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House Turnover and the Principle of Rotation

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The two centuries since the American Revolution have seen the eclipse in Congress of a long-standing principle of government. Under the Articles of Confederation maximum congressional service was three years in six, in order, argued Thomas Jefferson, "to prevent every danger which might arise to American freedom by continuing too long in office the members of the Continental Congress."[1]

After 1789 rotation in the legislative branch was no longer obligatory by law. In practice, however, turnover continued so sweeping that, as late as the nation's centennial year, members of the U.S. House of Representatives averaged less than one prior term in that chamber.[2]

During the twentieth century the constitutional system of biennial elections has not prevented the House from rivaling in tenure both the U.S. Supreme Court and the Senate.[3] Average tenures in the three bodies since World War II

[1] Articles of Confederation, Article V; see Merrill Jensen, *The Articles of Confederation* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1940), pp. 126, 130, 133-34; and Thomas Jefferson, *Papers of Thomas Jefferson*, ed. Julian P. Boyd et al. (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1950-), 1:411.

[2] Stuart A. Rice, *Quantitative Methods in Politics* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1928), pp. 296-97, Table 46. From 1789 to 1876 the typical election gave upwards of half the House to newcomers. The election of 1882 was the last in history to put into the House more newcomers than incumbents.

[3] Senators are defeated with about twice the frequency per election as congressmen. The average percentage of incumbent candidates defeated in general elections between 1914 and 1976 outside the South was 27 percent for the Senate and 12 percent for the House. In 1978 the rate was, Senate, 44 percent; House, 6 percent. See footnote 19 on data sources.

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are as follows: Supreme Court, 10.9 years; Senate, 10.4 years; House, 10.2 years.[4]

A number of the factors contributing to House turnover have been assessed already in political science journals. An emphasis has been on relatively recent variables, such as vanishing marginals, declining party competitiveness since 1950, modern advantages of incumbency, and the congressman's increasing orientation to bureaucratic tasks.[5]

As for the ascendancy of dissimilar norms in past generations, opinions and principles are obscure influences to measure. Yet they lie within the sphere of political science, for conceptual precepts secure obedience both within the governmental hierarchy and among the citizenry. "Ideas are, in truth, forces."[6]

One such force was the principle of rotation in office. George Mason of Virginia, one of the more influential founders, held that "nothing is so essential to the preservation of a republican government as a periodic rotation."[7] This point of view was popular in the United States for a century or more and ought not to be ignored for its direct effect on Congress, or conversely for the absence of its impetus when, as today, the body politic attributes more utility to tenure.

A difficulty for scholars has been the paucity of data on congressional elections that antedate the 1950s. Although two studies have compiled data on percentage of first-termers per House, as well as average tenure per Congress since 1789,[8] neither statistic reveals the chief components in turnover—that is, withdrawal from contention before the general elections, and defeats of incumbents at the polls.

[4] Compiled from U.S. Congress, Joint Committee on Printing, *Congressional Directory*, 79 to 94 Congs., 2d sess., and in part from Leon Friedman and Fred L. Israel, eds., *The Justices of the United States Supreme Court 1789–1969*, 4 vols. (New York: Chelsea House, 1969), 4:3232–35.

[5] Four studies not cited elsewhere in this article and that refer to additional works are: David R. Mayhew, "Congressional Elections: The Case of the Vanishing Marginals," *Polity* 6 (Spring 1974): 295–317; John A. Ferejohn, "On the Decline of Competition in Congressional Elections," *American Political Science Review* 71 (March 1977): 166–76; Morris P. Fiorina, "The Case of the Vanishing Marginals: The Bureaucracy Did It," *American Political Science Review* 71 (March 1977): 177–81; and Candice J. Nelson, "The Effect of Incumbency on Voting in Congressional Elections, 1964–1974," *Political Science Quarterly* 93 (Winter 1978–79): 665–678.

[6] Quotation from Henry James, *Charles W. Eliot*, 2 vols. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1930), 1:235. On ideas and their effect on history see, Allan Nevins, *The Gateway to History*, rev. pbk. ed. (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1962), pp. 261–62. See also Keynes's concluding notes elaborating on the theme that "the power of vested interests is vastly exaggerated compared with the gradual encroachment of ideas" (John Maynard Keynes, *The General Theory of Employment Interest and Money* [New York: Harcourt, Brace and Co., 1936], pp. 383–84).

[7] From Mason's address recorded in Jonathan Eliot, ed., *The Debates in the Several State Conventions on Adoption of the Federal Constitution*, 5 vols. (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1836), 3:485.

[8] Rice, *Quantitative Methods*, pp. 296–97; for an update of Rice's study, see Nelson W. Polsby, "The Institutionalization of the U.S. House of Representatives," *American Political Science Review* 62 (March 1968): 146, Tables 1 and 2; Morris P. Fiorina, David W. Rhode, and Peter Wissel, "Historical Change in House Turnover," *Congress in Change*, ed. Norman J. Ornstein (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1975), p. 26.

Examination of these components became practical after the publication in 1975 of *Congressional Quarterly's Guide to U.S. Elections.* Employing this source of raw data in 1977, Samuel Kernell's useful compilations of preelection withdrawals concentrated on five selected decades, so chosen chronologically as to confine his quantitative analysis to the downward side of the nineteenth-century trend in withdrawals.[9] The earlier rising portion of the trend which Kernall did not analyze, however, is indispensable to a balanced study of rotation. Nor did Kernell afford much attention to electoral defeats, which relate to public opinion on rotation more directly than withdrawals.

This article takes a comprehensive approach and breaks down the House turnover into withdrawals of incumbents, and percentage of incumbents defeated at the polls, during the entire century and a half, from 1824 to 1976. For the purposes of this article turnover is defined simply as change in House membership for any reason, public or private, whereas rotation implies departure of incumbent congressmen because of political or social aversion to long tenure in office.

This study will not be confined to a historical enforcement of rotation in constant and mechanistic ways, such as Kernell's investigation of strict two-term customs in nominating conventions. Instead, rotation is here defined as the turnover resulting from an idea, a normative judgment, an evaluation—specifically the negative evaluation in America of congressional careerism. This sociopolitical bias reinforced whatever political obstacles a post-1789 incumbent faced and represented a debit in the equation for elective careers. The debit was potentially decisive at various stages of an individual's career and in a number of ways: for example, through peer group pressures, in the nominating conventions, or at the polls.

