
Rural Free Delivery as a Critical Test of Alternative Models of American Political Development

Samuel Kernell, *University of California, San Diego*

During roughly the half-century straddling the turn of the twentieth century, America's national government underwent a dramatic transformation. It proceeded on two fronts, politics and administration. At the beginning of the era, politicians were deeply enmeshed in a system of patronage and graft reflecting their indebtedness to the local and state political parties without whose support their careers would have languished. Local party organizations recruited and sponsored candidates, ran election campaigns, and directed subsequent career moves among its cadre of politicians. In return, these politicians used their offices to stoke the party machine with a steady supply of patronage appointments and government contracts. By the end of the era, a variety of state and national reforms had effectively dismantled the patronage system. The party politician was gradually replaced by a more independent and entrepreneurial kind of elective officeholder, someone who assumed personal responsibility for his own reelection and political advancement. These new-styled politicians did not exist in the 1870s, but by the 1920s they were familiar figures throughout Washington.¹

Over this same time period the federal government rapidly evolved both programmatically and organizationally. When the era began, Washington offered few direct services to the citizenry, and these were unreliable and inefficient.² Administrative routines were honed, less to implement policy, than to process nominees for patronage appointments, to extract donations to the party coffers from a large population of federal workers, and to award contracts to those bidders who had won political clearance. In the bureau-

cracy as in politics, public service came second to party service. Yet, by the 1920s, hundreds of new federal programs and services had been created. The federal government's payroll swelled to nearly 600,000 civilian employees, over five times the size of the government sector in the late 1870s. Just as impressively, the federal bureaucracy rationalized organizationally to keep pace with the dramatically rising expectations for its performance. From the cabinet secretary to the field service offices, the bureaucracy reorganized in ways that brought its organizational structure into conformity with its programmatic mission.³ Civil service expanded rapidly, as well. By 1921, over 80 percent of the federal civilian work force was covered and protected by a national merit system.

The broad contours and historical significance of these turn-of-the-century trends in the politics and the administration of the federal government have long been acknowledged. Henry Jones Ford's contemporaneous characterization of the national government as reflecting "the accretion of so much coral rock" emphasizes the growth and layering of new government over old.⁴ Others have discerned a more

2. An instance of the poor state of public service during this era can be found in recent best-seller *Isaac's Storm*, which chronicles the inability of the Weather Service to monitor the "hurricane of the century" approach Galveston, Texas, in 1900. Erik Larson, *Isaac's Storm* (New York: Crown Publishers, 1999).

3. Leonard D. White, *The Republican Era: A Study in Administrative History, 1869–1901* (New York: Free Press, 1958).

4. Henry Jones Ford, *The Rise and Growth of American Politics* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1898), 121. See also Ballard C. Campbell, *The Growth of American Government* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995); Morton Keller, *Affairs of State* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1977); and Ronald N. Johnson and Gary D. Libecap, *The Federal Civil Service System and the Problem of Bureaucracy*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994).

1. Nelson W. Polsby, "The Institutionalization of the U.S. House of Representatives," *American Political Science Review* 62 (1968): 124–43.

complex process at work – government services and organization adapting functionally to a more variable and heterogeneous environment. By these accounts, America’s reconstitution of its formerly segmented, “island communities” into a single national community dictated the modernization of government.⁵ Neither historical representation much satisfies students of American political development. The transformation of America’s politics and administration was more complex than can be accounted for by growth and more problematic than conveyed by a functionalist mandate. The modern national government of the 1920s represents a different *kind* of political system from the one that preceded it. As Stephen Skowronek has persuasively argued, “the new American state” formed not as the fully rationalized and centralized bureaucracy that function alone would seem to have prescribed but as a “patchwork” of state and federal responsibilities.⁶

TWO MODELS OF AMERICAN POLITICAL DEVELOPMENT

Two models of politics presently compete within American political development to explain America’s turn-of-the-century transformation. For purposes of this article, I shall refer to the competing models as “state development” and “institutional politics.”⁷ The former typically posits an executive-centered coalition comprised primarily of presidents, the bureaucracy, progressive reformers, and various business constituencies seeking a favorable regulatory regime and a reliable provision of government services. The particular mix of actors and roles in advancing reform vary from one history to the next according to the specific policy under consideration. Stephen Skowronek cast the president as the chief protagonist: 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.”⁸ Below, we examine a differently configured executive-centered coalition that has the bureaucracy assuming a leading role and the president receding into the background.

5. Robert A. Wiebe, *The Search for Order, 1877–1920* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1967). The most famous instance of this development concerned regulation of the national rail transportation rates.

6. Stephen Skowronek, *Building a New American State* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1982).

7. Labels for these models abound. While “state” infuses labels of the former, the latter has been variously called “new institutionalism,” “congressional dominance,” or simply, a positive model of political development.

8. Skowronek, XX. For a somewhat different configuration that incorporates political parties into executive-centered coalitions, see Martin Shefter, *Political Parties and the State* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), 1–18, *passim*.

