Sam Rayburn and the Rules Committee Change of 1961

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In the last months of the Eisenhower Administration, Sam Rayburn of Texas, Speaker of the House of Representatives, encountered growing opposition to reform legislation. Sometimes called a populist, sometimes a liberal, and sometimes a moderate-regardless of classification, Rayburn in forty-six years of continuous service in the House established a record for positive achievement, but in the Eighty-Sixth Congress, which met in 1959, the Committee on Rules blocked the Democratic legislative program even though the Democrats were in the majority. This opposition to progressive legislation challenged the Speaker’s long record of leadership.

Indeed, Rayburn had an impressive public career. Born in Roane County, Tennessee, on January 6, 1882, he moved to Texas during his youth and received his education at East Texas College at Commerce and The University of Texas Law School at Austin. Taking an early interest in politics, the life-long Democrat was elected to his first of three terms in the Texas House of Representatives in 1907. He rapidly became influential in state politics, as amply demonstrated in 1911 when he was chosen Speaker of the House. He was first elected to the United States Congress in 1913 and was thereafter continually reelected until his death in 1961. He represented the Fourth Congressional District, one that included Collin, Fannin, Grayson, Hunt, Kaufman, Rains, and Rockwall counties. Establishing a reputation as an able legislator, he not only represented the interests of his East Texas constituents, he also gained influence in national Democratic circles. From 1931 to 1937 he chaired the Committee on Interstate and Foreign Commerce. After serving as Majority Leader from 1937 to 1940, he was elected Speaker of the House and held that position until 1947 when the Democratic Party lost control of the chamber. He was Minority Leader from 1947 until 1949, and from 1949 to 1953 he again served as Speaker. From 1953 to 1955 he served as Majority Leader, and in 1955 he was once again elected Speaker, the position he held until his death.

It was during his last term as Speaker that the aforementioned Rules Committee presented Rayburn with one of his greatest “tests.” This committee was the most powerful one in the House. Having original and secondary jurisdiction over the agenda of proposed legislation, it could stop most bills by refusing to advance them for consideration before the House. It could even introduce its own bills. Without it, the House would have had more bills than could have possibly been considered. The primary function of the committee, then, was to prevent needless legislation from reaching the floor, but by using broad powers in 1959 it blocked most bills and thus controlled all legislation.

Previously, when Rayburn’s personal friend Joseph W. Martin was Republican Minority Leader, the Speaker carried out most Democratic programs without great difficulty by compromising with Martin. In the Eighty-sixth Congress, however, Charles A. Halleck replaced Martin as Minority Leader. Halleck immediately established an alliance with Howard W. Smith, the conservative Chairman of the Rules Committee, and these two men successfully obstructed the Speaker’s Democratic program. For Rayburn, the Virginia “Dixiecrat” Smith was a worthy opponent.

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because as Chairman of the Rules Committee he held the power to set its agenda, to schedule witnesses, or even to choose not to convene the Committee. 4

Although the Rules Committee may consist of from five to fifteen members, in the years prior to 1959 its number was set at twelve. Traditionally, the majority party in the House controlled it with an eight to four advantage. 5 Accordingly, the Democratic Party should have dominated it. Yet the Republicans gained control because Chairman Smith and William M. Colmer, "Dixiecrat" from Mississippi, joined the Republican committee men and effectively blocked Democratic legislation. 6 Rayburn tried to use personal influence to counteract this coalition but was unsuccessful. He suffered many failures during the Eisenhower Administration. 7 As a result, the Democratic Party failed to advance its program and almost split trying to break the conservative alliance.

This situation became intolerable to the Speaker during the presidential and congressional campaigns of 1960. The conservative coalition did everything in its power to embarrass Democratic candidates—especially John F. Kennedy, the Party's nominee for President. During this period, Smith and Colmer, voting with Republicans, stopped liberal bills concerning minimum wages, aid to education, and housing. 8 Rayburn and Kennedy duly blamed the conservatives. After the presidential elections of 1960, the Speaker finally decided to react against the obstruction. He believed in Kennedy's New Frontier and realized that to move the program he had to break this conservative hold on legislation. 9 On December 20, 1960 Rayburn met with the President-elect at Palm Springs, Florida, to discuss the problem. Kennedy gave the Speaker his full support as well as assurance that he would not interfere with House business. They decided that Rayburn should take personal control of the situation and handle the problem in his own way. 10

