Congress\_In\_Crisis Essay, Research Paper

The United States Congress is not in any crisis from a lack of power, and indeed since the deteriorating power of the presidency has prevented ?imperial Presidents?, Congress has made Presidents seem less ?imperial? than ?impotent?. To assess the power and effectiveness of Congress, one must look at the four major roles that Congress plays in the United States. Although inevitably checked and balanced, there is no question of the founding fathers intent, when framing the constitution, they had aimed to enumerate the powers of Congress so as to create a dominant branch of government.

The United States, similar to Britain is a representative democracy, ergo the name of the Lower House in Congress; the House of Representatives with its four-hundred and thirty-five members based on state delegations, dependant on the population of the represented state. Much like constituency MP?s in Britain each member of Congress represents a certain district of a state. The power of the House of Representatives is limited due to ?a habitual recollection of their dependence on the people?. Representatives are elected every two years, as this term is so short a Congressman can not risk perusing or pressuring for unfavourable legislation or engaging in sleaze, as his or her electors will be unforgiving at time of his election. For example, the scandals concerning Newt Gingrich in the early 1990?s led to electoral dissatisfaction, including, by 1995, twenty-three states approving limits for the terms of their Senators and Congressmen. The dependence of Senators on their electorate, although restrictive, is not as overbearing as for Congressmen, as being the more prestigious house they have terms of six years, allowing Senators to attempt more long-term legislative goals, which may not be favourable early on but justifiable in their ends. This dependence on the electorate causes members of Congress to rely heavily on the views of their constituents to formulate their own opinion for voting in the house, this factor leads to a ninety percent level of incumbents being re-elected, and spawns the phrase, ?love your Congressman, hate Congress?. This quote indicates the general feeling of the United States public about their Congress, and exemplifies how Congress fulfils its role as to represent the people, they believe that individually they are represented well, but on a larger scale they are not. The public may view Congress as inadequate, and may believe that Congress is failing the nation, for a number of reasons, including ?policy gridlock? all to frequent an occurrence in modern American politics. An occurrence stemming from the ease with which Congress can block presidential policy initiatives and the difficulty it has in assuming political and policy leadership. Until recently it has been practically impossible for Congress to be pro-active with a view to initiating policy, until the House of Representatives, 104th Congress, under the leadership of Newt Gingrich attempted to reassert leadership with a policy agenda ?Contract With America?. This initiative showed that is has now become possible for Congressmen and Senators to seize political leadership, and allowed policy agenda control to shift between the presidency and the House of Representatives.

Congress has both a population determined representatives, as according to the original Virginia Plan of 1783, and an equally representative Upper House as decided with the Connecticut Compromise, to please smaller and previously less represented states. The composition of Congress being such permits legitimation, by means of a public mandate, as is the case in most representative democracies, this mandate allows Congress to be the law-making body of the American government. Due to the electorates officially chosen representatives making law, the public gives indirect consent for the laws and therefore is governed by them.

Since the dawn of this era of modern politics, in most representative democracies, the executive branch of government has become increasingly dominant, concerning itself with initiating as well as implementing policy. Due to the increased involvement of the executive in all areas of society it has been left to the legislature and in this case Congress to act as scrutiniser to this branch of government. Many of the powers enumerated for Congress give them the power to check and balance the President, for example Congress have the power of ratification and approval of Presidential initiated treaties and appointments. Although a seemingly inconsequential power, the President must be careful when agreeing treaties or making appointments as an uprising in Congress, could turn the media and the public unfavourably against the President.

Congress has also the ?power of the purse?, the power to appropriate money, although the President is largely responsible for leading the policy agenda, including the budget, Congress have powers to demand a balanced budget. They have right to refuse borrowing, deny tax changes, or simply not appropriate monies towards what the President dictated. This power is important for both foreign and domestic affairs, and stems from the constitution which states that only Congress ?can lay and collect Taxes, Duties, Imposts and Excises? [A1, S8], and ?no money may be drawn from the Treasury, but in Consequence of Appropriations made by Law? [A1, S9]. Using this power Congress often attempts to pursue its own policy agenda, with regards to public spending, by attaching ?riders?, to an appropriations bill, this is usually at the more specific level of appropriations, assigning specific funds to a cause or project. These ?riders? are an ultimatum for the President, with Congress refusing to pass appropriations for a section of the budget if the President does not allow funds for their own policy agenda. Via these means Congress has the power, in foreign affairs, to prevent wars or other military activities in other countries, which inevitably require money for supplies and wages, if Congress refuses to appropriate the funds for these foreign affairs, activity must cease. Although the ?power of the purse? has some effect on foreign matters, this is little compared to the abundant powers of Congress in domestic issues. Congress has powers to reject presidential legislation in all domestic policy areas, although Congress, not always being adversarial, usually follows presidential leadership in domestic policy. Congress and the president have combined media and public relation interests, due to their accountability, so to be seen as ?do-little?, by being adverse to each other?s initiative or leadership, would be detrimental to both branches.

However, as with all contemporary issues, variables exist; powers within the three branches of government, and more so within the presidency and Congress change, precisely as the founding fathers intended as each separate branch struggles for powers not unequivocally enumerated. It is too readily assumed that Congress and the President are fighting to create their own entirely different picture of America, this is not often the case. As the American system of government is relatively young and well-planned, Congress and the president often dispute and debate; this is an essential part of democracy, if either branch had overwhelming control over the other and total policy control it would be improper and not what the founding fathers envisaged. Congress?s role in United States politics is an important yet fluctuating one; their power depends heavily on the presidency as well as the country at the time. Congress has power to assert itself as a policy initiator, yet other branches have ability to seize this power from Congress without constitutional problems. The options of Congress are dependent on the management, consistency and composition of the Houses themselves, if Congress can ever be said to have been or be in crisis, it is not a constitutional or political problem, it is a problem brought on by the electorate, electing inadequate representative politicians.

Words: 1262

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