

Congress and America's Political Development: The Transformation of the Post Office from Patronage to Service

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Students of American political development portray the transformation of the bureaucracy from patronage to service as the handiwork of progressive presidents. In this article we explore Congress' *programmatic* contribution to the transformation of the bureaucracy. Specifically, we examine the development of rural free delivery (RFD) during the 1890's. The early administrative history of RFD and a statistical analysis of initial route allocations identify a strong partisan and electoral rationale for the Republican Congress's decision to dismantle patronage Fourth class post offices and replace them with RFD routes. Freshmen Republican members who faced difficult campaigns in 1900 were the most successful in gathering routes while their Democratic counterparts were the least so. We conclude that the emergence of careerist congressmen looking for opportunities to serve constituents provided an important impetus in the historic reorientation of national policy from patronage to service.

Throughout the nineteenth century the political fortunes of members of Congress depended heavily on their ability to send patronage home to their states and districts. They owed their offices and subsequent careers to the efforts of local party organizations in their districts. These mostly county-level organizations selected the candidates, sponsored local-party newspapers, printed the ballots and turned out the party faithful on election day. Those members of Congress whose party controlled the presidency repaid these labor-intensive services with an ample supply of federal patronage. Most of these jobs were located in the post office, but customs houses and other federal facilities also provided local employment opportunities for the party faithful and others who were prepared to tithe to the party's coffers. Political parties organized their activities in Washington and across the nation as if their sole mission were to win the next presidential election and with it, control of Congress.

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Yet at the height of strong party government in America (Brady 1985), politicians in Washington began to dismantle the federal patronage system. In 1883 Congress passed the Pendleton Act establishing the civil service commission and immediately classified about 6,000 jobs in Washington and within larger federal facilities offices across the country, most of which were urban post offices. More important, it also delegated to the president authority to issue executive orders moving additional jobs from patronage into the new civil service system of merit-based recruitment and protection from political removal. From that date until 1921, the proportion of the federal civilian workforce covered by civil service grew from 10 to 80 percent. At the same time, the number of federal jobs expanded almost fivefold to 562,252. This presents an intriguing question for students of American political development: Why did they do it? Why did these politicians choose to abandon an entrenched patronage system that had served them well in favor of one designed to insulate employees from their control?

The conventional history of this era (White 1958; Van Riper 1958; Skowronek 1982) answers this question by emphasizing the critical role played by presidents—especially progressive presidents—in invoking authority granted in the Pendleton Act to extend civil service. In describing this era's administrative reforms, Skowronek (1982, 186) writes: Theodore Roosevelt "carried the challenge of *executive-professional* reconstitution to the brink . . . of constitutional crisis. . . . Driving a wedge between national administration and local politics [represented in Congress], he jolted long-established governing arrangements and permanently altered national institutional politics."¹ This president-led revolution contains the essential components of a satisfying answer to the previous question. First, one can easily identify presidential actions—mostly in the form of executive orders—that led directly to reform. Second, short-term political considerations (as their party was about to surrender office to the opposition) and the weakening partisan ties of presidents (as they entered the twilight of their careers) provide these actors with a rationale for divesting patronage.²

While presidents' executive orders extending civil service were undeniably important, they were neither a singular, nor perhaps the most consequential, class of public policy refashioning America's bureaucracy during

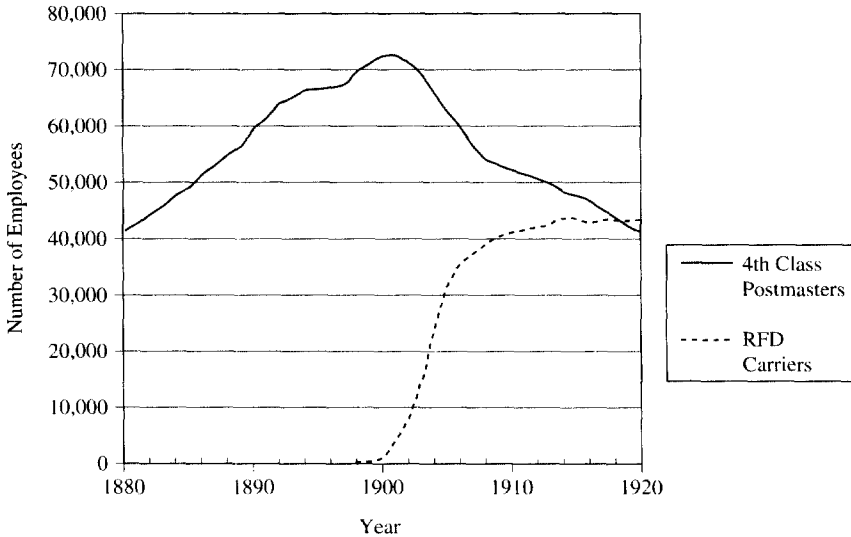
¹Citing this executive order and subsequent ones like it, Skowronek argues that progressive presidents teamed with a vocal national reform movement to "break the bonds" between Congress and state and county political parties "that tied civilian administration to local politics and to forge an executive-centered reconstitution of civil administration in its place" (1982, 179).