Of course evidence of the influence of an idea or principle must necessarily be circumstantial, in that the multitude of nineteenth-century incumbents, nominators, and voters cannot be surveyed as to motives. Yet insofar as the wax and wane of the popularity of rotation—as indicated by testimonial evidence such as contemporary books, newspapers, and letters—meshes chronologically with the quantitative data, one has to think that so fundamental a reevaluation by the body politic as to whether tenure is an asset or a liability must indeed have been a significant factor in contemporaneous renominations and reelections.

Rotation before 1824

A brief look at rotation in office during the initial half-century of independence will serve to preface and put into perspective the analysis of rotation norms after 1824.

For some fifteen years until the adoption of the U.S. Constitution, America

[9] Samuel Kernell, "Toward Understanding 19th Century Congressional Careers: Ambition, Competition, and Rotation," *American Journal of Political Science* 21 (November 1977): 669–93.

was a debating ground as to governmental forms. The educated class studied ancient constitutions and cited them as relevant to the American experiment. Prior to the first century B.C., the *polis* generally rotated its officials annually; notable were Athens, Sparta, and republican Rome.[10] Also the Middle Ages and Italian Renaissance saw a number of city-states in northern Italy employ rotation extensively in the highest political offices. Florence did so for centuries, with interludes, and Venice for more than 600 years without interruption until the Napoleonic conquest. Americans studied also the theory behind rotation in office, as articulated during antiquity by Aristotle, and in the early modern period by James Harrington, the author of *Oceania*.[11]

In January, 1776, John Adams assessed American opinion on the eve of Independence:

> A rotation of all offices, as well as of representatives and counsellors, has many advocates, and is contended for with many plausible arguments. . . . These persons may be allowed to serve for three years, and then be excluded three years, or for any longer or shorter term.[12]

By 1787 the triennial rotation of the Continental Congress had been six years in force under the Articles of Confederation. When Governor Edmund Randolph read the Virginia Plan during the second week of the Constitutional Convention, it provided for exit, after a single term, of all incumbents in the lower chamber of the national legislature. But during the fourth week the convention rejected the ban on consecutive terms.[13] No doubt, the mandatory rotation had been discredited somewhat by association with the Confederation. The convention delegates defeated also the various plans to ban or restrict reelection in the presidency.

Efforts toward a rotation amendment continued for a year or two after the convention of 1787. Leading advocates included George Mason, Thomas Jeffer-

[10] A few sources on rotation practices of antiquity include, Artistotle, *The Athenian Constitution* 4.3, 62.3, trans. H. Rackham, Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1935), pp. 21, 171; Charles Hignett, *A History of the Athenian Constitution* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1958), pp. 153, 237–44; A. H. M. Jones, *Sparta* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1967), p. 26; Livy, *From the Founding of the City* 7.42.2, 10.13.8, trans. B. O. Foster, Loeb Classical Library, 13 vols. (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1924), 3:513, 4:405; Leon Pol Homo, *Roman Political Institutions from City to State* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1929), pp. 160–61.

[11] On the Italian city-states and rotation see for example, Ferdinand Schevill, *History of Florence* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Co., 1936), pp. 67, 154, 162, 209–10; Bella Duffy, *The Tuscan Republics* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1898), p. 105; Frederick C. Lane, *Venice, A Maritime Republic* (Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1973), pp. 96–97, 100, 116, 251, 257, 392, 428–29. Philosophical apologies for rotation include, Aristotle, *The Politics* 3.4.5–7, 6.1.6–8, trans. H. Rackham, Loeb Classical Library (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1932), pp. 203, 205, 489, 491; James Harrington, *The Oceania and Other Works. . . .* , ed. John Toland (London: A. Millar, 1737), pp. 54–57, 124–25, 140, 161, 303–23, 504, 523, 623–24, 629, 632.

[12] John Adams, *The Life and Works of John Adams*, ed. Charles Francis Adams, 10 vols. (Boston: Charles C. Little and James Brown, 1851), 4:197–98.

[13] Max Farrand, ed., *The Records of the Federal Convention of 1787*, 4 vols. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1911), 1:20, resolution 4, and 1:210, 217, 221.

son, and Richard Henry Lee.[14] Their insistence on constitutional limitation of tenure proved fruitless, but the philosophical objections to perpetuity in office continued well into the future and influenced extraconstitutional practice.

For the years 1789 to 1823, good data on withdrawals and electoral defeats are not available, and no quantitative analysis of rotation in that generation will be attempted here. James Young's *The Washington Community, 1800–1828* is an important source for the general distrust of power in that period.[15] Also some normative views before 1824 are illustrative. According to one early congressman, continuous reelections were perilous because in time "the very best men among us become more or less impressed with opinions not comformable to that of the people."[16] An 1822 editorial in the influential *Niles Weekly Register* supports this reasoning, because in politics "the mind gradually becomes callous of wrong."[17] In the same year an article in the *Richmond Enquirer*, entitled "Rotation in Office," argues that lengthy tenure in Congress promotes usurpation of power from the states and the people; and the article contends that the "long cherished" principle of rotation has been impressed on the republican mind "by a kind of intuitive impulse, unassailable to argument or authority."[18]

Incumbent Defeats in General Elections, 1824–1976

The rotation impulse—for some voters intuitive, for others theoretically developed—is implied in the electoral defeats after 1824. The basic measure will be the percentage of incumbent congressmen standing for reelection who lose at the polls. The analytical procedure will be to present indications of the influence of rotation on nineteenth-century voting patterns, and then to advance further evidence against two plausible objections. The general thesis is that the relatively high levels of incumbent defeats before the twentieth century, especially for the more senior incumbents, and the lower loss rates since, are related to the wax and wane of the rotation principle as a conceptual force.

Some quantitative evidence is summarized in Table 1.[19] In terms of time-series data, changing attitudes toward long tenure in office should logically have the

[14] Eliot, *Debates*, 3:485; Thomas Jefferson, *Papers*, 12:440 and 13:490; Richard Henry Lee, *An additional number of Letters from the Federal Farmer to the Republican* (1788; reprint ed., Chicago, Ill.: Quadrangle Books, 1962), pp. 94–97.

[15] James S. Young, *The Washington Community, 1800–1828* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1966), pp. 51–52, 55–57, 59–61, 64, 145.

[16] Hezekia Niles, "Rotation in Office," *Niles Weekly Register* 23, 16 November 1822, p. 162. Niles says the quotation in text was made to him "several years ago at Washington," by a "*republican* member of congress."

