
reformers, however, underestimated the power of the congressional "barons" who controlled most of the important committees, and the power of the shifting conservative coalition of Republicans and southern Democrats.

After years of frustration with their own institution, compounded by suspicion of the executive branch during the Johnson and Nixon years, congressional reformers of the 1960s and '70s looked, naively, to "the American people" as a *deus ex machina*. Strip "the anti-democratic barons" of their powers and make them responsible to rank-and-file Democrats, thought reformers such as Representative Donald Fraser (D.-Minn.), and the "will of the people" would push desirable (liberal) legislation through Congress. The House reforms of 1970-74 included limiting the powers of committee chairs and weakening the important House Ways and Means and Appropriations committees.

Was it realistic to assume "that rank-and-file Democrats want to and will balance budgets, allocate scarce resources within limits, and make hard and unpopular choices"? The decades since have given the answer, Roos says. If Congress is "to regain its crucial role as an equal constitutional partner," it will not be enough to make it more rational, more efficient, or more democratic. Today's reformers will have to devise changes in the institution that permit its titular leaders once again to lead.

Schoolhouse Politics

"The Quagmire of Education Finance" by Charles Mahtesian, in *Governing* (Sept. 1993), 2300 N St. N.W., Washington, D.C. 20037.

In state politics, few issues are more explosive today than school finance. Since 1989, when state courts struck down school financing systems in Montana, Texas, New Jersey, and Kentucky, leaving governors and legislators to grope desperately for replacements, legal challenges have multiplied. Roughly half the states now find themselves in court. The issue is almost always the same, reports Mahtesian, a *Governing* staff writer: disparities in per-pupil spending between rich and poor school districts.

Court-mandated efforts to equalize outlays have been marked by bruising political fights and increasingly, says Mahtesian, a sense of futility. After the Texas Supreme Court threw out the state's funding system in 1989, it rejected three substitutes enacted by the state legislature; the voters vetoed a fourth. A fifth system adopted last spring faces another court challenge.

What makes the politics of equity so murderous, writes Mahtesian, is the fact that in most states the only fiscally practical road to parity "involves capping the expenditures of the wealthier districts—promoting mediocrity by 'leveling down.'" Such remedies stir angry opposition in those districts. Parity may not even be the right goal, some liberals have come to think: Do not inner-city and rural schools have special needs that make them *more* equal than others?

Now legislators and others are moving away from equity and embracing "adequacy." The concept comes from a 1979 case in which the West Virginia Supreme Court ruled that the schools of Lincoln County were not providing the "thorough" and "efficient" education guaranteed by the state constitution. Adequacy focuses on what comes out of schools rather than what goes into them, and thus meshes neatly with the national trend toward uniform educational standards and goals. It does not necessarily involve robbing Peter to pay Paul. In Oklahoma, a group of poor districts is suing the state on the grounds that they lack the resources to meet the standards set in the state's comprehensive school reform of 1990.

Adequacy may take some of the poison out of the politics of school financing, but it creates its own controversies: What is "adequate" and what is the best way to achieve it? However it is defined, adequacy does not seem to come cheap. Voters in Illinois last year rejected a constitutional amendment that would have made adequacy cases easier to win—and thus would have cost taxpayers \$1.8 billion to \$3 billion. Of course even the best ideas are worthless if the political will to implement them is lacking. In Lincoln County, Mahtesian writes, people are still waiting for the big improvements in schooling they thought they had won back in 1979.