²By classifying jobs as they were about to surrender the White House to the opposition, presidents could protect the current class of patronage appointees from automatic dismissal and remove them from the opposition's control as vacancies arose (see Van Riper 1958).

the turn of the century. One must also consider the dramatic expansion in federal programs that were occurring at the same time. By any measure, this was an era of rapid growth of the federal government (Wiebe 1967 and Keller 1977). From the 1880s to the 1920s federal spending increased at an annual rate of 15 percent and employment at 12 percent. Every year found more employees providing more services to more citizens.

Perhaps these trends reflect a growing appetite for constituency service within Congress that the patronage system was ill suited to deliver. Unlike civil service extensions, the creation and maintenance of new programs required Congress' active participation. In this article we investigate Congress' interest in *programmatically* transforming the bureaucracy from patronage to service. Specifically, we shall examine a single policy innovation—the creation of rural free mail delivery, or RFD, during the late 1890s. Although this policy might strike the modern reader as too narrow and esoteric for testing broad arguments about Congress' role in American political development, it is, in reality, particularly well suited to this task. The post office contained more patronage jobs than all the other federal departments combined. Within it, the Division of Fourth Class Postmaster with its approximately 77,000 rural postmasters represented the federal government's largest patronage pool. Its sheer size explains why the most celebrated executive orders extending civil service include those targeting the rural postal system. With RFD, we are investigating Congress' role on the same field of action where presidents won their spurs as reformers (Skowronek 1982). Finally, RFD is theoretically intriguing in that its destructive impact on patronage was evident. Members of Congress recognized this and yet, rather than manning the barricades, they personally supervised dismemberment of rural patronage and its replacement with RFD. From its inception, RFD was wildly popular, as can be seen in the steep inverse trends between numbers of RFD carriers and Fourth class postmasters in Figure 1.

In the next section we examine Congress' role in the creation and early administration of this new federal service. RFD has a rich and suggestive legislative history that presents many members of the House of Representatives gingerly, yet concertedly, discarding their postmasters in favor of mail carriers. They undertook this task with a dedication that one normally associates with politicians who are worried about the next election. In the third section we turn from the narrative history to a statistical analysis of the distribution of carrier routes across districts during the first two years of the full program. Some constituencies received dozens of routes, others none at all. A number of district-level electoral features—including party control, electoral marginality, the presence of a prominent Populist candidate, and the incumbent's reelection status—explains the early allocation of

Figure 1. Postal Employment, 1880–1920

Source: Various issues of Annual Report of the Postmaster General.

RFD routes. We conclude by assessing how well the actions of the late nineteenth-century Congress conform to our understanding of modern congressional politics.

1. A BRIEF HISTORY OF RURAL POSTAL POLICY

In this age of overnight delivery of international mail, fax machines, and e-mail, one might easily miss the significance of rural free delivery (RFD) for the nation's rural citizenry. In an era of slow transportation and poor communication, when other federal services—such as rural electrification, farm price supports, and social security—were only a gleam in some visionary's eye, rural free delivery represented a major advance in federal services for the nation's large farm population.³ Today, RFD remains the postal agency that delivers the mail to millions of rural Americans.

³One former postmaster observed that "Before free delivery was started, there were thirteen daily newspapers taken at Turner post office. Today, [1899] there are 113. . . . With the general extension of rural free mail delivery there will be less talk about the monotony of farm life" (Chu 1932, 67).

1.1 The Age of the Postmaster

At the close of the nineteenth century, the nation's rural landscape was blanketed with Fourth class post offices. Typically, they were housed in general stores located in rural America's many hamlets or crossroads. The postmaster received a direct federal stipend of only several hundred dollars a year, but when combined with commissions from the sale of stamps and other services, the postmaster's direct remuneration averaged about \$1,000 annually. More important, however, was the traffic the post office generated for their businesses.

These postmasters endeared themselves to members of the House of Representatives through their regular, personal contact with a remote segment of the electorate. During elections, postmasters were known discreetly to insert the incumbent's campaign literature with the customer's mail. Between elections, they listened to complaints from this far-flung constituency and alerted the congressman to discontent and potential opponents. With these political assets, members of the House of Representatives from the president's party jealously guarded their prerogative to name each one of their districts 200–250 postmasters.⁴ Except in those districts controlled by the opposition party, everyone, including the post office department and the state's Senators, respected the House member's property claim to these offices.

Congressmen doted on their postmasters. Even documented instances of gross incompetence and embezzlement of postal funds sometimes proved insufficient to dislodge a representative's embrace and permit the post office to dismiss the postmaster. Rural postmasters did not enjoy job security, however. They entered office knowing that their tenure was tied to the electoral fortunes of both their sponsor and his party's presidential candidate. When the partisan political tides shifted, a diaspora of postmasters ensued. The civil service commission reported that turnover of Fourth class postmasters approached eighty percent from 1883 to 1901. Partisanship and political service—not competence and honesty—governed a rural postmaster's tenure.