[17] Ibid. The quotation in the text is the observation of Niles himself.

[18] *Richmond Enquirer*, 8 November 1822, p. 3.

[19] Sources for Tables 1–3, Figure 1, and footnote 3: *Congressional Quarterly's Guide to the Congress of the United States*, 1st ed., ed. William B. Dickinson, Jr. et al. (Washington, D.C.: Congressional Quarterly, Inc., 1971), pp. 2a–175a; *Congressional Quarterly's Guide to U.S. Elections*, ed. Robert A. Diamond et al. (Washington, D.C.: Congressional Quarterly Inc., 1975), pp. 543–880

TABLE 1

Percentage of Incumbent Candidates Defeated in House General Elections (South excluded)

	Average percentage defeated		
	Freshmen	*2+ Termers*	*Ratio:*
1824-37	20	19	1.1 to 1
1838-65	30	23	1.3 to 1
1866-96	25	18	1.4 to 1
1898-1932	23	11	2.1 to 1
1934-48	28	11	2.5 to 1
1950-60	20	5.4	3.7 to 1
1962-76	12	5.6	2.1 to 1

Source: See footnote 19.

least effect on freshmen defeats. A freshman seeking reelection would be less likely than a sophomore, for example, to gain or lose votes from comparison with the nonincumbent challenger's newcomer status. And indeed the breakdown of the incumbent defeats into freshmen vis-à-vis the more senior congressmen, shows relatively moderate time-series fluctuations in the defeat rates for freshmen (Table 1). During the period 1824–1960, average defeats of freshmen incumbents stay between 20 percent and 30 percent inclusive, with as recent a period as 1934–48 having a freshmen defeat rate of 28 percent.[20] Only since 1960 has the long-term rate for freshmen fallen below 20 percent.

Using the relatively constant freshmen rate as a reference point in time series, the rest of the incumbent field (hereafter signified "2+ termers" for sophomores

(House), pp. 483–509 (Senate); *Congressional Quarterly Weekly Report* 32 (13 July 1974):1815, and November postelection issues since 1956; *Notable Names in American History* (Clifton, N.J.: James T. White & Co., 1973), pp. 70–266; U.S., Congress, House, Document no. 607, 81st Cong., 2d sess., 1950; *Biographical Directory of the American Congress, 1774–1949*, and also the 1774–1971 issue, U.S., Congress, Senate, Document no. 92–8, 92d Cong., 1st sess., 1971; U.S. Congress, Joint Committee on Printing, *Congressional Directory*, 60 to 95 Congs., 1st sess.

Defeated incumbents are losers listed in the *Guide to U.S. Elections* who had any service at all in the expiring House. Winners similarly. Withdrawals are computed by adding the incumbent winners and losers, and subtracting the total from the number of seats in the expiring House. I delete Secession from the withdrawal data for 1860–61.

The reader will note the exclusion from Tables 1 and 2 of defeat rates for Southern congressmen. The only portions of the data for which the percentage of defeats in the South equals or exceeds that of the rest of the nation are the years 1824–37 and 1866–76 (Reconstruction). One-party dominance shifted the action to the nominating stage after Reconstruction, and eventually reduced general election defeats in the South to the vicinity of zero percent. The inclusion of such data only distorts the picture of what is taking place in the meaningful general elections, and for the sake of uniformity and simplicity the eleven states of the Secession are excluded from the entirety of the 1824–1976 analysis of defeats.

[20] The range between 20 percent and 30 percent in freshmen defeats represents the long-term average. The biennial fluctuations for the period 1824–1960 are much wider, of course, ranging from 10 percent to 51 percent, as voters reacted to short-term issues.

and up) can be compared historically for shifting voter preferences concerning tenure. The effect of voter adherence to rotation norms should be to narrow the gap between the "ceiling" defeat rate of freshmen and the rate for 2+ termers. Conversely when rotation declines and voters attribute more value to experience, the spread between freshmen and 2+ termers should widen.

As indicated by the ratios in Table 1, the gap as of the first third of the twentieth century reached a then record width, and continued further to widen until 1960. If, as suggested by these data, the about-face in public thinking took place on the eve of the turn of the century, it would tentatively seem that the movement for a professional civil service, and thus the nation's clear rejection of rotation in appointive federal office after 1883, was the vanguard by not many years of the equivalent trend for the office of congressman.

That the great decline of the popularity of rotation among voters took place shortly before 1900 is consistent with the watershed character of the last two decades of the nineteenth century. Basic shifts in the American mode of life included urbanization, the industrial revolution, and the end of the frontier.[21] These fundamental changes accelerated tremendously from 1880 to 1900 and, accompanied by the economic and political shocks of 1893–96, created a political climate very different than the milieu in which rotation had flourished.

The preliminary conclusions as concerns general elections are: After 1824 public favor for rotation in office—as a defined principle or simply an intuitive impulse to throw the rascals out—worked to retard what superiority in polling strength 2+ termers enjoyed as compared to freshmen congressmen. Near 1900 a countertrend in public evaluation of long tenure in office promoted substantially wider spreads in reelection rates between freshmen and 2+ termers.

One might object that the 2+ field has aged. From 1838 to 1865 only 17 percent of the 2+ candidates consisted of 4+ termers, as compared with 50 percent from 1906 to 1932. By the period 1950–76 two-thirds of the 2+ field consisted of 4+ termers. This aging of the nonfreshmen might be more significant than shifting voter preference as a factor in the declining 2+ termer defeat rate.

In terms of political advantage at the polls, however, the accumulation of incumbency yields minimal rates of return after the sophomore term. The breakdown of 2+ data into rates for 2, 3, and 4+ termers in Table 2 reveals that twentieth-century incumbents accrue most of their polling power during the second term. Between 1906 and 1960 the 4+ termers performed within two percentage points of sophomores.

In addition, time-series comparisons within the respective classes—within the middle columns in Table 2—where accumulation of tenure is equal over time, show a chronological decline that is quite large. The downward trend would seem to derive from the electorate's changing evaluation of the tenure for the class in question. Sophomores average 25 percent defeats about mid-nineteenth

[21] Frederick Jackson Turner, *The Frontier in American History* (New York: Henry Holt and Co., 1953), chap. 1. This chapter is a reprint of a paper presented by Turner to the American Historical Association, 1893.

