THE CONGRESS PROJECT

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Contents

Summary
Ratified April 8, 1913, the Seventeenth Amendment fundamentally altered the method by which U.S. Senators are elected. Prior to its adoption, senators were selected by state legislatures, a process intended by the framers of the Constitution to balance state and federal powers. This indirect system of election was meant to serve "as a bulwark against federal overreach," ensuring that states retained significant influence within the federal government.[i] Over time, however, the legislative election of senators became a source of political tension, inefficiency, and, predictably, corruption. In fact, between the years of 1857 and 1990, three of these elections were "subjected to Congressional investigations on the grounds of corruption,"[ii] including the 1912 investigation into the election of Illinois Senator William Lorimer (R-IL).

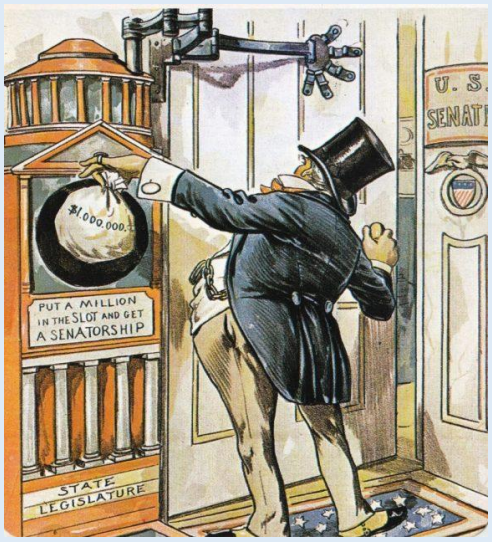

Figure 1. Political cartoon satirizing wealthy figures paying for Senatorial positions in Congress, 1890. (Public Domain)

The movement for direct election of senators had gained momentum in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Reformers argued that allowing citizens to vote directly for Senators would better reflect the will of the people. In 1910 and 1911, the House had passed proposed amendments for the direct election of U.S. Senators.[iii] By 1912, a majority of states had adopted measures favoring popular input in Senatorial selection, creating strong political pressure for a constitutional amendment, and the Seventeenth Amendment was subsequently proposed in the same year (Stathis 2014).

The adoption of the Seventeenth Amendment had immediate and long-term consequences for American politics. Early on in the twentieth century, nearly 25% of U.S. Senators were among America's wealthy elite. After the Seventeenth, that ratio dropped to around 1 in 6 or approximately 17% (Crook and Hibbing 1997). Senators now had to appeal directly to voters, increasing the importance of public opinion, campaigning, and media exposure in federal elections. This change contributed to the rise of more organized and visible political campaigns, often involving mass media and substantial grassroots fundraising efforts. The Senate also began to follow the partisan shifts of the popularly elected House of Representatives (Crook and Hibbing 1997).

In the decades following its adoption, the Seventeenth has remained a foundational element of U.S. democracy. The amendment's adoption followed years of political pressure from Progressive Era reformers who argued that legislative selection had become inefficient and susceptible to bribery. Today, the direct election of senators is an established norm, shaping the political landscape and influencing both state and national politics.

Background
In its second session, lasting from December 4, 1911, to August 26, 1912, the 62nd Congress completed action on what would become the Seventeenth Amendment. The amendment would establish the direct, popular election of U.S. Senators (Stathis 2014). Its ratification on April 8,

1913 was the culmination of a decades-long struggle that reflected both the reformist zeal and political tension of the Progressive Era.[iv] Though, debate around senatorial selection actually dates back to the Connecticut Compromise of 1787. The Virginia Plan, introduced May 29, 1787, originally called for a "National Legislature" to choose members of the Senate from nominees selected by state legislatures (Farrand 1911). This was designed to balance state and federal power. On May 31, the Convention debated this provision extensively. Many delegates, including the likes of James Wilson and Gouverneur Morris, instead favored direct election by the people, arguing it would make the upper chamber more accountable and democratic, while others, such as Roger Sherman and Elbridge Gerry, opposed direct election, insisting that state legislatures should have a hand to preserve state sovereignty within the federal structure (Farrand 1911). The final decision, made in early July 1787, saw the Convention reaffirm the idea of legislative election, allowing for the creation of proportional representation in the House along with equal representation of the states in the Senate.

The first attempt to revise this system came in 1826 when Rep. Henry Randolph Storrs (F-NY) proposed a constitutional amendment requiring senators to be popularly elected (Perrin 1910). These efforts to reform senatorial selection continued intermittently throughout the nineteenth century, gaining new life in the post-bellum period after the Civil War as the expansion of democracy and the rise of American industry exposed the flaws of legislative appointment. Frequent allegations of bribery and undue influence over state legislatures highlighted the vulnerability of senators to corruption, fueling calls for reform. During the period between 1890–1912, "nearly 150 proposed constitutional amendments were offered in Congress to establish the direct election of senators," and on five separate occasions, such measures were passed by the House (Stathis 2014, 496). The Senate, however, repeatedly blocked such initiatives throughout the decades.