RFD did not suddenly burst onto the national stage in the late 1890s as if spawned by crisis in the nation's rural postal system. Rather, grass roots

⁴In stressing the importance of these offices, one contemporary observer estimated that House members spent between one-third and three-quarters of their workdays attending to these postmasters, clearly an exaggeration. A study of the Civil Service Reform League found that 250 Fourth class vacancies generated an average of 1,700 applications. (Fowler 1943, 215) When the opposition controlled a district's seat, this responsibility tended to be distributed in various ways. If the state's senators were members of the administration party, they were given an opportunity to name these postmasters as would the state's representative on the party's national committee and the state's party chairman.

pressure for mail delivery had been building for decades. It probably began sometime during the mid-1860s when the first farmer spotted an urban free delivery carrier making his daily rounds and, feeling slighted, wrote his or her congressman. In the 1870s the National Grange adopted rural free delivery as a legislative goal (Gardner 1949), and local affiliates began pressing their representatives to sponsor and support RFD legislation in Congress. In 1889 Postmaster General John Wanamaker endorsed the concept and began promoting it with farm groups. If the department-farm group alliance did not suffice to prick these politicians' interest, surely the Populist party's well-publicized endorsement of RFD at its 1892 and 1896 presidential nomination conventions got their attention. In the summer of 1896, as Populist congressional challengers mounted serious campaigns throughout rural America, they and their party's attractive presidential nominee, William Jennings Bryan, ran on a platform of free silver, free trade, and free rural mail delivery.

Rural Republican congressmen confronted a festering political problem. In 1892 a House Committee on the Post Office and Postal Roads report identified a solution in RFD: "It is believed that rural free delivery will aid materially in stopping much of the growing discontent that now seems to exist among the farming population." The next year a Republican Congress followed up this recommendation by appropriating \$10,000 to underwrite a trial program. Citing prohibitive costs of a full-scale delivery program and other pressing work, the newly elected Democratic administration and its post office did nothing. In 1895 the House postal committee increased funding to \$20,000 and mandated that the Postmaster General report back with a feasibility plan within the year. Again, the department balked. Later that year, after a more enthusiastic Postmaster General assumed office, the department undertook the pilot study. Once again the House Post Office committee doubled its previous authorization to \$40,000. After languishing in the appropriations committee for months, Populist Bryan's blooming candidacy and a Grange petition with 75,000 signatures persuaded lawmakers that a propitious moment to test rural free delivery had at last arrived.

1.2 Launching RFD

Fifty-nine trial routes were created in 1896 and 469 followed during the next two years. Critics voiced suspicion that the department was trying to subvert the experimental program by locating routes along impassable roads and among remote homesteads. Yet the routes proved wildly popular, and boosters argued that the increased mail revenue would largely offset the increased costs of rural carriers. Members of the House postal committee listened politely to the department's less sanguine assessment and proceeded to

authorize \$150,000 to begin setting up these routes wherever practical. During 1899 and 1900 a separate RFD division was created within the department, and 1,638 routes were soon established. Two years later President Roosevelt signed a bill making rural delivery a permanent federal service.

The meteoric rise of rural free delivery displayed in Figure 1 suggests that members of Congress willingly, indeed eagerly, traded in their postmasters for mailboxes. In fact, members from both parties clamored for carrier routes faster than they could be laid out. Early on, rules rationing them had to be devised. Along with the distribution of routes, rules governing the substitution of carriers for postmasters proved especially difficult. Presumably everyone recognized that carriers made Fourth class postmasters redundant. No one appreciated this better than did the postmasters themselves. "The animal instinct of self-preservation is strong in the postmaster, who has a store in connection with his post office," averred a rural post office agent who had encountered hostile postmasters while setting up carrier routes (Fuller 1964, 41). In some states these small businessmen organized and circulated petitions across the country to oppose RFD. Some even sent representatives to Washington to remonstrate their grievances with politicians, whom they felt had betrayed them.

House members were understandably vexed. They wanted new routes, but they envisioned reprisals in the next election from displaced postmasters. One Republican congressman confided to a friend in the postal department that were he to be identified with the closing post offices, he could not "outlive the resentment of the men who would thus be deprived of their annual income" (Fuller 1964, 87). Such a move would, he judged, amount to "political suicide." The Republican postal department tried to relieve pressure on its party's House members by allowing some to name the carriers. Yet these 10-hour-day jobs, for which the carrier was expected to supply his own transportation, hardly represented the kind of patronage that would earn the gratitude of local party officials or leave them sufficient leisure for party service. The department also tried another solution in directing its agents to lay no routes within a half-mile of a post office. Almost immediately those constituents who lived within that radius—including at least one postmaster's daughter (Fuller 1964, 87)—protested that they were being reduced to chattel of the postal lord. Within eighteen months this rule was rescinded. In 1901 the post office formalized practice with a rule mandating that each new route would entail the closure of one or more Fourth class post offices. The final step from patronage to service came in 1902 when President Theodore Roosevelt issued an executive order incorporating rural carriers into the civil service system.