TABLE 2

Percentage of Incumbent Candidates Defeated in House General Elections (South excluded)

	Terms served by incumbents			
	1	*2*	*3*	*4+*
1838-65	30	25	19	19
1906-32	24	13	13	11
1934-48	28	10	13	10
1950-60	20	8	3	5
1962-76	12	9	5	5

Source: See footnote 19.

century and 8 percent defeats near mid-twentieth century. The three-termers drop from 19 percent to 3 percent during the same period.

The continuing decline of defeats during the twentieth century is not of course due to the abandonment of antitenure attitudes as such, for rotation norms were disregarded early in the century. As the popularity of rotation gradually terminated about 1900, the popularity of the principle of expertise gradually accrued. The negation of sociopolitical biases against careerism meant that long tenure was tolerable, not that it was at once affirmed enthusiastically in 1900. Increasingly in the twentieth century, demand for professionalism pervaded virtually every occupational field, including politics, which naturally reflected in voter preferences, with steady increases until 1960 in rates of reelection for 2, 3, and 4+ termers.

One might also object that the data can be explained better in terms of party competitiveness. In competitive eras, freshmen would be distributed relatively evenly among the congressional districts. But when party competitiveness declined, an ever growing number of safe districts would produce safe careers, while those districts that remained competitive would contain increasing proportions of freshmen. Thus the gap would widen in defeat rates between freshmen and senior incumbents.

On the contrary, however, among every class of incumbents, nineteenth-century withdrawals were numerous; thus freshmen were well represented, as an aftermath of seniors withdrawing, even in districts that had little party turnover. It is noteworthy that the period 1824 to 1834, one of the most sectionalist eras ever, saw the electoral defeat rates virtually identical for freshmen and 2+ termers.

Moreover, the period 1934 to 1948, described by E.E. Schattschneider as competitive in all the states outside the South,[22] saw the gap in defeat rates between freshmen and 2+ termers continue to widen, relative to the earlier gap during

[22] E. E. Schattschneider, "United States: The Functional Approach to Party Government," in *Modern Political Parties*, ed. Sigmund Neumann (Chicago, Ill.: University of Chicago Press, 1956), p. 208; Walter Dean Burnham, "Party Systems and the Political Process," in *The American Party*

the sectionalist fourth-party system. Indeed the rate for three-termers remained the same as during the quarter century prior, and sophomores actually incurred defeats at a lower rate than before; yet the freshmen defeat rate rose substantially in response to the more competitive situation. The party competitiveness thesis does not explain why the rate for 2+ termers failed to respond upward as well. Changing voting habits do explain it: the electorate's increasing preference for 2+ term tenure was strong enough to cancel out the conducement to defeats inherent in party competitiveness.

The long-term decline in the defeat rates for 2, 3, and 4+ termers spans four-party systems; it is too consistently in decline to derive only from competitiveness, which fluctuates up and down more than once over the same period.

To sum up, in nineteenth-century House elections, the rotation idea was influential enough in public thinking not to quash but certainly to retard the advantage accruing to the accumulation of incumbency. The Northern electorate of 1838–65 defeated 4+ termers at the relatively high rate of 19 percent (more frequently than twentieth-century voters have turned out sophomores—11 percent). Popular loyalty to the principle of rotation never demanded that nineteenth-century voters defeat a majority of the incumbent candidates; so many congressmen withdrew at the nomination stage that rapid turnover in the House was a certainty, even had the voters reelected every incumbent on the ballot. The rotation principle was a significant check to reelection if it simply dulled or nullified the natural weapon of every incumbent—his propaganda appeal on the basis of experience in Congress.

That the 4+ termer in the mid-nineteenth century enjoyed a moderately better chance at the polls than the freshmen or sophomore incumbents of his day can be attributed in part to the selectivity at the nominating stage, where to survive for four terms must have required exceptional skill in the political arena.[23] A major reason the 4+ termer did somewhat better in general elections was apparently that it took shrewder politicians just to achieve four renominations.

Finally, it is safe to say that especially during the era from the second Adams to Appomattox, 1824–65, the occupancy of a seat in Congress for several terms did not greatly impress voters. The incumbent's experience in the House was disregarded by many citizens, was feared by others as conducive to an aristocracy of officeholders,[24] or was deemed noxious for the incumbents themselves because "power is too apt to turn the head."[25]

Systems, 2d ed., eds. William Chambers and Walter Dean Burnham (New York: Oxford University Press, 1975), p. 302.

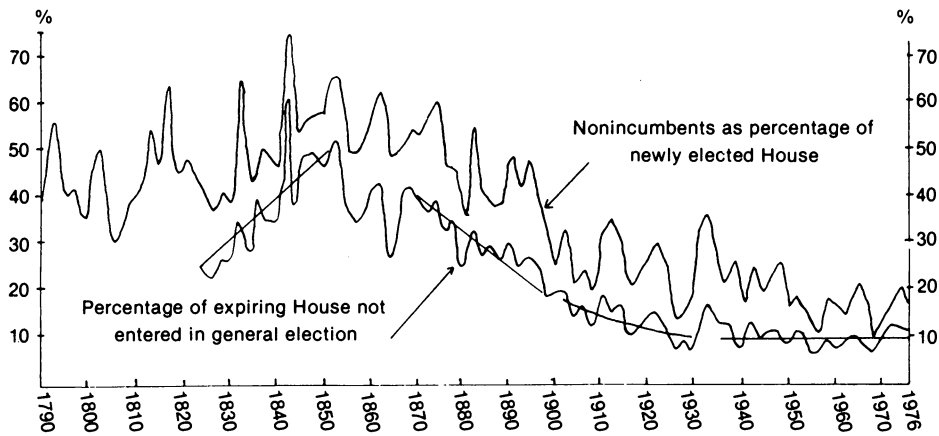
[23] So few congressmen won four renominations during the years 1838–65 that the incumbent candidates with four successive terms or more averaged a mere 2.9 percent of their expiring House memberships.

[24] On the idea that prolongation in office leads to an aristocracy of officeholders, see James Bryce, *The American Commonwealth*, 3d ed., 2 vols. (New York: Macmillan Co., 1907), 2:241; Edwin L. Godkin, in *Cyclopaedia of Political Science*, ed. John J. Laylor, 3 vols. (New York: Charles E. Merrill & Co., 1890), 3:19.

[25] *Richmond Enquirer*, 12 November 1822, p. 3.