Whatever their internal differences, “state development” explanations of this era’s political development agree in casting Congress as the chief antagonist to reform.⁹ As agents of corrupt, patronage-riddled political parties, members of Congress used their offices to divert government personnel, tax receipts and appropriations to the political parties. For these narrow partisan ends, they designed a Congress better suited for generating a steady flow of particularistic goods and services to targeted constituencies than for providing for the general welfare and national interest.

Aligning Congress against reform poses a puzzle that to be persuasive, an executive-centered explanation must solve. The Constitution’s Article I reposes primary government authority with Congress. Moreover, national politics during the intervening decades only served to reinforce Congress’s constitutional primacy. From dramatic confrontations with the executive, as with the Tenure of Office Act blocking presidential removal of cabinet officers without the Senate’s consent, to the inconspicuous details of annual budget riders through which congressional committees micromanaged agencies’ operations, Congress exerted pervasive controls that kept political executives genuflecting before it.¹⁰ In order for an executive-centered coalition to prevail over an unsympathetic Congress, it had to somehow overcome this imbalance of authority.

One way to solve the Article I problem is to place Congress in the governing coalition. This introduces the “institutional politics” model which gives center stage to Congress in any history of significant changes in national policy. As with “state development,” this model may involve consequential action from a variety of offices, including presidents and the bureaucracy. It differs from “state development,” however, in that the script closely follows the Constitution with the vetoes, institutional prerogatives, and proscriptions that together constitute the political system’s separation of powers. The actors occupy constitutional offices with differently configured constituencies, different electoral calendars, and disparate jurisdictional responsibilities, causing them to behave differently yet predictably.

The institutional politics model also stresses the electoral connection for politicians individually and collectively as members of political parties. In this model executive actors, who frequently appear divorced from politics in state building history, engage reform and policy innovation as ambitious politicians

9. A prominent exception to this characterization of the “state development” literature is Elizabeth Sanders’ congress-centered history. Elizabeth Sanders, *Roots of Reform*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999).

10. D. Roderick Kiewiet and Mathew D. McCubbins, *The Logic of Delegation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991); Lucius Wilmerding, *The Spending Power: A History of the Efforts of Congress to Control Spending Power* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1943).

and as members of political parties seeking control of Congress and the presidency. In combination with separation of powers, party competition results in either unified or divided control of government, two strikingly different political settings. When unified, party politicians in Congress and the presidency view their circumstances as a positive-sum game and hence, their relations are marked by cooperation and collusion. Conversely, divided party control flips the game to zero-sum and relations across the branches to competition and confrontation. To summarize, institutional politics regards public policy to be the result of politics among elected partisan politicians serving diverse constituencies from the vantages of constitutionally-separated institutions. The “state,” as a purposive actor, does not exist; descriptively, it is little more than the sum of the several parts and is synonymous with “government.”

To be persuasive, the institutional politics model must solve its own puzzle. Why would a majority party in Congress dismantle institutional arrangements that served its members so well? This question is especially relevant for accounting for the turn-of-the-century reforms in that the point of departure presents one of the most intensely partisan and patronage-rich eras in American history.¹¹ If the “institutional politics” model is to offer more than “politics as usual,” it must identify some dynamic force destabilizing equilibrium relations and moving them toward a new steady state. The most common candidate for explaining this era’s political transformation is the subtly changing individual and collective electoral concerns of elected officeholders, especially members of Congress.¹² As a result of reforms substituting a state-supplied ballot for party tickets and later replacing party nominating caucuses with primaries, politicians increasingly recognized they needed to appeal directly to voters rather than rely solely on mobilization efforts of their weakened party organizations.¹³ With greater self-reliance came self-

determination. In Congress, rotation practices that had sent members home after one or two terms fell by the wayside as increasing numbers of incumbents sought reelection. Many, in fact, had come to view congressional service as a career.¹⁴

One might think that two models with their primary causal agents residing on opposite ends of Pennsylvania Avenue would each have their own stories to tell and rarely cross paths. Yet, in that one branch’s actions rarely fail to involve a coordinated response, or at least elicit a reaction from the other, major reforms and innovations place both Congress and the presidency in motion. Consequently, explanations must venture down Pennsylvania Avenue from each direction, and as they do so, they find themselves converging on the same historical events. Yet, their different institutional vantages frequently place them in sharp disagreement over what happened and why.

Just such an instance arose in the recent publication of two articles offering different historical accounts for the development of rural free delivery (RFD) of the mail during the closing decade of the nineteenth century. That two American political development-seeking inquiries would converge on this policy is not so improbable as it might appear. Arguably, no other policy innovation during this era so explicitly substituted a new public service for an established patronage system. Entering the 1890s, the Post Office’s Division of Fourth Class Postmaster supervised 77,000 political appointees, far and away the largest patronage pool in the government. By 1920, almost half of these patronage positions had been replaced by roughly an equal number of rural civil service carriers that took their place.¹⁵ In the last issue of *Studies in American Political Development*, Daniel P. Carpenter offers a detailed case study of RFD as an instance of state development. His argument can be summarized simply: “Postal officials conceived, planned, lobbied for and secured the passage of RFD as did no other actor or force in the American regime.”¹⁶ A little more than a year earlier, Michael P. McDonald and I published a very different rendition of RFD’s early development, one which locates postal reform in the changing electoral strategies

11. David W. Brady, “A Reevaluation of Realignment in American Politics: Evidence from the House of Representatives,” *American Political Science Review* 79 (1985): 28–49; Keith T. Poole and Howard Rosenthal, *Congress: A Political-Economic History of Roll-Call Voting* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997).

