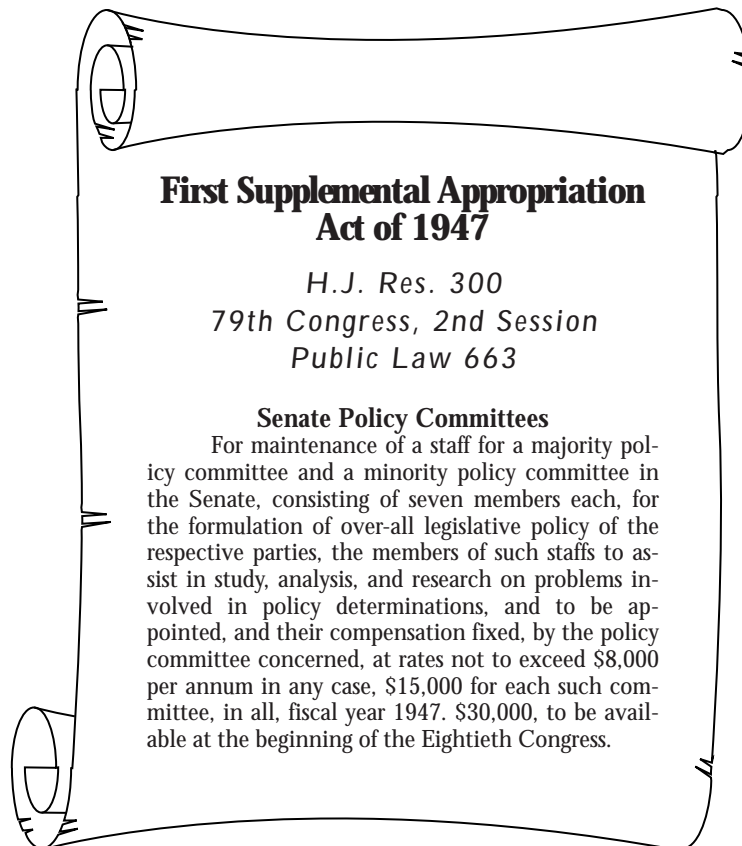
Sec. 244. (a) It is the sense of the Senate and the House of Representatives that the majority party and the principal minority party in the respective Houses should each at the beginning of each Congress appoint a policy committee, consisting of seven members, for the formulation of over-all legislative policy of the respective parties.

(b) There is hereby authorized to be appropriated annually for each policy committee the sum of \$30,000, for the maintenance of a staff to assist in study, analysis, and research on problems involved in policy determinations. The members of each staff shall be appointed, and their compensation fixed, by the policy committee concerned; but no such compensation shall be fixed at a rate in excess of \$8,000 per annum.

Joint Legislative-Executive Council

Sec. 245. In order to promote mutual understanding and harmony between the legislative and executive branches of the Government, the majority policy committees when established shall serve also on a formal council to meet at regular intervals with the Executive and with such members of his Cabinet as may be desirable, to consult and collaborate in the formulation and carrying out of national policy; and, from time to time, the minority policy committees shall be included in such joint conferences on broad questions of foreign and domestic policy.

regularly with the president, and “provide a focus for party responsibility and accountability.” Accepting these recommendations, members of the Joint Committee agreed that policy committees could “formulate the over-all legislative policy of the respective parties,” and “promote better teamwork.” In addition, the Joint Committee recommended that the policy committees meet regularly with the president and cabinet members as a “joint legislative-executive council” to avoid “those periodic deadlocks” between the executive and legislative branches and to formulate national policy.¹²





Drawing by Clifford K. Berryman, July 28, 1946, US Senate Collection, Center for Legislative Archives.

The Senate-passed version of the Legislative Reorganization Act contained both the policy committees and a “legislative-executive council.” However, Speaker of the House Sam Rayburn saw the policy committees as potentially diminishing his authority. At Rayburn’s insistence, the House dropped those provisions from the Reorganization Act. The Senate then amended a supplemental appropriations bill to create policy committees in the Senate alone. President Truman signed that appropriations bill into law on August 8, 1946, after Congress had adjourned.¹³

The 1946 Elections: Republicans Win Majorities in the Senate and House

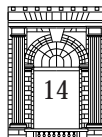
Campaigning in 1946 under the slogan: “Had Enough?” Republicans won majorities in both the Senate and the House for the first time since the onset of Franklin D. Roosevelt’s New Deal. As Republican senators returned to Washington after the election to prepare for the forthcoming Eightieth Congress, the Republican Steering Committee met for three days in mid-November to consider party organization, patronage, office

On December 30, 1946, the Republican Conference formally designated its Steering Committee to become the Majority Policy Committee.

space, and the future legislative agenda. The Steering Committee prepared a party agenda, and its members also met jointly with the House Republican leadership to discuss the party’s program in the next Congress. Finally, on

December 30, 1946, the Republican Conference formally designated its Steering Committee to become the Majority Policy Committee. However, the Conference did not amend its rules to change the number of members. Membership on the new Policy Committee therefore carried over at nine, despite the statute’s provision for a seven-member committee.¹⁴

When newspaper accounts implied that the new Policy Committee was determining policy for the incoming majority, the Republican Conference chairman, Senator Arthur Vandenberg, assured Republican senators that the Policy Committee had reached no decisions and that all subjects remained open for discussion and determination in the Conference. All that the Policy Committee had done, Vandenberg assured them, was “to canvass preliminary suggestions and to arrange preliminary studies in the hope and desire that it may facilitate our labors when we all gather together at the beginning of the new session.” Vandenberg reiterated that “there are no ‘commitments.’ None of us would presume to exercise any such authority which we do not possess.”¹⁵





George James, New York Times

Senators Robert A. Taft (R-OH) and Arthur H. Vandenberg (R-MI).