1.3 Congressional Administration Of Early RFD

In 1899 fed up with the claims of irate postmasters, incontinent congressmen, and communities plaintively seeking this new entitlement, the department turned over initial route selection to members of Congress. If a community wanted a route, it had formally to petition its congressman who then ranked and forwarded the approved request to the department. The department then examined the feasibility of the proposed route and made the final placement decision (Carpenter 1998). Although there were exceptions to this procedure, department guidelines and member practices consistently portray an administrative process in which House members initiated but did not dictate routes. Proposed routes might be turned down as impractical or overly expensive, and perhaps unsaid, lacking political merit. Moreover, the shortage of routes left postal officials with an opportunity to inject their own administrative preferences into allocation decisions. Yet, whatever its shortcomings, this procedure allowed representatives to claim credit for new placements, blame the department for rejected petitions, and, if they so desired, block entry of RFD into their communities by refusing to endorse petitions.⁵

Beginning in 1899, after its initial four-year trial, the RFD grew at a torrid pace. Demand soon outstripped supply. Communities competed fiercely for their representative's certification, and within Congress controversy arose over the concentration of routes in a few districts while others received none.⁶ The loudest protest came from aggrieved southern Democrats. "The state of Kansas," complained a South Carolina Democrat in 1906, "as rock-ribbed and everlasting in her republicanism as South Carolina in her democracy . . . had in operation 1,555 routes, as against 532 from South Carolina—a difference of over a thousand routes in favor of Republican Kansas" (Fuller 1964, 64). In response to these charges, the post office department acquitted itself in the best tradition of bureaucrats everywhere—by citing objective, universal criteria that deemed some districts to be more suitable

⁵By and large, Senators kept their hands off Fourth class postmasters and subsequently off RFD. They worked intimately with the Post Office on state-level administrative appointments and the scandal-plagued star route contractors who delivered the mail to the post offices. We suspect that at times and in those districts where the congressman was a member of the opposition party, senators wearing their hats as state party leaders or brokers did become involved in postmaster appointments and perhaps even RFD allocations. Formally, the local parties in districts controlled by the opposition were directed to submit names through their state's national committee representative to the national party chairman, who as likely as not, also served as Postmaster General (Fowler 1943).

⁶After its 1899 allocations had exhausted appropriated funds during the first quarter of the fiscal year, the department issued yet another rule stating that no district would receive more than half of its petitioned requests until other districts had been similarly supplied.

recipients of routes than others. Efficiency, the department reasoned, required that these scarce resources be allocated where they would offer the greatest benefit—namely, in those communities with the greatest volume of mail. With the South's higher levels of illiteracy, the Postmaster General reasoned, this region received less mail and could not, therefore, justify its claims. We suspect that southern critics found little solace in the secretary's reasoning that southerners had only their own illiteracy to blame for failing to qualify for this new federal program.

2. EXPLAINING EARLY ROUTE ALLOCATIONS

The above colloquy interests us theoretically as well as historically, for it poses a specific instance of the general question raised at the outset of our discussion: Did the transformation from patronage to service occur as an executive-led, good government reform or did it somehow satisfy "the base desire to win elections" (Thomas Reed's penetrating irony)? Identifying *where* routes were allocated across rural America will inform our understanding of *why* postal reform was undertaken.

Fortunately, the data exist for answering this "where" question, at least during the critical early years when the first steps were taken to replace Fourth class postmasters with carriers. From 1895 through 1900, the department provided the House postal committee with annual county-by-county tallies of routes. Since with few exceptions rural congressional districts were comprised of two or more whole counties, members could easily check the number of routes flowing into their districts and compare their success with that of their colleagues. With the aid of nineteenth-century district maps (Parsons, Dubin, and Parsons 1990), so can we.⁷

2.1 Executive Efficiency versus Congressional Partisanship

Our figures validate southern members' complaints. From 1895 to 1900, the ninety rural districts in the former Confederate states averaged 2.1 routes, compared to an average of 9.7 for the rest of the country. Moreover, a large share of these southern routes was located in the 10 percent of the

⁷We were able to locate the 2,136 RFD routes in rural counties from 1895 through 1900. In those few cases where districts split counties, such as in Massachusetts, we assigned routes to districts according to the route's originating town was located. Unfortunately, after 1900 post office annual route reports were aggregated to the state level. In a similar manner, we used county level data reported in the *12th Census of Population, 1900* (1978) to produce literacy rates for congressional districts. Since the county data contains counts of people, we were easily able to calculate district-level literacy rates. Where districts split counties, we assigned a fraction of the population equal to the inverse of the number of districts splitting the county. Since there is very little variation in literacy rates in adjacent counties, we feel that this method closely approximates the true literacy rate in those split-county cases.

congressional districts controlled by Republicans. Removing this group from the calculation, we find that Southern Democrats received 1.6 routes per district.

One need not look hard at literacy rates across the nation during these years to suspect that the Republican administration's argument was a convenient excuse for piling up routes in Republican districts. Although congressional districts in the South did lag behind the rest of rural America in the percentage of adults who satisfied the Census Bureau's definition of literacy—81 percent compared to 96 percent literate—we find little evidence beyond this regional difference that routes followed literacy. Most telling, routes varied greatly across nonsouthern districts while literacy did not. Conversely, literacy varied significantly across southern districts but did not correlate with the distribution of routes.

