
An alternative to term limits.

THE BIG HOUSE

By Michael Merril and Sean Wilentz

As we write this, a week before the election, it seems probable that several states will pass propositions favoring congressional term limits. That will be a shame, for term limits will do little to cure what ails Congress and could easily make matters worse. (See "Over the Hill" by Sean Wilentz, *TNR*, October 12.) The courts may well rule such state-imposed limitations unconstitutional. Whether they do or not, however, there is a far surer, less mischievous, and wholly constitutional proposal for congressional reform: enlarging the membership of the House of Representatives.

"Enlarge the House!" is, we admit, a less thrilling battle cry than "Throw the Bums Out!" And at first glance it might seem to defy common sense. Isn't Congress already trapped in endemic inefficiency and gridlock? Aren't there, as it is, too many self-important, perk-drunk careerists on Capitol Hill who labor slavishly for the corporate special interests while bribing the electorate with pork? And if so, won't a bigger Congress simply bring more arrogance, more bureaucracy, and less democracy? No. Enlargement cannot guarantee good government. No reform can. But enlargement is needed to prevent things from getting worse. It will make Congress more efficient, less reliant on the work of unelected staffers, and less vulnerable to national lobbies and PACs.

At the heart of the current congressional mess is an alarming, little-known fact: with respect to representation, the U.S. House of Representatives has become the least democratic body of its kind among the major nations of the developed world. When the Framers designed the Constitution in 1787, they allowed for no more than one representative for every 30,000 inhabitants (with each slave counted as three-fifths of a person, and with all untaxed Indians excluded). This meant sending sixty-five men to the first House of Representatives. The Anti-Federalists complained that such a small ratio of representatives to residents would render the House an oligarchy, out of touch with the sentiments of the citizenry; the victorious Federalists buried these arguments with the claim (advanced by James Madison in *Federalist No. 55*) that the proposed House was large enough to legislate virtuously and thwart corruption.

What neither side of the Constitution debate could foresee was how rapidly the country would grow over the next two centuries. Although subsequent generations periodically increased the numbers of representatives as new states were admitted, the House has

remained stuck at 435 members since the 63rd Congress, back in 1913. (The number was fixed by law at 435 in 1929.) Consequently, in 1992 each member of the House represents on average about 600,000 persons—a figure that would have staggered Madison, let alone the Anti-Federalists. The ratio looks nearly as scary when compared with today's figures for the analogous legislative bodies of Japan (1:238,600), Germany (1:120,000), France (1:96,300), and Great Britain (1:87,500).

No wonder ordinary Americans feel out of touch with Congress; and no wonder members have increasingly fallen victim to careerism and burnout. Compounding the problem has been the astounding growth in the size and power of congressional staffs. Between 1929 and the late 1980s, the numbers of personal, committee, and leadership staff members rose more than tenfold. The figure dropped slightly at the very end of the 1980s. Still in 1989 there was a grand total of 11,187 House staffers, an average of nearly twenty-six staffers per elected member. Overburdened by the demands of legislative business, constituent service, and fund-raising for the next election, members have delegated much of the work they were elected to do to their hirelings, further weakening accountable representative government and heightening congressional cynicism and public alienation.

As Michael Lind (a fellow Enlarger) has pointed out, it would be difficult to return immediately to the Framers' original ratio, which would create a body of more than 8,000 members—under current conditions, a congressional circus. Yet we might easily return to 1929 as a baseline. Since that year, the American population has roughly doubled. Let us therefore consider doubling the House to 870 members. As an all-important corollary, let the overall outlay for congressional staffs be frozen. This would raise the American ratio of members to constituents to 1:300,000—still low, but a big step toward making Congress more representative. It would also leave each member with half the staff he or she currently employs, to match their diminished individual responsibilities.

For citizens, the new, smaller congressional districts would encourage greater political intimacy at the local level, counteract the trend toward expensive, media-driven politics, make members more directly accountable (shorn of their large, protective staffs), and thus curtail the advantages of incumbency without punishing worthy representatives (as term limits would do). The new districts would also bring politics more closely in line with the life of actual communities and promote a genuinely democratic social and intellectual diversity among candidates and elected officials.

Enlargement would do even more to improve the functioning of Congress. Smaller districts would reduce the crushing load of constituent service for each member, encourage less expensive campaigns, and mitigate the distracting and corrupting pursuit of PAC financing. Doubling the membership would make life all the more difficult (and costly) for special interests that lack a significant popular base among the citizenry. In the new Congress, it would be harder for individual members to

vie for the plum committee assignments that, under the current regime, have become the foundations for personal fiefdoms and a lure for monied lobbyists. By thus removing some of the opportunities for personal careerism, enlargement would help channel congressional ambitions and individual self-interest toward effective deliberation and legislation on national issues.

A House of 870 members would at first be more cumbersome, although it would remain of an order of magnitude similar to that of national legislatures elsewhere. (There are 651 M.P.s in the British House of Commons; Germany's Bundestag has 662 members.) This very awkwardness, however, should encourage yet another benefit: in addition to being more accountable to the voters, members of an enlarged Congress would be more dependent on effective party organizations to carry the day. The combination would work to establish issues rather than personalities as the dominant focus of our political life.

Enlargement is not a panacea. Its success would depend on mastering some difficult and crucial details. But its logic runs entirely to the good, with none of the drawbacks of term limitation. It is an eminently conservative reform, returning Congress to the pre-New Deal representative ratio of 1929 without resorting to constitutional tampering. And it wisely approaches Congress's problems in the spirit once proclaimed by Andrew Jackson as the essence of American reform: that the best cure for democracy's ills is more democracy.

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