FIGURE 1

Withdrawal as Component of House Turnover



Source: See footnote 19.

WITHDRAWALS, 1824-1976

Withdrawal of incumbents prior to the general elections was much the largest component in House turnover. For the seven decades 1824-96, an average of 35 percent of the House withdrew from the running before the general elections, or about two-thirds of the average turnover from all causes (51 percent). Furthermore, as indicated in Figure 1, the trend in withdrawals was steeply up between 1824 and mid-century, was erratic for a period of fourteen years that included the Civil War, and was sharply down between 1868 and 1898—a trend that matches chronologically the wax and wane of the spoils form of rotation introduced by the Jacksonians.

In 1829, in his first address to Congress, President Andrew Jackson declared that rotation in office "constitutes a leading principle in the republican creed."[26] The seventh president went on during his eight years in office to enforce an unprecedented turnover in the executive bureaucracy. Following this extension of the spoils system to the federal level came a fundamental change in how Americans viewed U.S. government. For more than half a century, the idea that federal offices were spoils to be spread among the party faithful had a significant effect not only on appointive places, but also on nominations for the elective seats in Congress.

During the years after Jackson, 1838-53, the rate of withdrawal in non-Southern states averaged 45 percent among freshmen congressmen, 61 percent

[26] James D. Richardson, ed., *A Compilation of the Messages and Papers of the Presidents*, 10 vols. (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1896-99), 2:448-49.

among sophomores, and 42 percent among 3+ termers. The configuration by class in rates of withdrawal continues to show a bias toward the sophomores through the 1890s according to Kernell's figures.[27] In volume, the great bulk of the withdrawals at mid-century accrued to the freshmen, as by far the largest class in the House.

The role of rotation in promoting these withdrawals is touched upon by the *New York Statesman* in 1824, which ascribes many or "perhaps most" of the turnover in the state's congressional delegation to "an arrangement, by which it is stipulated, that, after a given time, one aspirant for office is to succeed another."[28]

Such arrangements took principally two forms during the nineteenth century: agreements between competitors in a nominating convention that the incumbent, normally after one or two terms of service, shall then retire and aid the nomination of his nearest rival; and a custom known as the claim of locality, whereby the different geographical sections of the congressional district furnished the party's candidate in turn.[29] The former case, agreements between competitors, found its most favorable milieu in the district conventions, which became increasingly standard nominating machinery after the Jacksonian revolution began. More than in state legislative caucuses or statewide conventions, the local leaders in district conventions held sway and could reach and enforce agreements to pass the seat around among themselves.

A case in point was the seventh congressional district in Illinois, where Abraham Lincoln resided, and where the Whigs adopted the conventions system in 1843. Lincoln's associates, Nicolay and Hay, portray the setting: "The Sangammon district was the one which the Whigs of Illinois had apparently the best prospect of carrying, and it was full of able and ambitious men, who were nominated successively for the only place which gave them the opportunity of playing a part in the national theatre at Washington."[30]

In 1846 a meeting by the Whigs of the Athens precinct is notable for moving the nomination of Lincoln with the following whereas clause: "our present Representative, Hon. E. D. Baker, recognizing the principle of 'rotation in office,' has generously declined a reelection."[31] However, the predecessor of Baker proved less cooperative.[32] Former Representative Hardin declared his candidacy

[27] Kernell, "Ambition, Competition, and Rotation," p. 687, Figure 2.

[28] Quoted in *Niles Weekly Register* 27, 4 December 1824, p. 217.

[29] Frederick W. Dallinger, *Nominations for Elective Office in the United States* (New York: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1897), pp. 88–89; Laurence N. Powell, "Rejected Republican Incumbents in the 1866 Congressional Nominating Conventions," *Civil War History* 19 (September 1973): 228–33.

[30] John G. Nicolay and John Hay, *Abraham Lincoln: A History*, 10 vols. (New York: The Century Co., 1890), 1:289.

[31] *Lacon Illinois Gazette*, 7 February 1846, p. 2.

[32] In 1843 the Whigs of the seventh (Sangammon) district nominated General John Hardin for Congress. Also the convention approved, nineteen to fourteen, delegate Abraham Lincoln's motion limiting Hardin to a single term and designating Edward D. Baker as the Whig candidate for the subsequent term. See *Lacon Illinois Gazette*, 14 February 1846, p. 2.

against Lincoln, waged a hot contest, and moved Lincoln to remind Hardin by letter of an agreement three years earlier, between themselves and Baker, that none of the three was to be a candidate out of his turn.[33] Hardin soon withdrew his candidacy,[34] and in the district convention Lincoln's nomination was without opposition.[35]

Lincoln exited the House by the same principle. During the first year of his single term in Congress, he wrote his law partner that political support notwithstanding, he would not run for reelection, excepting no other Whig came forward, because "to enter myself as a competitor of another, or to authorize anyone so to enter me, is what my word and honor forbid."[36] The Whig nomination went in 1848 to Steven Logan, who had nominated Lincoln in the previous district convention.[37]

Geographic rotation, or the claim of locality, operated somewhat differently from the rotation among rivals like Baker, Lincoln, and Logan, who all resided in the city of Springfield. As Nicolay and Hay observed with some exaggeration: 'To ask in a nominating convention who is best qualified for service in Congress is always regarded as an impertinence; but the question what county in the district has had the Congressman oftenest' is always considered in order."[38] Also an article in the *Christian Examiner*, September 1869, states that, "there is a constant temptation, in a district made up of an aggregation of counties or towns, to pass the offices round from town to town, or county, to another; each claiming in its turn the honor of furnishing the member."[39] In 1866 just such a system characterized New York State according to Horace Greeley.[40]

The chronology of the gradual eclipse of nomination rotation is perhaps best seen in the declining trend line for withdrawals (Figure 1) which is steepest for the thirty-year period, 1868 to 1898. Testimonial evidence is also indicative. Rotation in the House was still strong enough when James Bryce visited America in the 1870s and 1880s that he found: "So far from its being, as in England, a reason for re-electing a man that he has been a member already, it is a reason for passing him by, and giving somebody else a turn."[41] And as late as July, 1896, Frederick W. Dallinger wrote that intraparty agreements among

[33] See letter to John Hardin, 7 February 1846, in Abraham Lincoln, *The Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln*, ed. Roy P. Basler, 10 vols. (New Brunswick, N. J.: Rutgers University Press, 1953), 1:361.