A casual inspection of these distributions reveals that party affiliation of the representative far better differentiates the "haves" from the "have-nots" both within and across regions. During 1899 and 1900 Republican-controlled districts won nearly four times as many routes as did their Democratic neighbors, although they controlled only nine more rural House seats. Southerners appear to have been denied routes not because of their higher levels of illiteracy but because of their higher levels of Democracy.

2.2 Republican Leaders and Members

Signs of Republican favoritism and howls of Democratic protests lead us to suspect that members coveted these carrier routes.⁸ As national policy, RFD offered the Republican party an opportunity to steal a Populist issue. Unwilling to abandon the gold standard or liberalize trade, Republicans found in RFD an issue that did not run afoul of the party's core commitments, while giving them entree with farmers, the only national constituency they had lost in the 1896 election.⁹

While the party could use this issue to burnish its image, individual Republican congressmen gained a highly visible commodity with which to showcase their constituency service. Successful route gatherers frequently

⁸Democrats lost out in the partisan distribution scheme but only relatively. They received comparatively few routes during these early years, and after the 1896 debacle they entertained little prospect of regaining control of the post office anytime soon. Controlling none of their districts' postmaster appointments anyway, the few routes doled to them by the Republican administration represented a net gain. Perhaps Republicans found it a cheap price to purchase both political cover against charges of favoritism and Democratic support for the ever-increasing appropriations required to sustain RFD's rapid growth.

⁹Indeed, another important Republican constituency—the rapidly growing, mostly urban retail and catalogue sales industry—had been pressing the Republican administration to expand mail and parcel post services to distant communities (Kielbowicz 1994).

reminded voters of the mailboxes that had only recently come to populate their districts (Fuller 1964). Even those unfamiliar with the techniques of "home style" had by 1900 ample reason to learn them. Over the past couple of elections, virtually all House candidates had begun competing for votes without the aid of party tickets. Recent electoral reforms across the nation (Rusk 1970) gave citizens the opportunity to vote secretly with ballots designed to allow them to pick and choose among the parties' candidates for the different offices. Ballot reform, as Katz and Sala observe, "made credit-claiming and other personal vote activities by members of Congress significantly more important for reelection, even at the very height of 'strong party government' in the United States" (1996, 21). Both in the service and the program's local establishment (i.e., petitions to members), RFD was perfectly tailored to members' need to serve their constituents.

This leads us to suspect that where we find rural Republican members seeking reelection in competitive races, we will also find them amassing routes. Since these districts offered a high return on investment, we may assume that party leaders blessed their efforts. Situations surely arose, however, where members' acquisitive urges ran afoul the party's collective strategy. Safe-seat members piling up routes to ward off potential opponents and incompetent or retiring members failing to pursue them despite their potential political payoff in the upcoming election would in both instances yield an inefficient deployment of this scarce resource. In searching for evidence of electoral strategy in route allocations, we shall remain mindful that, then as today, members' self-serving efforts may run afoul the party's collective welfare, inviting the corrective actions of leaders.

In order to test the electoral efficiency with which Republicans in Congress and the department sent routes to the districts, we need to adapt our statistical procedures to the distinctive properties of our dependent variable. During the first two years of operation 1,638 routes were placed in 306 rural congressional districts. Fully 10 percent of the routes were located in just five rural districts while nearly a third received no routes at all. Since these data violate the normal distribution assumption, the familiar ordinary least squares estimation procedure is inappropriate. Instead, we will employ maximum likelihood estimation (MLE) for a special class of distributions, known as "event counts" that better characterize the number of routes assigned to a district. Anticipating contagion effects (King 1989) whereby routes beget routes, we will employ a negative binomial distribution.

Evidence of the party's collective strategy

As electoral assets, Republican leaders would have distributed RFD to maximize their party's chances of retaining its majority status. Prime targets

were Republican districts facing difficult elections in 1900. They would have also sought to deny them to vulnerable Democratic incumbents.

In this era before polling, one of the most reliable indicators of a district's competitiveness in the upcoming election was the result of the preceding election. We have followed the standard procedure in measuring marginality as the percentage point difference in the winner's and closest loser's vote. The Populist congressional vote in 1896, when that party's congressional support crested, offers a strong and readily available indicator of the constituency's Populist sentiment and hence its receptivity to new carrier routes (Fuller 1991).¹⁰ Moreover, Republican leaders could anticipate that those districts wrested away from Democrats in 1898 would face the stiffest competition in 1900. Accordingly, they had an incentive to pour routes into Republican freshmen "takeaway" seats, while conversely, doing everything possible to keep them out of the hands of similarly situated Democratic freshmen.

To test these predictions, we have classified all districts into four dummy variables according to which party controlled the district in the current session and whether party control had turned over in the preceding election. These two dimensions combine into four types of districts: Republican takeaway and continuing districts and Democratic takeaway and continuing districts.