The Speaker considered three alternative actions which might break the coalition on the Committee. First, he might try to get a Twenty-one-Day Rule. But this would let all legislation out of the Committee if the coalition held it longer than three weeks, and as a result, much needless legislation might reach the floor. 11 Consequently, Rayburn decided against the first alternative. Second, the Speaker might attempt to remove a member. Moderate Democratic leaders thought this would be most desirable. Both Representative John A. Blatnik, an influential Democrat from Minnesota, and Vice President-elect Lyndon B. Johnson urged Rayburn to "purge" William M. Colmer. 12 They wanted to keep the problem within the party and a "purge" would accomplish this purpose. Blatnik and Johnson maintained that Rayburn could simply replace Colmer with a moderate or liberal Democrat. 13 The New Frontier would then have a seven to five majority on the committee, and Republican participation regarding the problem could be avoided. The Speaker feared, however, that this course could have dire consequences. Although he had adequate grounds for Colmer's removal—Colmer had opposed Kennedy in the presidential campaign—southerners might have considered such a move an attempt to advance Kennedy's civil rights program. They might have bolted and caused dissension in the party. This Rayburn did not want. Rather, he hoped to unify the Democratic Party and effect good legislation. Accordingly, he decided upon a third alternative; he would move to enlarge the committee. 14 By increasing the membership from twelve to fifteen, the moderates on the Rules Committee would enjoy an eight to seven advantage. Moreover, the enlargement plan was not as harsh as the removal plan. Rayburn knew that moderate and progressive Southern Democrats would favor it as a conciliatory measure, a move that might unite the party.

When the Eighty-seventh Congress convened January 3, 1961, the Speaker could have begun enlargement proceedings, but a struggle then would have created a bad
image of the forthcoming Kennedy Administration, and a defeat would have ruined the New Frontier's chance of success. Rayburn, therefore, refused to commit himself publicly on the first day. He allowed the House to adopt the rules of the Eighty-sixth Congress without challenge. This meant that the resolution to change the Rules Committee would have to have approval from the conservative coalition which controlled it; otherwise, the enlargement proposal would not reach the floor.  

This failure to act on the first day necessitated oblique tactics on Rayburn's part. He pretended he might effect Colmer's removal. The rumor of removal circulating in the country's leading newspapers made excellent psychological warfare. It brought confusion among his opponents. Delay also afforded the Speaker opportunity to amass support, and various factions both in and out of Congress gave him aid. For example, the Democratic Study Group, a unit of about one hundred liberal Democrats, which had organized in 1956 because of the tactical successes of the conservatives, circulated pamphlets identifying the sweeping powers of the Rules Committee and giving alternate proposals for reforms. Also, Richard Bolling, the liberal Democratic leader on the Rules Committee, used his influence to help Rayburn get enlargement-vote pledges. The Speaker—remembering the December, 1960, meeting with Kennedy—asked for the President's assistance and got it; Kennedy and his staff made personal calls on doubtful congressmen. The new administration's control over public works projects, over job patronage, and over committee appointments influenced many. Finally, various organizations throughout the country expressed approval of the Speaker's position. For example, Rayburn received a statement from the Conference on Majority Rule in Congress. This Conference was called to discuss the Rules Committee problem. Of the forty-five organizations participating in the meeting, the most prominent were the AFL-CIO, the American Association of University Women, the National Education Association, and the League of Women Voters. The conference's statement favored a Rules Committee change and concluded that it was the fundamental right of the majority to rule and that the conservative blockade violated this principle.  

Of course, Rayburn's most valuable asset was his own influence. All congressmen, even his opponents, respected "Mr. Speaker." His power rested on friendships made in many years of service. He had extended courtesies to all members of the House; many owed him political favors. And when personal influence failed, Rayburn resorted to his official prerogatives as Speaker of the House, most important of which was the power to influence committee assignments.  

