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Filibustering: A Political History Of Obstruction In The House And Senate (Chicago Studies In American Politics)



Synopsis

In the modern Congress, one of the highest hurdles for major bills or nominations is gaining the sixty votes necessary to shut off a filibuster in the Senate. But this wasn't always the case. Both citizens and scholars tend to think of the legislative process as a game played by the rules in which votes are the critical commodity – the side that has the most votes wins. In this comprehensive volume, Gregory Koger shows, on the contrary, that filibustering is a game with slippery rules in which legislators who think fast and try hard can triumph over superior numbers. Filibustering explains how and why obstruction has been institutionalized in the U.S. Senate over the last fifty years, and how this transformation affects politics and policymaking. Koger also traces the lively history of filibustering in the U.S. House during the nineteenth century and measures the effects of filibustering – bills killed, compromises struck, and new issues raised by obstruction. Unparalleled in the depth of its theory and its combination of historical and political analysis, Filibustering will be the definitive study of its subject for years to come.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

"Filibustering offers an impressive theory of obstruction that undercuts conventional wisdom on the filibuster and provides a more complete analysis of this important topic than has previously been available either in one source or collectively." - Bruce I. Oppenheimer, Vanderbilt University"

Gregory Koger is assistant professor of political science at the University of Miami. Previously, he worked as a legislative assistant in the U.S. House of Representatives.

When most people think of filibustering they probably recall the famous scene from *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington* where Senator Smith stands up and speaks endlessly in front of the Senate. Or maybe they recall from school Strom Thurmond's more than twenty-four hour talk-a-thon on the Senate floor filibustering the Civil Rights Act of 1957. But various other tactics have been used in the history of Congress. The book is roughly divided into two parts. The first deals with the historic Congress from 1789-1901 and the other is the modern Congress from 1901-present. Interestingly, during the nineteenth century filibustering was far more common in the House of Representatives through disappearing quorums and unnecessary roll call votes. Then rule changes in the 1890s put an effective end to filibustering in the House. In the Senate, obstruction led to the enactment of the cloture rule in 1917. Paradoxically, the cloture rule only seemed to increase the amount of filibustering rather than put a stop to it. Events over the twentieth century led to the so-called sixty vote Senate. Sixty votes being necessary to pass significant legislation. Also examined is the use of holds. The author examines the motivation for filibustering and what leads to the proliferation of it. All in all, a pretty interesting look at the filibuster in the U.S. Congress. A good read for anyone interested in political history or Congressional history.

I have sought over the years to find a theoretically-compelling, empirically rich, and accessible treatment of the filibuster. Now that I've read Koger's book, "Filibustering", I have stopped searching. Why is this book so good? First, it treats the filibuster in the Senate as but one case of the larger concept of obstruction. Koger demonstrates that obstruction can occur in the House or the Senate--and that patterns of obstruction observed over time and the response by chamber majorities to that obstruction relates to the value of time. As a legislator's time becomes more valuable, both the decision of an individual legislator to obstruct and the majority's response to that obstruction is altered. Filibustering is frequent in today's Senate because Senate majorities are not willing to wait out filibusters--time waiting out filibusters is better spent raising money, campaigning, or doing committee work. Filibustering largely ceased in the House during the late 19th century because party majorities, frustrated by obstructive minorities, altered the House rules (at great short-term political cost) to make filibustering much more difficult. Another reason why I'm a fan of the book: Koger takes measurement seriously. Filibustering and obstruction can be elusive buggers to nail down: they are tricky to observe from roll call votes alone. Koger uses a mixed measurement

approach to the problem--culling filibustering from roll call records and media accounts to develop a defensible measure of legislative obstruction. He demonstrates its validity by carefully walking the reader through the construction of his obstruction data and comparing it other measures. To witness the amount of time and effort put into the careful development of his filibustering data alone is worth the price of admission. But the most important contribution Koger makes, in my humble opinion, is the demonstration that single-peaked preferences alone do not explain the voting behavior of members of Congress. For example, Koger provides evidence that members may actually filibuster a bill they prefer to see passed simply to prevent another bill--one that members do not want to see passed--from acted upon. In other words, preferences are not single-peaked -members take into account timing, scheduling, and other factors when deciding to obstruct a bill. Demonstrating the practical problems of treating each and every vote as if it were arrayed along a single ideological dimension is long overdue, and suggests the perils of adopting theoretical assumptions which overly simplify what is in practice a complex preference calculation with many competing dimensions. Great book, and a great read. Suitable for a wide-range of audiences.

I liked his analysis, and particularly the afterword/epilogue sections. I also enjoyed hearing some of the stories and tactics employed by filibusters. I didn't enjoy the statistics and numbers part of the book, but I do appreciate that he drew his conclusions from more than just random stories. Regardless a very good book even for those like me who are outside the field.

Its definitely intuitive as far the the filibustering process and effect, however, It was a little dry in reading.

While this book is a good and very comprehensive guide to the history of filibustering in the United States -- which has a more complex history than I was really aware of -- there are two problems with this book from my perspective: first, the writing is just too dry. This book could have been filled with vivid anecdotes and great stories, stories that could have underlined the point and brought the book to life. Second, the book is almost too detailed. There is always a delicate balance in a book of this kind regarding how much detail should be included, and for my tastes the authors of these kind of books often err on the side of being too inclusive. While I understand why that would happen -- and one can, after all, skip the parts that don't interest us -- I still find that pithy is better. Otherwise it starts reading like a government memo, as this book sometimes does. Still, I got one very clear insight from this book, and that is that the United States Senate changed the filibustering -- which

had formerly required Senators to speak on the floor of the Senate for as long as they wanted to hold the floor to one in which the Senators only need to "threaten" to filibuster -- for the comfort and convenience of the Senators. That is so wrong; the whole point of the process is that it's supposed to be uncomfortable. It's supposed to require the devotion of a Mr. Smith goes to Washington. It's supposed to be reserved for the issues that individual Senators care most passionately about, it's not supposed to be an ordinary parliamentary procedure. Shame on the United States Senate. And it's too bad that these authors didn't write a more vivid book.

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