In the first column of Table 1 all of the competition and district dummy variables are significantly associated with the distribution of the 1,638 routes across the 306 rural congressional districts.¹¹ With the effects of continuing Democratic districts represented in the intercept term, we find that both continuing and takeaway Republican districts systematically received more routes than did either type of Democratic district.

As with the more familiar logit and probit estimation, the negative binomial estimation generates nonlinear relationships. One must pass the coefficients through this function to obtain the predicted number of routes for variations in our independent variables. To see these effects more clearly we have converted these coefficients for the dummy variables into predicted route counts. Setting marginality and Populist support at their

¹⁰Where Populist parties teamed with another party (most frequently the Democrats) to present a unified front, we classified the resulting fused party as Populist. This measure might unavoidably overstate Populist strength in these districts.

¹¹One variable excluded from our analysis is literacy rates within congressional districts. We exclude this variable not only because of its poor correlation with routes *within* both the South and North, but because of the disparity in literacy rates *between* the North and South makes literacy practically a dummy variable identifying the South from the North. The inclusion of a South dummy variable presents its own problems in the analysis, resulting in a more complicated model with a number of interaction terms, although the findings presented here still hold. In order to present our findings as clearly as possible, we decided to exclude a South dummy or a literacy variable.

Table 1. Elections and Incumbency in RFD Allocations

Maximum Likelihood Estimation using the Negative Binomial Distribution RFD Routes Allocated to Rural Congressional Districts, 1899–1900		
	Electoral Model	Adding Incumbency
Variable	Coefficient (Standard Error)	Coefficient (Standard Error)
Republican Takeaway Districts	1.4787** (.4531)	.6958 (.5318)
Continuing Republican Controlled Districts	.8750** (.1990)	–0.0897 (.3495)
Non-Republican Takeaway Districts	–0.8804** (.3626)	–0.9038** (.3537)
Winning Margin	–0.0127** (.0035)	–0.0100** (.0034)
Populist Vote Share, 1896	.0060* (.0033)	.0062* (.0031)
All Incumbents Seeking Reelection		–0.2091 (.2773)
Republican Incumbents Seeking Reelection		.8402** (.3707)
RFD Routes, 1895–1898		.1490** (.0376)
Constant	1.1557** (.2184)	1.1571** (.2861)
α	.6060** (.1083)	.4761** (.1132)
Log Likelihood	–766.6364	–754.5708

Number of observations = 306 Rural Congressional Districts

** 5% Significance Level * 10% Significance Level

mean values of 26 and 19 percent, respectively, we find striking differences in the availability of this new service according to the district's recent electoral history. Republican takeaway districts gained more than twelve routes during 1899 and 1900 compared to barely one route for their Democratic and Populist counterparts. These partisan differences for continuing districts were less pronounced at nearly seven and less than three routes, respectively.

As a net result of a strategy of helping friends and hurting enemies, freshmen Republicans who had won an opposition seat in 1898 received

eleven times the number of routes placed in the districts of their Democratic counterparts. Presumably, Republican leaders assisted freshmen in securing a large proportion of these coveted routes. Short of zeroing out the Democratic district's share altogether, it is hard to imagine a distribution that better served Republican's strategy in the 1900 election.

Evidence of members' strategies

However much party leaders appear to have appreciated the electoral utility of RFD, certainly no one was in better position to discern its impact than the local congressman who was receiving both petitions from constituents and protests from postmasters.¹² Presumably those incumbents seeking reelection in marginal districts were more assiduous in garnering routes than were their colleagues who enjoyed certain victory or those who did not intend to return to the next Congress. To check this out we have added in the second column of Table 1 variables identifying members' reelection status in 1900.¹³

Another district feature that should have motivated individual members more than their party's leaders were the petitions for new routes pouring in from the district. Although the actual petitions are no longer systematically available for all districts, we may be able to approximate the relative strength of these demands across districts by simply knowing how many routes had been established in each district during the preceding four-year trial period. From 1895 through 1898, 528 test routes were created. The Postmaster General's report to Congress in 1899 attributed RFD's surging popularity to these demonstration routes' contagion effect: "Requests for the service multiplied like an endless chain, every new rural delivery route established bringing in three or more applications from contiguous territory for like privileges" (U.S. 1899). Congressmen complained that their rural constituents had quickly come to regard mail delivery as an entitlement. To

¹²We also tried to test the next question of whether their routes improved their vote margin in the next election. Unfortunately, this relationship involves a serious simultaneity problem between routes and votes. We failed to identify an instrument for routes whose error term was uncorrelated with the 1900 vote and was significantly correlated with the actual number of routes. Our failure to find congressmen's "treatment" effects continues a string of confirmations of the null hypothesis in this field (see Fiorina 1981).