12. One cannot dismiss a purely historical explanation, however. Voters paid dearly for services diverted into the party machine. As progressive reformers and yellow journalism popularized abuses, perhaps the electoral costs of continuing to oppose reform, mounted to the point where vote-seeking political parties had to respond. And as they did so, perhaps at times they miscalculated the consequences of their actions. Two possible instances come to mind: in the aftermath of President Garfield’s assassination by a frustrated patronage applicant, enactment of the Pendleton Act establishing a limited civil service but allowing future presidents to expand it through executive orders, and the Republican party’s nomination of reform champion Theodore Roosevelt for vice president in 1900.

13. 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.” Jonathan Katz and Brian Sala, “Careerism, Committee Assignments and the Electoral Connection,” *American Political Science Review* 90 (1996): 21.

14. For evidence of increasing careerism in the House of Representatives, see Samuel Kernell, “Toward Understanding Nineteenth-Century Congressional Careers: Ambition, Competition and Rotation,” *American Journal of Political Science* 21 (1977): 669–93.

15. Samuel Kernell and Michael P. McDonald, “Congress and America’s Political Development: The Transformation of the Post Office from Patronage to Service,” *American Journal of Political Science* 43 (1999): 793.

16. Daniel P. Carpenter, “State Building through Reputation Building: Coalitions of Esteem and Program Innovation in the National Postal System, 1883–1913,” *Studies in American Political Development* 15 (2001): 138.

of members of Congress and their party leadership. In these two recent articles, we have two theoretically-informed histories that approach largely the same chronology from the different ends of Pennsylvania Avenue. In this essay, I review Carpenter's evidence and find that much of it can easily be reconciled with the institutional politics model. Moreover, where it cannot, I argue that institutional politics offers a more capacious explanation for the actions of both members of Congress and the executive branch.

CARPENTER'S BUREAUCRATIC ENTREPRENEUR

Carpenter's account represents a significant variation on the mainline state development model. Instead of the president's narrow authority and bully pulpit to challenge Congress, Carpenter introduces a new political actor, the "bureaucratic entrepreneur," to supply the driving force for political reform. This figure brings two assets to the political arena: "a public reputation for low-cost administration, progressivity, and moral integrity," and "a support coalition that is uncontrollable by politicians, and . . . sufficiently strong to induce legislative, executive and judicial overseers to grant . . . sustained discretionary and operational latitude and to refrain from encumbering . . . procedural and fiscal constraints."¹⁷ This coalition, in fact, sponsors reforms "that politicians can neither control by dint of party affiliation nor break apart by invoking principles of partisanship."¹⁸ Congress is left with little choice but to "defer" and "bow" to the department's initiatives. What this theory requires is an effective, properly motivated entrepreneur at the helm of the Post Office. Carpenter finds this critical, modernizing agent in the person of John Wanamaker.

By any standard, Wanamaker was a remarkable figure, a man who epitomized the entrepreneurial spirit of his age. Before entering the political arena, he had built a prominent Philadelphia department store, *Wanamaker's* (now *Lord and Taylor's*), into an east-coast chain with a sizable mail order business.¹⁹ With a track record of innovation in business, it is not too surprising to find that when he ventured into the realm of party finance as the Republican party's chief fundraiser for the 1888 election, he broke new ground by shifting campaign finance from the tithes of political appointees to the contributions of business interests seeking to influence public policy.²⁰

17. Carpenter, "State Building," 123–25. For a different set of historical processes that give rise to bureaucratic autonomy, see Martin Shefter, "Party and Patronage: Germany, England and Italy," *Politics and Society* 7 (1977): 403–52.

18. *Ibid.*, 125.

19. To attract customers, he invented the "money back guarantee," and to entertain them, he installed in his Philadelphia store one of the world's largest pipe organs, the famous "Wanamaker organ."

20. Wanamaker's committee was reported to have raised \$400,000, three-quarters of it from railroad interests on the

John Wanamaker occupies a special but, in the end, ambiguous status in Carpenter's narrative. He is introduced as someone who thoroughly exemplifies "state building through bureaucratic entrepreneurship, founded upon multiple, diverse network affiliations."²¹ In Wanamaker, Carpenter has a department head mobilizing a broad coalition of support to compel members of Congress and other party politicians to accept a new kind of government service and administration based on efficiency and rationality. Once Wanamaker's coalition unleashed its grass roots campaign, Congress found free delivery irresistible. As a consequence, "from the very first steps of rural free delivery, Wanamaker and the department [and not Congress] assumed control of its expansion."

