CONGRESSIONAL GOVERNMENT

A STUDY IN AMERICAN POLITICS

BY

WOODROW WILSON

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CONGRESSIONAL GOVERNMENT. A Study in American Politics.

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BOSTON AND NEW YORK

To

His Father,

THE PATIENT GUIDE OF HIS YOUTH,

THE GRACIOUS COMPANION OF HIS MANHOOD,

HIS BEST INSTRUCTOR AND MOST LENIENT CRITIC,

This Book

IS AFFECTIONATELY DEDICATED

BY

THE AUTHOR.

PREFACE TO FIFTEENTH EDITION.

I HAVE been led by the publication of a French translation of this little volume to read it through very carefully, for the first time since its first appearance. The re-reading has convinced me that it ought not to go to another impression without a word or two by way of preface with regard to the changes which our singular system of Congressional government has undergone since these pages were written.

I must ask those who read them now to remember that they were written during the years 1883 and 1884, and that, inasmuch as they describe a living system, like all other living things subject to constant subtle modifications, alike of form and of function, their description of the government of the United States is not as accurate now as I believe it to have been at the time I wrote it.

This is, as might have been expected, more

noticeable in matters of detail than in matters of substance. There are now, for example, not three hundred and twenty-five, but three hundred and fifty-seven members in the House of Representatives; and that number will, no doubt, be still further increased by the reapportionment which will follow the census of the present year. The number of committees in both Senate and House is constantly on the increase. It is now usually quite sixty in the House, and in the Senate more than forty. There has been a still further addition to the number of the "spending" committees in the House of Representatives, by the subdivision of the powerful Committee on Appropriations. Though the number of committees in nominal control of the finances of the country is still as large as ever, the tendency is now towards a concentration of all that is vital in the business into the hands of a few of the more prominent, which are most often mentioned in the text. The auditing committees on the several departments, for example, have now for some time exercised little more than a merely nominal oversight over executive expenditures.

Since the text was written, the Tenure of Office Act, which sought to restrict the President's removal from office, has been repealed; and even before its repeal it was, in fact, inoperative. After the time of President Johnson, against whom it was aimed, the party in power in Congress found little occasion to insist upon its enforcement; its constitutionality was doubtful, and it fell into the background. I did not make sufficient allowance for these facts in writing the one or two sentences of the book which refer to the Act.

Neither did I give sufficient weight, I now believe, to the powers of the Secretary of the Treasury. However minutely bound, guided, restricted by statute, his power has proved at many a critical juncture in our financial history — notably in our recent financial history — of the utmost consequence. Several times since this book was written, the country has been witness to his decisive influence upon the money markets, in the use of his authority with regard to the bond issues of the government and his right to control the disposition of the funds of the Treasury. In these matters, however, he

has exercised, not political, but business power. He has helped the markets as a banker would help them. He has altered no policy. He has merely made arrangements which would release money for use and facilitate loan and investment. The country feels safer when an experienced banker, like Mr. Gage, is at the head of the Treasury, than when an experienced politician is in charge of it.

All these, however, are matters of detail. There are matters of substance to speak of also.

It is to be doubted whether I could say quite so confidently now as I said in 1884 that the Senate of the United States faithfully represents the several elements of the nation's make-up, and furnishes us with a prudent and normally constituted moderating and revising chamber. Certainly vested interests have now got a much more formidable hold upon the Senate than they seemed to have sixteen years ago. Its political character also has undergone a noticeable change. The tendency seems to be to make of the Senate, instead of merely a smaller and more deliberate House of Representatives, a body of successful party managers.

Still, these features of its life may be temporary, and may easily be exaggerated. We do not yet know either whether they will persist, or, should they persist, whither they will lead us.

A more important matter — at any rate, a thing more concrete and visible — is the gradual integration of the organization of the House of Representatives. The power of the Speaker has of late years taken on new phases. He is now, more than ever, expected to guide and control the whole course of business in the House, — if not alone, at any rate through the instrumentality of the small Committee on Rules, of which he is chairman. That committee is expected not only to reformulate and revise from time to time the permanent Rules of the House, but also to look closely to the course of its business from day to day, make its programme, and virtually control its use of its time. The committee consists of five members; but the Speaker and the two other members of the committee who represent the majority in the House determine its action; and its action is allowed to govern the House. It in effect regulates the precedence of measures. When-

ever occasion requires, it determines what shall, and what shall not, be undertaken. It is like a steering ministry, — without a ministry's public responsibility, and without a ministry's right to speak for both houses. It is a private piece of party machinery within the single chamber for which it acts. The Speaker himself — not as a member of the Committee on Rules, but by the exercise of his right to "recognize" on the floor — undertakes to determine very absolutely what bills individual members shall be allowed to bring to a vote, out of the regular order fixed by the rules or arranged by the Committee on Rules.