[34] *Lacon Illinois Gazette*, 28 February 1846, p. 2.

[35] Nicolay and Hay, *Abraham Lincoln*, 1:245.

[36] See letter to William Herndon, 8 January 1848, in Basler, ed., *Works of Lincoln*, 1:430-31.

[37] Nicolay and Hay, *Abraham Lincoln*, 1:245.

[38] Ibid., 1:290.

[39] W. F. Allen, "The Caucus System In the United States," *The Christian Examiner* 87, September 1869, p. 148.

[40] Powell, "Rejected Republican Incumbents," p. 236, n. 109.

[41] James Bryce, *The American Commonwealth*, 2d ed., 2 vols. (New York: Macmillan Co., 1891), 1:192. Please note that in the third edition (1907) the phrase "as in England" is omitted (1:195-96).

rivals to rotate the nomination occurred "often," while in other districts geographic rotation was "customary."[42] It was, however, but the remnants of these practices that gave way to direct primaries between 1903 and 1915.[43]

The Theory of Withdrawals

A separate aspect of nomination rotation was the normative justification, that is, the principle, or at least the appearance of principle, to embellish the practice. As rotation conceptually understood was, according to Bryce, the philosophical adjunct without which the country would never have let the politicians rivet the spoils system to the civil service,[44] so did the same philosophy lift the intraparty machinations for sharing seats in Congress to a level of respectability impossible if the practice were unadorned.

Until the rise of the Jacksonians, the principle of rotation at the federal level was primarily limited to the connotation it had held since the Revolution—that of the antipower attitudes documented in chapter three of James Young's *Washington Community*. The tendency to look askance at political power was so ingrained in American culture, says Young, that even the officeholders themselves perceived their occupations in a disparaging light.[45] A widespread conviction, as articulated by James Fenimore Cooper in 1838, viewed "contact with the affairs of state [as] one of the most corrupting of the influences to which men are exposed."[46] Half a century earlier the president of the Continental Congress, R. H. Lee, had written to Samuel Adams: "The fact is, that power poisons the mind of its possessor."[47]

The Jacksonians mixed this original connotation to rotation with an entirely new meaning. For both major parties rotation in office came to embrace the doctrine of taking turns in the distribution of prizes. More than once in his quest for the Whig nomination to Congress, Lincoln employed the slogan, "turnabout is fair play."[48] By fair play he referred not to the antipower notions described by Young but to the contest for the prize of office.[49]

During the second quarter of the nineteenth century, the antipathy to power (which was held to be in the best interests of the country) and the normative in-

[42] Dallinger, *Nominations*, pp. 88–89.

[43] C. E. Merriam and L. Overacker, *Primary Elections* (Chicago, Ill.: University of Chicago Press, 1928), pp. 61–63.

[44] Bryce, *American Commonwealth*, 3d ed., 2:133.

[45] Young, *The Washington Community, 1800–1828*, pp. 51–52, 59–61, 64, 145.

[46] James Fenimore Cooper, *The American Democrat* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1931), p. 52.

[47] Letter dated 14 March 1785, in Richard Henry Lee, *The Letters of Richard Henry Lee*, ed. James C. Ballagh, 2 vols. (New York: Macmillan Co., 1914), 2:344.

[48] Letter to N. J. Rockwell, 21 January 1846, in Basler, ed., *Works of Lincoln*, 1:359, 361.

[49] By Lincoln's time the spoils principle had become so acceptable to Whigs as well as the Democrats that a Whig writer could boldly oppose the nomination of a fellow Whig and former congressman on the following grounds: "we maintain that it is Mr. Lincoln's turn to 'rotate' into congress, that his 'turn' has come" (*Lacon Illinois Gazette*, 14 February 1846, p. 2).

novations of the Jacksonians (which played to the self-interest of local leaders) were coupled under one philosophical heading called rotation in office. Apparently the combination of connotations and motives redoubled the impetus to nomination rotation and promoted a steep rise in incumbent withdrawals. By mid-century, close to half the House membership per term agreed, either voluntarily or by party push, not to seek reelection.

That the principle of rotation was the deciding factor or at least a major contributor to the rise in withdrawals is yet more credible in that the post-bellum decline in the popularity of the spoils principle paralleled the downward trend in the withdrawal rate. According to Carl Russell Fish, the decline of rotation in the civil service dates from 1865 when President Lincoln refused to enforce rotation in the appointive offices under his jurisdiction.[50] Later that year Representative Thomas Allen Jenckes introduced his first civil service reform bill, which the House would vote down by a narrow margin. In defeat the Jenckes reform bill became the springboard of a great national debate. The 1872 Democratic party platform heralded civil service reform as "one of the most pressing necessities of the hour," while the Republican platform of the same year advocated reforms to "make honesty, efficiency and fidelity the essential qualifications for public positions, without practically creating a life-tenure of office."[51] During the years 1872–92, every platform of the two major parties contained strong planks for civil service reform. The Republican proviso against a life tenure of office vanished after 1872. Meanwhile newspapers and periodicals were replete with articles and editorials supporting the reformers from Jenckes onward. The post-bellum generation underwent, in short, something of a revolution in the prevailing attitudes toward career government service. Careerism was transformed in leading minds from a vice to a virtue, and the effects of this conceptual revolution could not but spill over into the sphere of elective office.

The idea of rotation was called further into question after 1865 by at least two basic social changes. Post-Civil War America witnessed a growing ascendancy of cosmopolitan over local life. Since support for spoils was rooted in the localities, the declining influence of counties and towns hastened the eclipse of nomination rotation.[52] Moreover, the post-bellum nineteenth century saw a shift in the balance of power to the business class, where professionalism and careerism were increasingly the standard. In turn, the U.S. government began to

[50] Carl Russell Fish, *The Civil Service and the Patronage* (New York: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1905), p. 172. Contemporary accounts also cite as a turning point the Civil War. According to an 1868 article, it mattered less how officialdom exercised its functions prior to the war, "for the Government was seen rather than felt, it was an idea rather than a fact. All this changed with the rebellion" (*Nation* 6, 28 May 1868, p. 425).

[51] Kirt H. Porter and Bruce Johnson, eds., *National Party Platforms, 1840–1960*, 2d ed. (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1961), pp. 42, 47.