Yet, Wanamaker's success ended as abruptly as it began. Whereas in 1890 Wanamaker turned away congressional offers of more generous funding as unmanageable for the experiment he had in mind, a year later, when he returned to the Hill with the report in hand touting a highly successful experiment, Congress paid little attention to his request for a greatly expanded program. The next year, his luck was no better. Shortly after his departure in 1893, Wanamaker's village-route project ended unceremoniously. As a serious experiment, RFD does not begin until 1896, and it does not become a statutory program for nearly a decade.

One can as easily argue that Wanamaker's busy but brief tenure as Postmaster General offers testament to the inadequacy of bureaucratic entrepreneurship in solving the Article I problem. Looking back on his years at the Post Office, Wanamaker rued the source of his frustration:

The real boss of the department is Congress at the other end of the city on the hill. Congress makes the laws which govern the department, and the Postmaster-General is dependent upon Congress for everything he gets. There are scores of ways in which the business might be bettered, if the Postmaster-General had only the power to act. He has not the power.²²

Before dismissing the Wanamaker case, however, we should consider how it might be salvaged in behalf of the "bureaucratic autonomy" argument. Perhaps Wanamaker better serves as an illustration of the arrival than the success of this new-styled political actor, the bureaucratic entrepreneur. This role's occupant failed in this instance, but clearly, an independent force in the executive branch had emerged and was trying mightily to push the reform boulder up the hill. But does Wanamaker really epitomize the kind of state building agent Carpenter's theory envisions?

promise that a sympathetic Secretary of Interior would be appointed to the cabinet. Fowler, *The Cabinet Politician*, 208–9.

21. Carpenter, "State Building," 122.

22. Herbert A. Gibbons, *John Wanamaker* (London: Kennikat Press, 1971): 296–97.

We are told that Wanamaker embraced the necessary ethos of “internal reform” – to wit, he pursued RFD not to serve farmers but to eradicate patronage postmasters.²³ Yet many of Wanamaker’s actions in the department appear to belie his reformer’s credentials. Entering office with master spoilsman James S. Clarkson serving as his right-hand man, the patronage “guillotine” went into action almost at once, and the “heads fell into the basket” even more rapidly than during the preceding administration.²⁴ This confirmed the fears of Carl Schurz, the former secretary of the interior and a paragon of Carpenter’s bureaucratic entrepreneurship, who on learning of Wanamaker’s appointment complained, “For the first time in the history of this Republic a place in the cabinet of the President was given for a pecuniary consideration.”²⁵ Reformers continued to attack Wanamaker throughout his term, causing his tenure to be nagged by rumors of his resignation.²⁶ The jury is still out on whether John Wanamaker was acting as bureaucratic entrepreneur robed in a “reputation of esteem” or simply as an ambitious politician engaged in the modern strategy of promoting new policies to advance his career.²⁷ In stirring the forces of democracy and directing them at Congress, Wanamaker arguably followed the tenets of institutional politics as conscientiously as those of state development.

Whatever inspired his strategy, one can hardly gainsay Wanamaker’s success in triggering the deluge of grass roots appeals for rural delivery that flowed continuously from America’s hamlets. Carpenter concludes his discussion of RFD by citing Wanamaker’s advocacy as an essential contribution to the ultimate establishment of rural delivery.²⁸ But, here too, other evidence is readily available questioning Wanamaker’s *essential* contribution and, hence, his value to

the state development argument. Early stirrings for rural delivery were occurring on several fronts. John Stahl, a farm journal editor and lecturer, had campaigned tirelessly for rural free delivery since the late 1870s. In 1889, two years before Wanamaker took up the cause, the Farmer’s National Congress adopted a resolution calling for rural mail delivery.²⁹

Independent action surfaced in Congress, as well. In June 1892, a populist Democratic representative from Georgia, Lon Livingston, introduced a resolution calling for \$100,000 to be spent on delivery “outside of towns and villages.”³⁰ This resolution was ruled out of order, but then Georgia colleague and future populist leader Tom Watson maneuvered to redirect Wanamaker’s village delivery program to rural areas. This resolution was also defeated, but in the spring of 1893, the lame duck Congress passed Watson’s proposal for an additional \$10,000 dedicated to experimenting with free delivery for farming communities.³¹ As far as the historical record reports, Wanamaker had no commerce with Watson, Marion Butler, or other populists who emerged contemporaneously as early champions of rural free delivery.

The point here is simply that Wanamaker was not the only available fount of reform. To have the Postmaster General announce his support and to coax farm group officers to join him surely did trigger a flurry of activity among this highly receptive audience. But this does not mean that the outcome would have been much different, when several years later, the experiment resumed. Whether Wanamaker’s free delivery campaign is best represented as a first step or a false start to RFD remains debatable.³² What we can say reliably is that farm organizations and populist politicians kept up the pressure long after Wanamaker left Washington.

WHO CREATED RFD – THE DEPARTMENT OR CONGRESS?

