

HISTORY OF THE SENATE

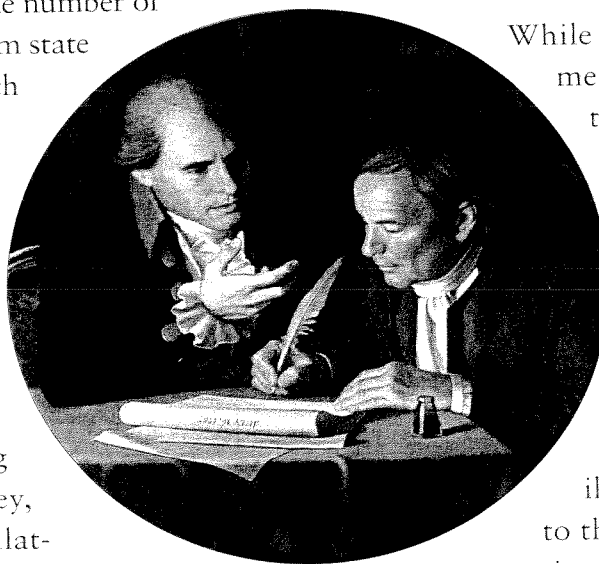


The two houses of Congress resulted from the “Great Compromise of 1787,” also known as the Connecticut Compromise, between large and small states reached at the Constitutional Convention. Membership of the House of Representatives is apportioned according to a state’s population, and the number of representatives varies from state to state. In the Senate each state is equally represented by two senators.

The Constitution assigns the Senate and House equal responsibility for declaring war, maintaining the armed forces, assessing taxes, borrowing money, minting currency, regulating commerce, and making all laws necessary for the operation of the government. The Senate holds exclusive authority to advise and consent on treaties and nominations.

The Constitution requires that senators be at least 30 years of age, citizens of the

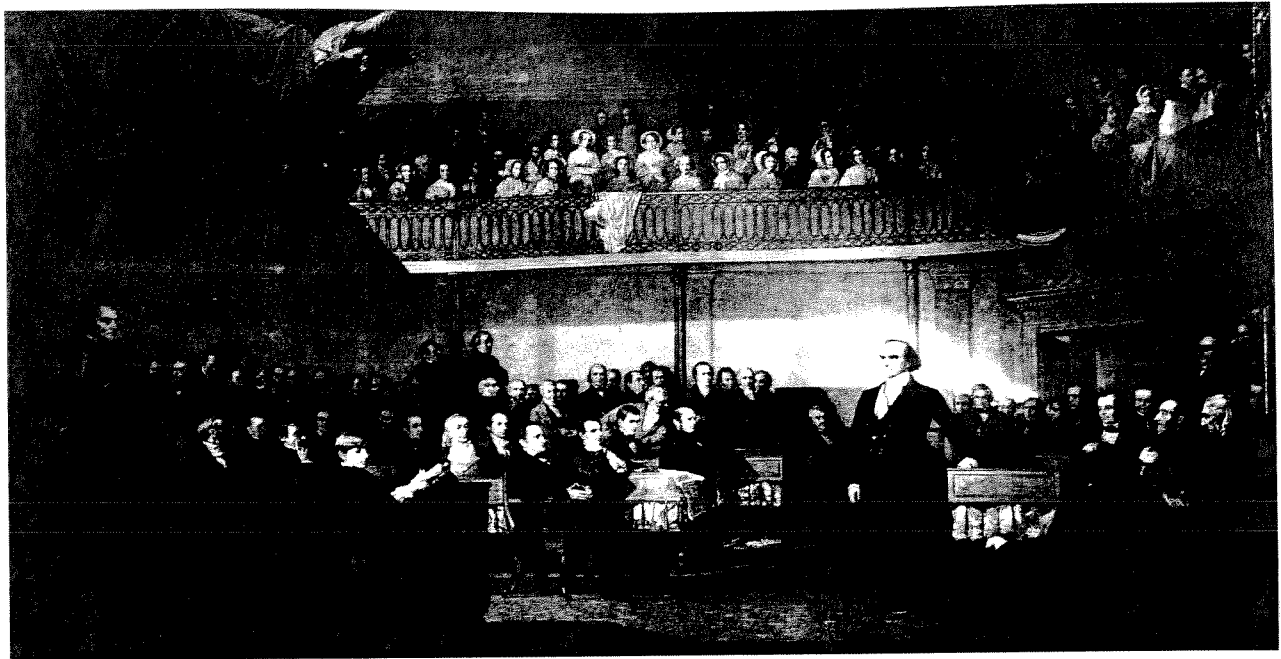
United States, and residents of the states from which they are elected. Originally the Constitution provided that state legislatures would elect senators, but passage of the 17th Amendment in 1913 established direct election of senators by the people.



The Connecticut Compromise,
by Bradley Stevens.

While the House in 1789 immediately opened its doors to the public, the Senate conducted its business in secret session for the first five years while meeting in New York and Philadelphia. Initially, senators expected that they would act primarily as an advisory council to the president and, as a senior body, perfect legislation by amendment that came up from the House. As early as

1789, however, the Senate began originating some legislation, and public pressure soon encouraged the body to construct a visitors’ gallery, which opened in 1795. In 1800, when the federal government moved



Senator Daniel Webster addressing the Senate, January 1830.