[52] Samuel P. Hays, "Political Parties and the Community-Society Continuum," pp. 172–73, 177; and Walter Dean Burnham, "Party Systems and the Political Process," p. 284, both works in *Party Systems*, eds. Chambers and Burnham; Powell, "Rejected Republican Incumbents," pp. 236–37.

reflect the methods and manner of the ruling industrial elite.[53] Big business was then both novel and awesome in its success, and this formidable model dissented from the antipower attitudes described by Young. In short, the industrial revolution in America contained elements hostile both to the spoils principle and to the older norms concerning the perils of long tenure in power.

The long-term fluctuations in the quantitative phenomena of withdrawals by congressmen thus were related to whether the politicians and voters in the nation regarded careerism as good or evil, fair or unfair, expedient or inopportune. When these normative judgments were reversed, a revolution in basic political values had transpired, and a major transformation of Congress ensued.

The chronology of such a revolution in ideas is more broad brush than for the practices. As late as 1889 Frederick Whitridge wrote in *Political Science Quarterly* that many Americans regarded the idea of rotation in office as a "shibboleth" by which their neighbor's democracy might be tested. But by 1904 Professor Fish was writing in the past tense about "the days of rotation."[54]

It may well be that misgivings about prolongation in office, as expressed by the electorate, outlasted intraparty support for the spoils principle as manifested in withdrawals. For a quarter century before the economic depression of 1893–97, incumbent withdrawals had been in steep decline, whereas at the polls incumbent defeat rates had yet to fall substantially. Neither did the gap in electoral defeat rates between freshmen and 2+ termers widen appreciably until the late 1890s.

Rotation Relative to Ambition and Competition

Of course variables other than rotation contributed to the component trends in turnover. T. Richard Witmer wrote in 1964 that a "labyrinth of factors" accounted for the increase in survivability in the House.[55] One factor, institutionalization of the House internally, as elucidated by Nelson Polsby,[56] became a factor quite late in the nineteenth century or early in the twentieth. Two variables that were significant throughout the nineteenth century—ambition and party competition—bear on the contemporary importance of rotation.

In 1977 Samuel Kernell asserted that nomination rotation did serve as a "significant impediment" to career development, but that it was of third-rate importance behind the ambition of incumbents for House careers, and interparty

[53] Hays, "Political Parties," pp. 177–78; Fish, *Civil Service*, pp. 233, 245; Godkin, *Cyclopaedia of Political Science*, 3:24.

[54] Frederick W. Whitridge, "Rotation in Office," *Political Science Quarterly* 4 (June 1889): 281, 294; Fish, *Civil Service*, pp. 236–37. Both Whitridge and Fish refer principally to rotation in the civil service, but rotation had similar apologies and conceptual support wherever applied. Rotation in appointive versus elective office was a fairly subtle distinction, and the declining popularity of both applications seems to have been closely associated.

[55] T. Richard Witmer, "The Aging of the House," *Political Science Quarterly* 79 (December 1964): 527–28.

[56] Polsby, "The Institutionalization of the U.S. House of Representatives," pp. 144–68.

competition as manifested in defeat at the polls.[57] Kernell's analysis undervalues rotation, however, in at least four respects.

First, as established above, rotation was a factor in nineteenth-century electoral defeats. Kernell makes the assumption that changing defeat rates at the polls were due almost exclusively to party competitiveness.

Second, rotation is causally interrelated to ambition, because the attractiveness of the job—hence ambition—was linked culturally to whether prolongation in office was deemed good, neutral, or evil by contemporary society and peers.

Third, the effect of interparty competition on withdrawals was also causally interrelated to rotation. The major parties came to regard nominations for the House as "salary" due their leading troops.[58] Making good on this payroll, through rotation in nominations, helped keep the intrastate party machinery in fighting trim. And of course to win the numerous state and local offices, discipline in the party ranks was more important, especially with stiff competition, than the modest returns to the party expected from incumbent renominations to the House.

Had the custom of nomination rotation not existed, competition would have placed the expediency from the state and local parties' perspective on renominating incumbents as the stronger candidates. The spoils principle shifted the locus of expediency to withdrawals, so as to spread the payoffs as widely as possible. This intraparty motive was intensified by interparty competition. Since competition called for party discipline, which required more attention to the rotations payroll, competition and the nomination rotation were causally interrelated.

Fourth, Kernell's methodology in estimating the effect of rotation on House turnover is demonstrably invalid for the antebellum period, when rotation was at full tide. To determine the percentage of all careers ended by rotation, Kernell simply subtracts the percentage of sophomores renominated from the percentage of freshmen renominated, on the assumption that a two-term limit was so much the prevailing way of rotating nominations that rotation was not, on average, conducive to withdrawals by first-termers.[59] This methodology leads Kernell to conclude that rotation terminated no more than 4 percent of all House careers after 1854.

An examination in Table 3 of the three largest state delegations in the House during the ten elections between 1838 and 1857 is particularly useful because it is possible to ignore the factor of ambition—assuming that at this point in time, the House was more or less equally attractive to incumbent congressmen from New York, Pennsylvania, and Ohio. A fourth state, Massachusetts, is not included in the analysis, but appears in Table 3 for reference, as the Northern state with the lowest withdrawal rate.

[57] Kernell, "Ambition, Competition, and Rotation," pp. 688-90.
[58] Bryce, *American Commonwealth*, 3d ed., 2:133.
[59] Kernell, "Ambition, Competition, and Rotation," p. 688.

TABLE 3

Percentage of Class to Withdraw, 1838–57

	All Terms	*Freshmen Class*	*Sophomore Class*	*3+ Termers*	*Kernell Formula**	*Percentage of districts with Party Turnover*
New York	65	62	74	64	12	35
Pennsylvania	52	41	70	73	29	26
Ohio	40	28	60	47	32	21
Massachusetts	28	25	17	39	−8	11

Source: See footnote 19.

* Percentage of sophomore class minus percentage of freshmen class.

Table 3, as well as testimonial evidence, indicates that during the ten elections covered, New York was the leading state in commitment to rotation in office. At that time the Albany Regency so dominated Democratic politics in the Empire State that, according to Jabez Hammond, the Regency settled "all questions in relation to the selection of candidates for elective office."[60] The Regency was led by Martin Van Buren, William Marcy, and Silas Wright, who were also the leading figures under Jackson in extending the spoils system nationally. That only 1 percent of New York congressmen managed to win three consecutive renominations from 1838 to 1856 cannot be unrelated to the influence of the Albany Regency in behalf of nomination rotation. And the fact that three-fourths of the withdrawals were freshmen, renders untenable Kernell's assumption, at least for the largest state, that the bulk of rotation was confined to sophomores.