On its face, postal policy appears to be an area of public policy peculiarly well suited for congressional control. Section 8 of Article I states plainly, “The Congress shall have power . . . To establish post offices and post roads.” Moreover, the huge reservoir of patronage postmasters that grew with the nation drew members of Congress deeply into postal administra-

23. Carpenter, “State Building,” 128.

24. Gibbons, *John Wanamaker*, 213. Wanamaker’s biographer even congratulates his subject for preventing the president “from making the irreparable blunder of accepting the drastic program of the civil service reformers.” *Ibid.*, 299.

25. Quoted in Fowler, *The Cabinet Politician*, 207. Fowler adds that these two appointments attracted more criticism than any other of President Harrison’s appointments (212).

26. Fowler, *The Cabinet Politician*, 212. In his diary, Postmaster General William L. Wilson, noted that his predecessor, Wilson Bissell, seemed to have assumed that

whatever Wanamaker did in his numerous innovations should be carefully scanned. There may have been some foundation for this, as he brought too many of the methods of his department store to the management of a great Department, and there are abundant proofs yet remaining that he perverted the public service to political purposes. His methods of self-advertising were also offensive to an upright man like Bissell. William L. Wilson, *The Cabinet Diary of William L. Wilson* [Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1957], 11–12

27. Nelson W. Polsby, *Political Innovation in America: The Politics of Policy Innovation* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984). Wanamaker was widely suspected of coveting a Senate seat.

28. Carpenter, “State Building,” 149.

29. John M. Stahl, *Growing With the West* (New York: Longmans, Green and Co., 1930), 126. The National Grange appears to have first endorsed the concept of rural delivery in 1891, as Carpenter reports, but the organization’s “official” history locates its origins in a state (Colorado) resolution a year earlier. Charles W. Gardner, *The Grange, Friend of the Farmer* (Washington: National Grange, 1949), 113–14.

30. C. Vann Woodward, *Tom Watson: Agrarian Rebel* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1963), 245.

31. Bruns and Bruns, *Reaching Rural America*, 12.

32. John Stahl argued in his memoirs that the postmaster general’s “spurious” program costs enactment of a true rural delivery about three years of additional effort. Stahl, *Growing With the West*, 144.

tion. Before, during and after the turn-of-the-century reforms, numerous Postmaster Generals and their senior assistants were closely associated with the presidential party's national committee.³³ Party leaders controlled the department's political levers, not as an usufruct of office, but in order to consummate recent campaign deals as well as honor long-standing patronage contracts with fellow partisans in Congress. In these activities, a partisan post office cemented party ties across the executive and legislative branches.

Stories abound of members of Congress meddling continuously in department work. The typical representative reportedly devoted significant parts of every workday to postal affairs.³⁴ Some of that time was spent visiting the department's offices to oversee day-to-day administration that affected their district. Writing about the era, during which Carpenter's post office is presumably extricating itself from under the thumb of Congress, Joseph Bristow, McKinely's Fourth Class Postmaster, reported the following vignette as commonplace:

In the departments [the new congressman] is readily recognized as he walks down the corridors. There is a lordly air about his movement which indicated that he had just won a great victory in his district, and expects to receive particular consideration from the departmental subordinates. The clerks treat him with great courtesy and smile at each other as he leaves the room.³⁵

During the 1890s, the same years of RFD's inception and experimentation, department heads bemoaned Congress's micromanagement in language comparable to Wanamaker's unhappy reminiscences. William Wilson, Grover Cleveland's Postmaster General, complained to his diary:

I shall do little to connect my name with the Post Office Department, for Congress has about thwarted all my efforts to reform the administration, and to extend the civil service, and I am confined to the small changes that are possible within the old lines, and which will make little mark in the history of the department.

In another entry Democrat Wilson groused at the way the Republican House had tried to hamstring his control over department spending:

33. Dorothy Garfield Fowler, *The Cabinet Politician* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1943).

34. Fowler, *The Cabinet Politician*.

35. The passage continues the irony: "He marches up Capitol Hill feeling burdened with the tremendous responsibility that weigh upon his shoulders." Joseph L. Bristow, *Fraud and Politics at the Turn of the Century* (New York: Exposition Press, 1952): 89–90. The National Archives has catalogued (but cannot locate) late 19th century department maps drawn with congressional district boundaries in order to show the peripatetic members of the House of Representatives the location of postal routes and installations in their districts.

the crude experimental framers of the House, who thought it wise to segregate or earmark the appropriations . . . would greatly embarrass in this bill, where we must have some latitude to change and shift as public service or economy may suggest.³⁶

Entering the 1890s, politicians on both ends of Pennsylvania Avenue attended to the department's affairs as if their party's electoral success depended vitally on postal policy and administration. This familiar history does not square well with Carpenter's image of department officials escorting RFD through a Congress "bowing" and "deferring" to its professional expertise. Institutional politics, by comparison, offers an account of the decade-long politics leading to adoption of RFD that is consistent with Congress's intimate and highly partisan attention to postal affairs in the past.