As Rayburn gathered support, new events concerning enlargement occurred in rapid succession. From January 3 to January 11 the Speaker was in constant contact with Smith, and the two men tried to effect a compromise. The Speaker considered maintaining the status quo on the Rules Committee if Smith would promise to give all of the Kennedy's major proposals permission to go to the floor. They reached no agreement, and on January 11 Rayburn publicly announced his support of the enlargement plan. Although many liberals still favored Colmer's removal, and perhaps Smith's also, the Speaker still refused to confront the Southern Democrats directly.  

The final stage for the struggle was set when, on January 24, the Rules Committee gave the enlargement proposal a rule for debate. Because the Republican caucus had voted to oppose Rayburn, Smith did not attempt to stop the resolution. He believed the Republican- Dixiecrat coalition would defeat the Speaker. Moreover, had Smith refused a debate rule, Rayburn could have still effected Colmer's removal. The House scheduled the vote on enlargement for Thursday, January 26. But Rayburn lacked confidence. His personal prestige was at stake, and a defeat would have placed
him and the entire Kennedy Administration at the mercy of the Rules Committee. Fearing defeat, the Speaker appealed to moderate Republicans for support. Then, because he knew Smith and Halleck possibly had enough support to stop the resolution, he postponed the vote until Tuesday, January 31.26

Throughout the struggle the Speaker had had an additional problem. His Texas colleagues in the House reported mail increases from their constituents. Most of the people writing doubted the wisdom of enlarging the Rules Committee.27 Rayburn, however, was sure that these letters, along with the ones he personally received, “were from people who voted for Nixon and were poor losers who still wanted to fight Kennedy.”28 Consequently, in spite of the possibility of losing local support in Texas, Rayburn decided to continue his opposition to the Rules Committee. Fifteen members of the Texas delegation, including Homer Thornberry, a Democrat and a member of the Rules Committee, supported the Speaker while seven opposed.29

During the final week the Speaker’s forces gained support. Smith, now afraid of losing his power base, offered a compromise. He said his committee would permit the five major bills in Kennedy’s program to go before the House, including bills for redevelopment of depressed areas, housing, higher minimum wages, health insurance of the aged, and federal aid to public schools.30 On January 28, Rayburn—in close communication with President Kennedy—rejected the offer. These five proposals would not complete the Democratic program. Stating that the New Frontier would include ten or twelve major proposals, the President supported Rayburn’s refusal.31

Because of Rayburn and Smith’s failure to reach a compromise, the House met on January 31, 1961 to consider Resolution 127, the enlargement plan. After Rayburn supporters expressed their views, the Speaker made one of his rare speeches on the floor and gave his reasons for wanting the Rules Committee enlarged. For one thing, he said, the nation needed good legislation. Also, the House needed the authority to consider all important bills. He supported the New Frontier and wanted to “move the program.”32 He did not believe one committee deserved the power to stop all legislation.33

When the moment for the vote arrived, congressman and spectators were silent. The last five votes decided the victor. The Speaker’s plan won House approval by the narrow margin of 217 to 212.34 Thus, the Rayburn-led moderate Democrats broke Smith’s control over the Rules Committee and assured consideration of Kennedy’s programs. Later, the Speaker said this was his greatest personal victory. His prestige and power were intact, and after the final roll call, House members gave him a standing ovation.35

This triumph did not mean complete success for the New Frontier. It only meant that the entire House could consider its proposals and that the majority would rule. The conservative coalition in the House went on to oppose and defeat many of Kennedy’s programs, but during 1961 the performance of the Committee on Rules gave Rayburn the desired results. Enlarged, it refused only one major Kennedy bill—a school aid measure—passage to the floor.36

All this success was largely the result of Rayburn’s efforts. He wanted to see Kennedy’s New Frontier programs written into statutory law, and he was the only man in the House with sufficient influence and power to engineer enlargement of the Rules Committee. Without such an ally the New Frontier would have been doomed from the outset, and such legislation as it brought would have been longer in coming.


10. Sam Rayburn to Clarence Cannon, December 2, 1960, Rayburn Papers; Rayburn to Clifford Davis, December 7, 1960, Rayburn Papers.


31. U.S., Congressional Record, 1576.


34. Rayburn to C.A. Rettig, February 27, 1961, Rayburn Papers; Rayburn to Tom Durning, March 20, 1961, Rayburn Papers.