Furthermore, the rates of withdrawal in the first three columns of Table 3 indicate that rotation in New York was substantially stronger than in Pennsylvania or Ohio. A generous estimate for the effect of interparty competition in frightening congressmen into withdrawal[61] would subtract only 5 percent and 6

[60] Jabez D. Hammond, *The History of Political Parties in the State of New-York*, 3 vols. (Cooperstown, N. Y.: H. & E. Phinney, 1842–48), 2:429; Fish, *Civil Service*, pp. 91, 165; Denis T. Lynch, 'The Growth of Political Parties, 1777–1828," in *History of the State of New York*, ed. Alexander C. Flick, 10 vols. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1934), 6:54, 56, 68, 72, 83, 110.

[61] According to Kernell's figures for five selected decades of the nineteenth century, the withdrawal rate averaged 44 percent in districts with party turnover (calculated from Kernell, "Ambition, Competition, and Rotation," p. 681, Table 1). Formula A below assumes that in districts with party turnover, fully half the incumbents anticipated the worst and did not seek renomination for fear of defeat in the interparty competition. Kernell, however, regards interparty competition of the nineteenth century as insignificant for promoting withdrawals (ibid., p. 682).

Formula A

$$w' = \frac{x+y}{2} + z$$

percent, respectively, from the margins by which Pennsylvania and Ohio trail New York in the first column (all terms) and (assuming ambition was relatively equal in the three states) the remainder of New York's lead in the withdrawal rate is attributable to rotation. Yet according to Kernell's formula (percentage for sophomores minus percentage for freshmen), New York is by far the weakest of the three in supporting rotation. The relative strength of rotation in the three states, using the Kernell formula, is exactly the reverse of what the first three columns indicate.

It is clear, then, that the procedure whereby the withdrawal rate for freshmen is a "benchmark" against which to measure the effect of rotation in other classes is not valid for the antebellum period. In this light Kernell's formula is highly questionable for the post-bellum rotation as well. Since freshmen were far more numerous than any other single class, and until 1876 usually constituted a majority of the House, the proportion of House careers ended by rotation must have been much larger than Kernell's estimate, which is based exclusively on the set of congressmen who belonged to the sophomore class.[62]

Kernell does state that his effort is "an educated guess" about the relative effects of ambition, competition, and rotation. However, ranking the three factors according to their percentage effects on House turnover stretches the empirical evidence beyond reasonable limits. The findings above indicate the contributions of the three factors in terminating the careers of the nineteenth-century congressmen are simply too causally interrelated, and their borders too indistinct, to be sorted out with any hope of factuality.

Conclusion

Rotation in office was a development of the American Revolution, with precedents dating back to ancient Greece and republican Rome. The fervor and altruism began to fade, however, and political realities supplanted some of the origi-

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Where:

w = actual total withdrawals for state in question.

w′ = adjusted total withdrawals at hypothetical party turnover rate.

x = number of districts in state with party turnover.

y = additional number of districts with party turnover assuming some higher rate of party turnover.

$z = w - \left(\frac{x}{2}\right)$ = withdrawals not due to anticipated party turnover.

Under Formula A, dividing w′ by the size of the state's delegation in the expiring ten Houses (N. Y., 358; Penn., 261; Ohio, 210) yields the adjusted withdrawal rate for a hypothetical party turnover rate. Applying New York's party turnover rate to the other states adjusts the withdrawal rate upward to 57 percent for Pennsylvania and 46 percent for Ohio—still below the 65 percent rate for New York.

[62] Laurence Powell writes that there is good reason for attributing largely to rotation the amazingly high House turnover of the nineteenth century, for the practice of giving turns to the various counties and aspiring politicians would surely have had "more than a casual bearing" ("Rejected Republican Incumbents," pp. 235–36).

nal ideals. One of the casualties in the twelfth year of the new Republic was the legal maximum on consecutive terms in Congress.

After 1789 short-tenure norms persisted, notwithstanding the lawfulness of multiple reelections. But unlike the two-term tradition in the presidency, which became almost sacred with age,[63] the rotation of congressmen was tainted over several decades and discredited. From the age of Jackson onward, spoilsmen distorted the principle of rotation into a philosophy and policy quite different from the original.[64] Perhaps the geographic spread of the hundreds of nominating conventions, coupled with the lack of a constitutional system of nonpartisan rotation, made it inevitable that the extraconstitutional practice would sooner or later be politicized and diverted from service to the Republic as a whole.

Eventually the United States embraced the antithesis of rotation, thereby culminating a conceptual revolution that was slow but sweeping. This revolution negated America's initial revolt against old evaluations of tenure, which had taken place when the thirteen former colonies instituted rotation in the Continental Congress. Parliament and monarchy in the Mother Country had abhorred such Harringtonian aberrations.[65] Thus, when careerism reemerged it was, in a sense, a reversion to the prerevolutionary standard. In short, the professionalization of the House represented a counterrevolution against an original principle of the American Revolution.

[63] In 1875 the House of Representatives passed by the extraordinary margin of 233 to 18 the following resolution:

> "*Resolved*, That, in the opinion of this House, the precedent established by Washington and other Presidents of the United States, in retiring from the presidential office after their second term, has become, by universal concurrence, a part of our republican system of government, and that any departure from this time honored custom would be unwise, unpatriotic, and fraught with peril to our free institutions" (U.S., Congress, House, *Congressional Record*, 44th Cong., 1st sess., 1875, 4, pt. 1:228). Half a century later an essentially identical resolution passed the Senate, 56 to 26. See U.S., Congress, Senate, *Congressional Record*, 70th Cong., 1st sess., 1928, 69, pt. 3:2842. For a thorough history of the two-term limit in the presidency see, Charles W. Stein, *The Third-Term Tradition* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1943).

[64] Whitridge, "Rotation in Office," pp. 282–84, 288–89.

[65] According to John Aubrey, a contemporary of James Harrington, all but eight or ten members of Parliament in 1659 "hated" Harrington's plans for parliamentary rotation. See John Aubrey, *Brief Lives, chiefly of contemporaries . . .* , ed. Andrew Clark, 2 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1898), 1:291. See also, Edmund Burke, *Reflections On The Revolution In France* (Middlesex, England: Pelican Classics, 1968), p. 139.