The key variable in this explanation is party control of the government. As shown in Table 1, the 1890s contained every combination of divided and unified government, and until the 1896 Republican landslide, party control of either Congress or the presidency turned over with every election. Party considerations enter the story early, during Wanamaker's failed attempts to expand free delivery in 1891 and 1892. Why did Congress ignore his funding request in the aftermath of a highly favorable report on the experiment when, a year earlier, he had turned away congressional importunities to expand his village delivery experiment? Carpenter stresses the continuing postal deficits and lack of confidence in the capacity of the department. Both probably did contribute to Congress's deaf ear, but these considerations had not prevented an enthusiastic reception a year earlier. What had intervened between 1890 to 1891 was a midterm election that saw Democrats swamp Republicans across the country and take over control of the House of Representatives. The new Democratic majority had no interest in helping this high-profile Republican politician achieve his pet project, with which, as Carpenter documents, he had come to be so closely associated in the nation's press.

At the same time, some of the more populist-inclining Democrats introduced legislation to redirect Wanamaker's experiment from villages to farms. In the lame duck session of 1893, the Democratic majorities accommodated these colleagues by authorizing yet another \$10,000 for a rural delivery experiment. The 1892 Democratic landslide sent Wanamaker back to Philadelphia and introduced his successor, Wilson Bissell, who could have cared less about rural delivery. He viewed RFD to be an exorbitant, profligate policy for which he refused to expend any department effort, despite statutory language directing him to do so. Characterizing the 1893 appropriation to be a "paltry, laughable sum for a policy

36. Wilson, *The Cabinet Diary*, 56–57.

Table 1. The Cast of Characters and Partisan Setting of RFD Development

Congress	PMG (and relevant assistants)	President	House	Senate
50 (1887–1888)	Donald McDonald Wilson	Cleveland (D)	Dem. 169/152	Rep. 39/34
51 (1889–1890)	John Wanamaker James Clarkson (First Asst. PMG)	Harrison (R)	Rep. 166/159	Rep. 39/37
52 (1891–1892)	John Wanamaker	Harrison (R)	Dem. 235/88	Rep. 47/39
53 (1893–1894)	Wilson S. Bissell	Cleveland (D)	Dem. 218/127	Dem. 44/38
54 (1895–1896)	William L. Wilson August Machen (Superintendent of Free Delivery)	Cleveland (D)	Rep. 244/105	Rep. 43/39
55 (1897–1898)	James A. Gary Perry S. Heath (First Asst. PMG) August Machen Joseph Bristow (Fourth Class Postmaster)	McKinley (R)	Rep. 204/113	Rep. 47/34
56 (1899–1900)	Charles Emory Smith Perry S. Heath August Machen Joseph Bristow	McKinley (R)	Rep. 185/163	Rep. 53/26
57 (1901–1902)	Henry C. Payne Perry S. Heath August Machen Joseph Bristow	Roosevelt (R)	Rep. 198/153	Rep. 56/32

experiment – \$10,000 when Wanamaker had asked for \$6,000,000,” Carpenter appears to lay blame on Congress for Bissell’s dismissive attitude.³⁷ But this amount is simply the same figure Wanamaker had requested two years earlier for his village experiment which Carpenter judges to have been a model of innovation.³⁸ Congress responded by doubling the appropriations to \$20,000 and mandating that Bissell report back with a feasibility plan for rural delivery within the year. Once again, the department balked. Finally, when former House member William Wilson succeeded Bissell in 1896, he grudgingly agreed to undertake the experiment if Congress would reauthorize the expenditure for the next fiscal year. Congress obliged and once more doubled the appropriation to \$40,000.

McDonald and I recounted this chronology in our

37. Carpenter, “State Building,” 143.

38. And we must remember Wanamaker’s \$6 million was the price tag for a more grandiose plan rather than the first experiment in true rural delivery its populist sponsors had requested.

article as evidence of Congress’s persistent – indeed, insistent – support for rural free delivery. This critical period during which Congress is forcing a reluctant department to take up RFD poses a serious challenge to state development history. “Yet,” Carpenter responds, “in equating the department’s stance on the RFD program with the Bissell’s opposition, these scholars [Kernell and McDonald] neglect the organizational realities of the Post Office. Lower-level postal officials continued their support for RFD even as Bissell prevented experimentation.”³⁹ I am not sure what “organizational realities” Carpenter refers us to. Whatever reformist yearnings might have been simmering in the department, they did not alter its policy. Postmaster Generals Bissell and Wilson controlled department decisions on this issue. This phase of the history concluded when Wilson, continuing to express misgivings, nonetheless caved in to congressional – not departmental – pressure.

39. Carpenter, “State Building,” 143

As a result of the 1896 election divided party control of Congress and the presidency was replaced by a unified Republican government, and contentious relations between Congress and the department dissolved into an era of Pax Republicana. By the spring of 1897, eighty-two experimental routes had been installed around the country, but funds for continued expansion were exhausted. Neither narrative has much to say about the hiatus that occurred during the first session of the Fifty-Fifth Congress. The next reference to RFD appears in the Postmaster General's *Annual Report* at the end of the session calling for continuation of the experiment.⁴⁰ Congress responded expeditiously by appropriating \$150,000. With the House, Senate and presidency safely controlled by Republicans and these party politicians in accord on RFD, they got on with the business of building a delivery system and did so in such a way as to extract maximum political advantage.