¹³Admittedly, our measure of ambition based on reappearance on the 1900 general election ballot only imperfectly separates members by political ambition. Some of those who did not show up for the next election because of death, unexpected opportunities elsewhere, or defeat in the renomination caucus might still have sought routes in 1899 and 1900 much like their reelection-seeking colleagues. Although the proper interaction of incumbency with party should include all four categories of party control we identified in the party model, the full interaction was run but no difference was found between incumbents seeking reelection in continuing and takeaway districts. For clarity in reporting the results, we have simplified the interactions presented in Table 1.

the extent individual members drove allocation decisions through their right to submit and rank petitions, those districts that had received routes during the demonstration phase (1895–98) might also have generated greater demand for routes in 1899 and 1900.¹⁴

In the second column of Table 1 we have added the reelection and the district “demand” variables to the party model. Both sets of variables are significantly related to a district’s route count; the combined party and incumbency model performs better than do the district’s competitiveness alone.¹⁵ Evidence of this tendency for routes to beget routes is also provided in the estimated coefficient of the special parameter of the negative binomial distribution, α , which indicates a contagion effect.

With the inclusion of the incumbent’s reelection status, the differential effects of continuing and takeaway districts in column 1 are largely eliminated. This change suggests that Republican incumbents are responsible for the different number of routes placed in Republican and Democratic districts. Only the coefficient for the Democratic takeaway district remains significantly negative. With only one of the incumbents in the eleven Republican takeaway districts failing to seek reelection in 1900, much of this variable’s effect has shifted into the dummy representing Republican incumbents seeking reelection.

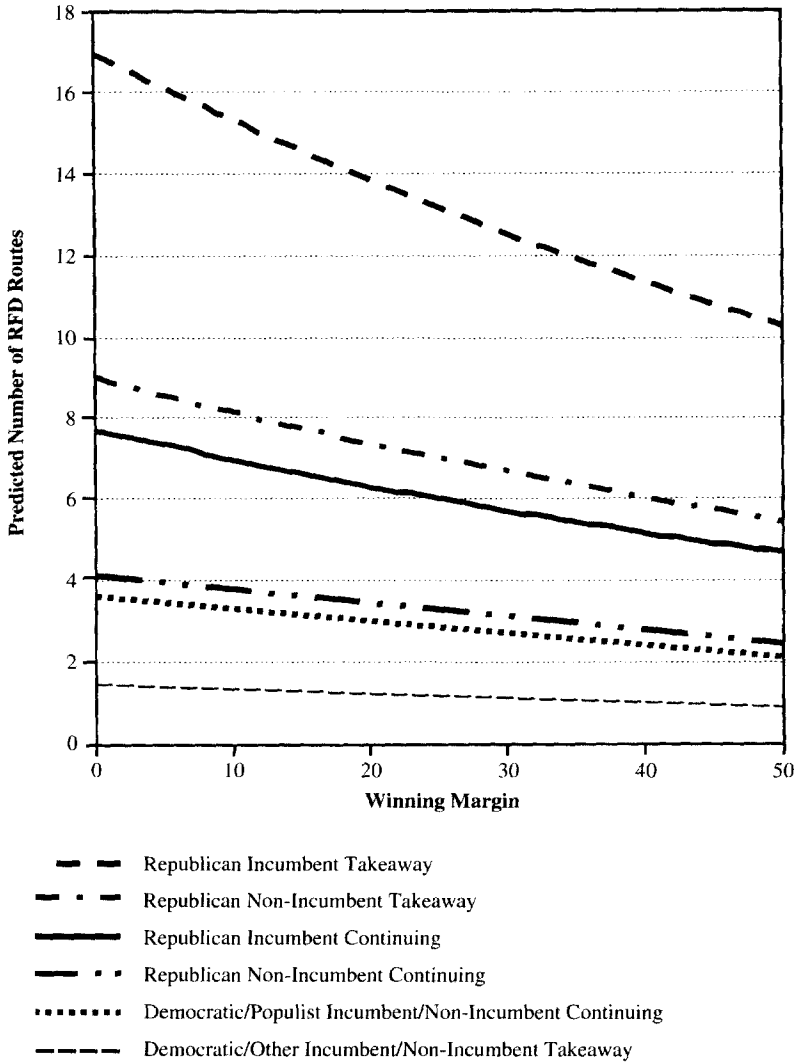
The relative effects of partisanship, incumbent reelection status, and winning margin can be better discerned in the predicted route allocations plotted in Figure 2.¹⁶ Across levels of competition, Republican takeaway districts uniformly received the most routes whether or not the member sought reelection in the 1900 election. In the most competitive of these districts, the presence of the incumbent on the ballot, however, almost doubled the district’s route total. Strong evidence of “home style” among reelection-

¹⁴Such discretionary responsiveness would (and did) show up in the strength of the districts’ competitive features but not in the cumulative lag term added to the electoral model reported in Table 1. In analysis not shown, we separated the lag term for Republicans and opposition members and as expected, found the first, but not the second, to be significantly related to districts’ route counts. We also encountered a multicollinearity problem between this interactive term and the other Republican incumbency variables in the equation. Based on the different overall explanatory power of the equations and the sharper differences between incumbents from the opposing parties, we rely on the relationships reported in Table 1.

¹⁵The comparative explanatory power of the two models is tested by a likelihood ratio test. In this case, the likelihood ratio test produces a value of 24.13 and is distributed as a χ^2 statistic with 3 degrees of freedom. This test demonstrates that the combined party-incumbent model provides a superior measure of route allocations than does the pure party model.