Most observers agreed that during the two years preceding the November 1946 elections, the Republican Steering Committee had contributed to the party's victory at the polls and had enhanced the standing of its chairman, Robert Taft. Senator Taft's biographer, James Patterson, commented that the committee reflected the senator's "faith in expertise" and noted that "Taft himself worked closely with [George] Smith, read most of the reports that formed the basis for position papers, and even corrected personally the minutes of the meetings." Taft determined the agenda of its meetings, outlined the reports that his staff had prepared, and encouraged senators to take on specific tasks, to build party discipline and readiness. But Taft's leadership ultimately stemmed from his willingness to tackle problems that others wished to avoid. Senate

Parliamentarian Floyd Riddick once asked George Smith what had brought Taft to the forefront of his party. “If I had to answer it in a few words,” Smith replied, “I’d say: ‘Let Bob do it.’” Whenever the Steering Committee had discussed an issue or procedure, Taft went around the table in search of a senator willing to undertake the assignment. After everyone else declined, Taft would take on the task himself. Eventually, it became commonplace to say: “Let Bob do it.” As the Republican Eightieth Congress opened, Senator Taft, through his studiousness, energy, and intellectual capacity, would lead his party in the Senate, not as majority leader but as chairman of the Policy Committee.¹⁶

Notes

¹ Special Committee on the Organization of Congress, *Legislative Reorganization Act of 1946*, Report No. 1400, 70th Cong., 2nd sess. (1946), 4.

² Steve Neal, “Charles L. McNary: The Quiet Man,” in Richard A. Baker and Roger H. Davidson, eds., *First Among Equals: Outstanding Senate Leaders of the Twentieth Century* (Washington: Congressional Quarterly, 1991), 106–123; Randall P. Ripley, *Power in the Senate* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1969), 37–38; David J. Rothman, *Politics and Power: The United States Senate, 1869–1901* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1966), 17–18, 59.

³ Republican Conference Minutes, January 27, February 18, 24, 1944; Republican Steering Committee Minutes, March 15, 1944, in Republican Conference Records; Robert W. Merry, “Robert A. Taft: A Study in the Accumulation of Legislative Power,” in Baker and Davidson, eds., *First Among Equals*, 171–175.

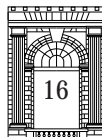
⁴ S. Res. 158, 77th Cong., 1st sess: *Resolved*, That in addition to any other clerical assistance to which each may be entitled, the majority leader and the minority leader of the Senate shall each be entitled to have a research assistant, to be paid at the rate of \$6,000 per annum out of the contingent fund of the Senate until otherwise provided by law.

⁵ George H.E. Smith to Robert A. Taft, April 26, 1943, March 29 and April 4, 1944, Taft Papers, Library of Congress.

⁶ Republican Steering Committee Minutes, April 28, June 3, August 1, August 22, December 11, 1944.

⁷ The Republican Policy Committee also occupied the same rooms in the Russell Building, where it has remained since its creation. “History and Functions of the U.S. Senate Republican Policy Committee,” May 16, 1966, Senate Historical Office files; Smith to Dr. Marjorie Shearon, November 6, 1945, Taft to Harry F. Byrd, November 21, 1945, Taft Papers.

⁸ Republican Policy Committee Minutes, January 8, 1945.



⁹ Joint Committee on the Organization of Congress, *Organization of Congress, Hearings*, March 13–28, 1945, 79th Cong., 1st sess. (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1945), 365.

¹⁰ Republican Policy Committee Minutes, January 3, 27, February 2, July 25, November 2, 1945.

¹¹ Everett M. Dirksen, “Congressman: A Case History Report on How Congress Works and How It Might Be Made to Work Better,” *Fortune* 27 (April 1943), 76–80; Dirksen, “Daily Demands on a Member of Congress,” *Congressional Digest* 24 (August 1945), 205; Robert C. Byrd, *The Senate, 1789–1989: Addresses on the History of the United States Senate*, volume 1 (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1989), 537–546.

¹² Roland Young, *This Is Congress* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1943), 247–259; George B. Galloway, “On Reforming Congress,” in the Special Joint Committee on the Organization of Congress, *The Organization of Congress: Symposium on Congress*, 79th Cong., 1st sess. (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1945), 58–65; Robert Heller, *Strengthening the Congress* (Washington: National Planning Association, 1945), 13–17; *Legislative Reorganization Act of 1946*, Report No. 1400, 4; S. 2177, 79th Cong., 2nd sess., 1946.

¹³ House Republicans later created a House Republican Policy Committee during the 81st Congress. Legislative Reorganization Act of 1946 (S. 2177) (79th Congress, 2nd session, Senate Reports 1011 and 1400, later report modified by S. 2177) (First Supplemental Appropriations Act, fiscal year 1947) H.J. Res. 390.

¹⁴ Republican Steering Committee Minutes, November 14, 15, and 16, 1946; George H.E. Smith, to Robert A. Taft, December 13, 1946, Taft to Smith, December 19, 1946 Taft Papers.

¹⁵ A.H. Vandenberg to Senator Edward V. Robertson, November 19, 1946, Taft Papers.

¹⁶ James T. Patterson, *Mr. Republican: A Biography of Robert A. Taft* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1972), 239, 348–349; Floyd Riddick: *Senate Parliamentarian*, Oral History Interviews, 1978–1979, Senate Historical Office, 235–238; Leverett Saltonstall remarks, *Memorial Services Held in the Rotunda of the Capitol, the Senate, and the House of Representatives of the United States, Together with Remarks Presented in Eulogy of Robert Alphonso Taft, Late a Senator from Ohio* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1954), 47.