The experiment proceeded with continuous expansion of the service. There were road bumps along the way. The department had to be reorganized to reflect the staffing requirements of this dramatically growing service and as routes accumulated willy-nilly in communities, the resulting disarray forced the department to reorganize RFD for entire counties. Numerous fourth-class postmaster offices had to be disbanded. It was politically as well as administratively appropriate that these tasks fell heavily onto the department.⁴¹

This does not imply that the Republican majority in Congress ceased to direct rural delivery's development. To the contrary, with Republicans firmly gripping the reins of government, their control over postal policy was no longer in dispute, which meant that they no longer had to enlist statutory mandates and compartmentalized budgets to try to impose their preferences on a recalcitrant bureaucracy. Instead, with unified party control bringing principal and agent into accord on RFD, Congress could allow department discretion and invite its initiative in addressing the numerous technical (and political) issues facing successful implementation.⁴² Where "state development" sees autonomy, "institutional politics" finds delegation.

40. "It is the policy of this administration to extend the postal service on reasonable and economical lines, and to establish post offices wherever communities are justified in asking for them, thereby properly, adequately, and more economically meeting the requirements of postal extension than by establishing rural free delivery at so great an expense to the people." [*Annual Report of the Postmaster General of the United States* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1893)]. McDonald and I failed to notice this recommendation in our narrative and misrepresent the next appropriation as a reassertion of congressional initiative.

41. David Epstein and Sharyn O'Halloran. *Delegating Powers: A Transaction Cost Approach to Policy Making Under Separate Powers* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

42. This aspect of agency theory is developed well in Kathleen Bawn, "Political Control Versus Expertise: Congressional Choices.

AUTONOMY OR DELEGATION

With this distinction in mind let us briefly reconsider several important administrative decisions that Carpenter presents to confirm bureaucratic autonomy. Each, I argue, exemplifies no more than relaxed delegation to a responsive agent.

The Petitioning Process

According to Carpenter, RFD administrator August Machen devised the "brilliant stratagem" of requiring those farmers who desired RFD to petition their member of Congress for a route. If the member endorsed it and the POD found the proposed route feasible, the community would be awarded a carrier. "Machen and [his boss] Perry knew that, once flooded by petitions, Congress would have no choice but to expand the RFD route network."⁴³ Never mind that Congress had not balked on funding RFD since Wanamaker left office, the political appeal of this procedure surely had every Republican in the House of Representatives salivating. Machen (if he indeed came up with this neat idea) had been in Washington long enough to know that his principals coveted credit claiming.⁴⁴ Every roadside mailbox in the district would become a monument to the representative's constituency service. At the same time, blame for failed petitions could be conveniently laid on the Post Office's doorstep.

Elimination of Fourth-Class Postmasters

"The Department *alone*," Carpenter claims, "floated the rule for the closure of fourth-class offices in 1901."⁴⁵ Stressing this point, he adds, "It was no committee chair and no agrarian group, but Machen and First Assistant William Johnson who forced Congress to choose between routes and offices. Why then did the fourth-class office die such a quick death?" The answer: "No adequate explanation can ignore the entrenched pattern of deference that prevailed between the House Committee and the Department."⁴⁶ That this rule first appears in the 1901 *Annual Report of the Postmaster General* to Congress does not itself adequately identify its origin. One can easily imagine numerous conversations among congressional Republicans and with their party colleagues in the department, privately mulling over what to do with these remnants of the patronage system where large numbers of constituents were receiving their mail di-

43. Carpenter, 144.

44. Carpenter and I essentially agree on this point, but differ on whether Congress is being manipulated (in the best tradition of the British career service in *Yes, Minister*) or merely being served. Fourth-class Postmaster General Bristow described a similar arrangement in his office; every nomination of 4th class postmaster required an accompanying petition. It might be that this practice became a model for this parallel service. Bristow, 159.

45. Carpenter, "State Building," p. 148 (emphasis in original).

46. *Ibid.*

Table 2. The Impact of Political Considerations on the Number of RFD Routes Awarded (1895–1898) a Congressional District*

Party Control of District		Incumbent Seeking Reelection	% Winning Margin		
Previous Congress	Current Congress		0%	10%	50%
Dem.	Rep.	Yes	17	15	10
Dem.	Rep.	No	9	8	6
Rep.	Rep.	Yes	8	7	5
Rep.	Rep.	No	4	4	2
Dem.	Dem.	Both	4	3	2
Rep.	Dem.	Both	2	1	1

*Number of RFD routes estimated from Figure 2, Kernell and McDonald, "Congress and America's Political Development," 807. Since running for reelection had no effect on the meager allocations to Democratic (and Populist) controlled districts, we collapsed these categories to include "both" circumstances. Included under the Dem. label are a few Populist-controlled seats.

rectly. As a district added routes, its fourth-class postmasters lost traffic for their businesses.⁴⁷ Many of them became upset; some even traveled to Washington to remonstrate their grievances.⁴⁸ Moreover, they were siphoning scarce funds that could be dedicated to accelerating expansion of RFD. Another answer to the above question is, then, that members of Congress increasingly viewed postmasters as obstacles to their designs for extending credit-claiming services to their constituents. The trick was to eliminate their office without incurring their wrath, which meant having someone else wield the ax. This conjecture is perfectly consistent with the record of members clamoring for new routes while mutely receiving the department's proposed regulation to exchange postmasters for routes.