This obviously creates, in germ at least, a recognized and sufficiently concentrated leadership within the House. The country is beginning to know that the Speaker and the Committee on Rules must be held responsible in all ordinary seasons for the success or failure of the session, so far as the House is concerned. The congressional caucus has fallen a little into the background. It is not often necessary to call it together, except when the majority is impatient or recalcitrant under the guidance of

the Committee on Rules. To this new leadership, however, as to everything else connected with committee government, the taint of privacy attaches. It is not leadership upon the open floor, avowed, defended in public debate, set before the view and criticism of the country. It integrates the House alone, not the Senate; does not unite the two houses in policy; affects only the chamber in which there is the least opportunity for debate, the least chance that responsibility may be properly and effectively lodged and avowed. It has only a very remote and partial resemblance to genuine party leadership.

Much the most important change to be noticed is the result of the war with Spain upon the lodgment and exercise of power within our federal system: the greatly increased power and opportunity for constructive statesmanship given the President, by the plunge into international politics and into the administration of distant dependencies, which has been that war's most striking and momentous consequence. When foreign affairs play a prominent part in the politics and policy of a nation, its Executive

must of necessity be its guide: must utter every initial judgment, take every first step of action, supply the information upon which it is to act, suggest and in large measure control its conduct. The President of the United States is now, as of course, at the front of affairs, as no president, except Lincoln, has been since the first quarter of the nineteenth century, when the foreign relations of the new nation had first to be adjusted. There is no trouble now about getting the President's speeches printed and read, every word. Upon his choice, his character, his experience hang some of the most weighty issues of the future. The government of dependencies must be largely in his hands. Interesting things may come out of the singular change.

For one thing, new prizes in public service may attract a new order of talent. The nation may get a better civil service, because of the sheer necessity we shall be under of organizing a service capable of carrying the novel burdens we have shouldered.

It may be, too, that the new leadership of the Executive, inasmuch as it is likely to last, will

have a very far-reaching effect upon our whole method of government. It may give the heads of the executive departments a new influence upon the action of Congress. It may bring about, as a consequence, an integration which will substitute statesmanship for government by mass meeting. It may put this whole volume hopelessly out of date.

WOODROW WILSON.

PRINCETON UNIVERSITY, 15 *August*, 1900.

PREFACE.

THE object of these essays is not to exhaust criticism of the government of the United States, but only to point out the most characteristic practical features of the federal system. Taking Congress as the central and predominant power of the system, their object is to illustrate everything Congressional. Everybody has seen, and critics without number have said, that our form of national government is singular, possessing a character altogether its own; but there is abundant evidence that very few have seen just wherein it differs most essentially from the other governments of the world. There have been and are other federal systems quite similar, and scarcely any legislative or administrative principle of our Constitution was young even when that Constitution was framed. It is our legislative and administrative *machinery* which makes our government essentially different from all other great governmental systems. The most

striking contrast in modern politics is not between presidential and monarchical governments, but between Congressional and Parliamentary governments. Congressional government is Committee government; Parliamentary government is government by a responsible Cabinet Ministry. These are the two principal types which present themselves for the instruction of the modern student of the practical in politics: administration by semi-independent executive agents who obey the dictation of a legislature to which they are not responsible, and administration by executive agents who are the accredited leaders and accountable servants of a legislature virtually supreme in all things. My chief aim in these essays has been, therefore, an adequate illustrative contrast of these two types of government, with a view to making as plain as possible the actual conditions of federal administration. In short, I offer, not a commentary, but an outspoken presentation of such cardinal facts as may be sources of practical suggestion.

WOODROW WILSON

JOHNS HOPKINS UNIVERSITY, *October* 7, 1884.

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A STUDY IN AMERICAN POLITICS.

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INTRODUCTORY.

The laws reach but a very little way. Constitute government how you please, infinitely the greater part of it must depend upon the exercise of powers, which are left at large to the prudence and uprightness of ministers of state. Even all the use and potency of the laws depends upon them. Without them your commonwealth is no better than a scheme upon paper; and not a living, active, effective organization. — BURKE.

The great fault of political writers is their too close adherence to the forms of the system of state which they happen to be expounding or examining. They stop short at the anatomy of institutions, and do not penetrate to the secret of their functions. — JOHN MORLEY.

IT would seem as if a very wayward fortune had presided over the history of the Constitution of the United States, inasmuch as that great federal charter has been alternately violated by its friends and defended by its enemies. It came hard by its establishment in the first place, prevailing with difficulty over the strenuous forces of dissent which were banded against it. While its adoption was under discussion the voices of criticism were many and authoritative, the voices of opposition loud in tone and omi-