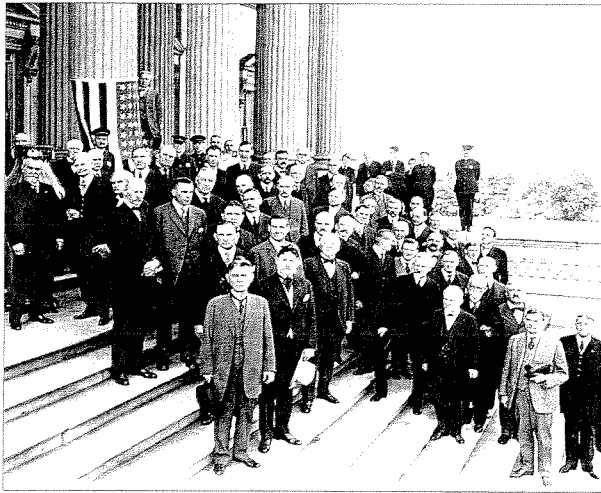
from Philadelphia to the newly created District of Columbia, both the House and Senate Chambers provided public galleries.

By the 1830s, the Senate had attracted the nation's leading political figures and most gifted orators. Daniel Webster, Henry Clay, John C. Calhoun, and other towering figures made the Old Senate Chamber the chief forum for debating the great national issues of the day. The French observer Alexis de Tocqueville described the Senate he visited as a body of "eloquent advocates, distinguished generals, wise magistrates and statesmen of note, whose language would at all times do honor to the most remarkable parliamentary debates in Europe."

From the 1830s to the 1850s, the Senate tackled the issues of federal authority versus states' rights, as well as the spread of slavery into the territories. Valiant efforts to achieve compromise eventually failed, and the nation split apart in a bloody civil war. Southern members resigned from the Senate as their states seceded, and in

1861 the new Republican Party became the majority in the sharply reduced Senate, which had just moved into its spacious new chamber in 1859. Following the war, those senators who favored vigorous reconstruction of the Southern states frequently clashed with President Andrew Johnson, who adopted Abraham Lincoln's more lenient policies. When the conflict culminated in the impeachment trial of President Johnson, held in the Senate Chamber, the president escaped removal from office by a single vote.

A series of weak presidents followed Johnson throughout the remainder of the 19th century, allowing the Senate to become the strongest branch of the federal government. Senators argued that the executive should be subordinate to the legislature, and that the president's only role was to enforce the laws enacted by Congress. By the beginning of the 20th century, the energetic presidencies of Theodore Roosevelt and Woodrow Wilson challenged senatorial dominance, and the balance of power



Senators gather in 1918 during the Treaty of Versailles debate.

shifted toward the White House. Still, the Senate delivered Wilson a major blow at the end of his presidency by rejecting the Treaty of Versailles, which ended World War I and created the League of Nations.

In the depths of the Great Depression of the 1930s, the Senate enthusiastically responded

to President Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal program of recovery, relief, and reform. An unprecedented burst of legislative activity profoundly altered the size, shape, and scope of the federal government.

By 1937, the Senate had broken with President Roosevelt over his proposal to "pack" the Supreme Court, and strong isolationist sentiments limited Roosevelt's international policies. The attack on Pearl Harbor in 1941, however, brought a sudden shift in public opinion, and senators rallied behind the war effort. The slogan that "politics stops at the water's edge" expressed the new spirit of bipartisanship in American foreign policy.

A major turning point in the Senate's history occurred with the passage of the 1946 Legislative Reorganization Act, which reshaped the committee system and



The United States Senate in session, 1940.



Watergate committee hearing, 1973. [L-R] Staff counsel Fred Thompson, Senator Howard Baker (TN), and Chairman Sam Ervin (NC).

provided a more professional staff for senators and committees. The Cold War brought an increase in legislation that resulted in the expansion of the national defense program, foreign aid, and economic and military assistance to America's allies.

During the 1950s the Senate engaged in heated debates over civil rights policies, stimulating lengthy filibusters, but eventually resulting in passage of the landmark Civil Rights Act of 1964 and Voting Rights Act of 1965. The Senate was also divided over American involvement in the war in Vietnam. Although in 1964 senators overwhelmingly approved the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution that authorized the president to repel North Vietnamese attacks, they later disagreed over its application and voted for its repeal. Senate concern over increased presidential powers in foreign affairs led to the passage of the War Powers Act of 1973, requiring congressional

notification and approval whenever American troops are sent into combat.

The Watergate burglary and irregularities of the presidential campaign in 1972 led to a Senate investigation chaired by Senator Sam Ervin of North Carolina. Testimony and evidence gathered by Ervin's committee eventually led to the 1974 resignation of President Richard Nixon. In 1999 the Senate conducted the impeachment trial of President Bill Clinton, ultimately voting not to remove him from office.

In recent years, the Senate has sought to maintain a balance with the president, supporting presidential initiatives while maintaining vigilant oversight of executive branch operations. This is the system of checks and balances the framers of the Constitution had envisioned, which has endured for over 200 years of American representative democracy.