The Partisan Allocation of Routes

Following our lead, Carpenter acknowledges that the department awarded routes with a nod toward partisanship. To the degree partisan criteria displaced objective standards of good policy, such as literacy and cost-effectiveness, they appear to violate Carpenter's central argument that bureaucratic entrepreneurs managed to insulate policy from politics. Yet, one must allow for compromise, and perhaps it is asking too much that postal executives shun the partisan concerns of those who authorized their programs, oversaw their performance and supplied their funds.

47. The value of the postmaster's office lay less in direct remuneration – including commissions for stamps, about \$1,000 annually – than in the traffic it generated for their general store or other business.

48. Fuller, 88. That RFD and 4th class post offices ultimately represented a zero-sum proposition had to be apparent to everyone, certainly the politicians who were eroding the value of the office by offering direct delivery. John Stahl wrote that in the early days when he was promoting rural delivery on the rural lecture circuit and in farm newspapers, vocal opposition came from these postmasters who did not want to lose their clients. Stahl, *Growing with the West* 120–29.

More revealing for identifying whether bureaucratic autonomy or responsiveness was at work can be found in the actual distribution of routes. Both histories agree that the decision to create a new route rested formally with the department. They differ on whether the department was acting autonomously to promote its reform agenda or serving as a dutiful agent of a partisan Congress.

McDonald and I present evidence that complex and politically sophisticated calculations, extending well beyond a simple Republican bias, governed route allocations. Consider the electoral variables we found significantly and independently associated with the distribution of routes across congressional districts: the Populist party's strength in the district two years earlier, the closeness of the last election, whether the Republican incumbent was a freshman and if so, whether he won by defeating an incumbent Democrat or Populist, and finally, whether he sought reelection. In Table 2, I summarize the large cumulative effects of these partisan considerations on early RFD route allocations.⁴⁹ Republican freshmen who sought reelection, after having barely defeated a Democratic (or Populist) incumbent in the previous election, had their candidacies buttressed on average with seventeen RFD routes awarded to their district. Their Democratic counterparts, by comparison, had to face a Republican party seeking revenge with bragging rights to a single carrier route. Their vacuum of routes left a plenum of Republican-appointed fourth-class postmasters, some of whom were known to discreetly insert Republican campaign materials into their customers' mail. The strength of the incumbency variables alone suggests that the distribution of carrier routes closely reflected the efforts of individual members. And the variety of electoral considerations that evidently went into these decisions suggests a kind of expertise one associates more with politi-

49. For a full discussion of the statistical specification of these electoral variables, see Kernell and McDonald, 802–808.

cians than bureaucrats. Even if Republican leaders were not privately dictating placement decisions or their members working the corridors of the department – and for all we can know, both might well have been diligently engaged in these activities – the fact remains that had the House Republican caucus tried to divvy up these routes, it would have had a hard time arriving at a politically more attractive distribution.⁵⁰

Whether Congress or the POD invented the petition process and the rule exchanging postmasters for carriers remains unclear from the available record. Similarly opaque is the process by which routes were assigned to districts. Whatever their origin, we can

50. Consider the following contents of a letter from Representative Charles Landis of Indiana to Machen during the 1902 midterm election campaign: “Do not, as you value your life, fail to get this service started Oct. 1st. It would cost me hundreds of votes if it did not go according to promise.” Two weeks later, he instructed Machen, “I want it [service in Hamilton county] humming along when I canvass the district.” Facing stiff competition, a neighboring Republican incumbent telegraphed Machen: “Order rural county service in Kosciusko and Marshall counties. Can’t you do this for me? I need it badly.” These and other similar communications are reported in Fuller, 68–69.

confidently say that these administrative practices met with favor on the Hill. They gave increasingly self-reliant Republican members of the House a new constituency service fashioned in such a way to maximize the opportunities for credit claiming while minimizing their exposure to blame from disappointed petitioners and disgruntled postmasters. Consequently, the Republican Congress gave RFD unwavering support and growing budgets, at least up to the time that most Republican districts had been stuffed with routes.

To conclude, the history of RFD need not contain an “Article I” problem. Institutional politics can fully account for this important policy innovation and political reform. Where does this leave the bureaucracy? Carpenter presents persuasive evidence that the Post Office department professionalized rapidly during the 1890s. This both fostered a sympathetic response to RFD among its second-tier staff, if not always its leaders, and endowed it with the technological capacity to implement this complex new service. Without this development, Congress might have judged broad delegation risky and as a result, RFD a politically hazardous transition from patronage to service.