¹⁶Again, we have set the other variables at their means. For clarity, we are also limiting the plotted estimates to Republican interactions with incumbency since this is where most variation in route allocation occurs.

Figure 2. The Effects of Partisanship, District History and Incumbent Status on RFD Allocations*



*Estimates derived from Table 1 setting Populist strength and past route allocations (1895-98) at their mean values of 25.8 and 1.5, respectively.

seeking members can also be easily seen in the placement of routes in continuing Republican districts. Again, the presence of the incumbent on the ballot doubles the average number of routes awarded the district.

The failure of route allocations in Democratic districts to key significantly on the incumbent's reelection status (for display purposes Figure 2 combines their nearly identical route numbers) or on the previous election's competitiveness suggests that Republican leadership in the department strategically doled out routes to opposition members as well. Nowhere is this more evident than in the last place finish in the competition for routes scored by Democrats who had taken away a Republican seat in the previous election.

Overall, these numbers reveal that routes were distributed as though keenly strategic actors were at the throttle—a throttle that appears to have been shared by leaders and individual members. Freshmen Republicans seeking reelection in closely contested, former opposition districts garnered an average of seventeen routes over the two-year period. Meanwhile, their more senior colleagues continuing in office in safe districts averaged just over two routes. While leaders stayed in the background of the formal process, signs suggesting their influence can be seen in these distributions—particularly in the generous distribution of routes for those highly competitive, takeaway seats where the Republican incumbent is departing office.¹⁷ In sum, where Republican incumbents sought reelection, where electoral pressures were great, and where constituent demands were high, RFD blossomed. Conversely, where Democrats controlled the seats and demonstration routes had not generated demand, RFD made only a token appearance. The narrative history and statistical relationships presented here uniformly support the thesis that the rise of RFD and the decline of patronage post masters occurred because House Republican members and leaders found it in their electoral interest to substitute service for patronage.

3. CONCLUSION: CONGRESS' ROLE IN AMERICAN POLITICAL DEVELOPMENT

Research into American political development frequently portrays the turn-of-the-century Congress as a backwater of American politics against which progressive presidents struggled to drag it and the national administration into the new century. In a series of executive orders, presidents stripped members of Congress of patronage that had for generations ce-

¹⁷For those who doubt congressional leaders' omnipresence during this era, consider Binkley's comment: "It would hardly be an exaggeration to say that the [congressional] Republican Party organization ran the government" (1947, 182).

mented their relations with local party organizations. It is a lively, at times dramatic, history but one with which our inquiry poses serious question. With RFD we have a Congress on the cusp of reform, leading rather than following the administration in introducing new federal services at the expense of patronage.

In a political system run by self-reliant officeholders, the urge for reelection is assumed to influence every aspect of a politician's life (Mayhew 1974). By the close of the nineteenth century, members of the House appear to have been following this urge no less than do today's representatives. The politicians who most successfully pursued routes for their communities were not rent seeking, senior members.¹⁸ Instead, heading the list of successful route gatherers were vulnerable freshmen Republicans, especially those who had served the party's collective interest so well by capturing an opposition seat but who were now facing a serious prospect of losing it.

The literature on modern Congress (e.g., Ferejohn 1974; Niou and Ordeshook, 1985) reports that the institution commonly distributes particularistic goods and services without regard to party. But the conditions that presumably give rise to universalism in the modern Congress were largely absent in the late nineteenth century. In this era of unparalleled partisanship, members of the majority Republican party could reliably anticipate that they would prevail on the floor and so did not need to hedge their bets by cutting in the minority party to a share of the action.¹⁹ Congressional Republicans hoarded these new routes just as administration parties before them had monopolized Fourth class postmasters. Only the commodity had changed. In this respect, the arrival of rural mail carriers did not represent such a dramatic or difficult break with the old order.

Populism may have provided the proximate stimulus for RFD in the late 1890s. But a more enduring (and generalizable) cause can be found in the emerging needs of the new breed of officeholding politicians who entered Congress at century's end and who increasingly sought to remain (Polsby 1968; Kernell 1977). As they came to foresee a greater electoral payoff in

¹⁸Nor were they the members of the standing post office committee. In a preliminary examination of the distribution of routes across districts we find little evidence that these members exploited their apparent advantage. The chairman of the post office committee, Eugene Loud, was able to shepherd twenty-two RFD routes to his district, but other Republican post office committee members did no better than other Republicans.

¹⁹Shepsle and Weingast (1981) and Collie (1988) identify the uncertainty of the winning coalition as the reason why members opt for inefficient universal coalitions. Shepsle and Weingast suggest that the same uncertainty problem can occur within the party coalition that should inspire internal or "partisan universalism." Although our analysis finds substantial differentiation in the award of routes to Republicans according to various indicators of district marginality, these relationships leave ample unexplained variance that might reflect the leveling effect of equity considerations.

direct services to their districts than in subsidy of local party organizations, these increasingly self-reliant politicians in Congress transformed the American bureaucracy from patronage to service.

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