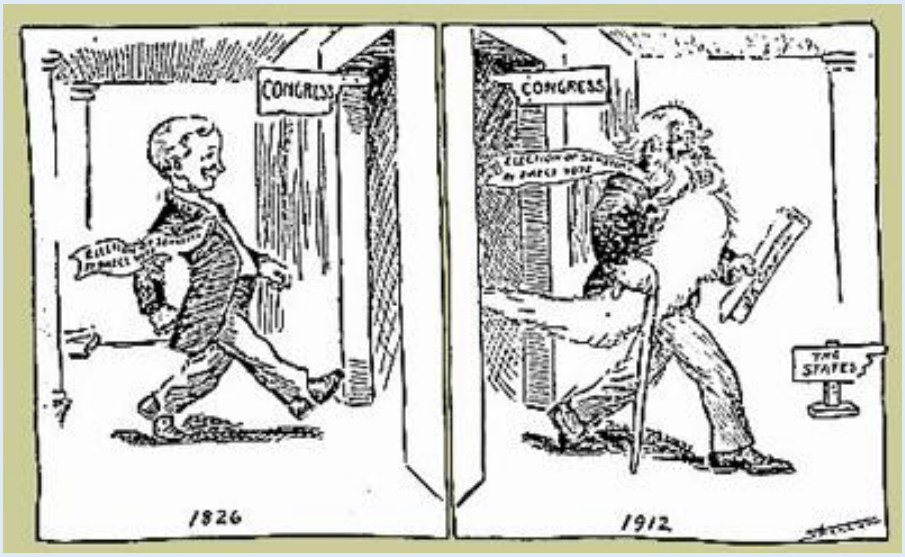

Figure 2. Political Cartoon portraying the time it took to pass the Seventeenth Amendment allowing the direct election of U.S. senators (Source: Senate.gov)

As a result, the movement for direct senatorial election would begin at the state level. Reformers in Oregon pioneered a system in 1904, in which the legislature pledged to select the candidate favored by the people's vote, effectively circumventing the constitutional requirement for

legislative appointment (Schiller and Stewart 2014). Other states soon followed suit, and by 1912, thirty-three states had adopted some form of popular or advisory primary for selecting senators.[v] Additionally, recurring scandals further reinforced perceptions that legislative election bred corruption. The most infamous case was that of Senator William Lorimer (R-IL) in 1910, where Lorimer was accused of securing his seat through bribery and political manipulation (Blount 1911), reportedly attempting to solicit votes by offering upwards of $1,000 to several Illinois State Senators the night before the election.[vi]

By the close of the first decade of the twentieth century, the push for reform had reached a critical mass. State experimentation had demonstrated the practicality of popular election, while scandals like Lorimer's had exposed the potential for moral bankruptcy in the old system. These forces soon converged on Capitol Hill, where the question of senatorial selection took on new urgency.

During the 61st Congress, debate over the direct election of Senators was already well advanced. The 61st Congress convened from March 4, 1909, to March 3, 1911, under the presidency of Republican William Howard Taft (R-OH). Republicans dominated both chambers, holding 219 seats to the Democrats' 172 in the House, and 59 seats to the Democrats' 32 in the Senate.[vii] The House of Representatives, maintaining a favorable attitude to popular pressure, passed a version of the amendment in 1910.[viii] Although the measure reached the Senate floor, it again failed to pass. Many of these proposals were being killed through agenda control, allowing Senators to obscure their positions on the issue. Nevertheless, the following 1910 midterm elections proved decisive. Widespread dissatisfaction with Taft—stemming mainly from concerns other than senatorial selection[ix]—allowed Democrats to gain control of the House for the first time in 16 years. They captured 228 seats to the Republicans' 161, while in the Senate, Republicans retained a narrow majority of 51 to 41.[x] While Republicans felt huge losses in both the House and Senate, it came with asymmetrical magnitude across the two chambers, as Democrats gained in the House while Republicans managed to maintain a hold on the Senate—a pattern that would change after the Seventeenth Amendment with simultaneous party control changes in both chambers in 1918, 1946, 1948, 1952, 1954 and so on (Crook and Hibbing 1997, 851).

The political realignment that was the 62nd Congress marked a turning point in the fortunes of Progressive reform. However, "[c]ontrary to widespread belief, had direct election been in effect during the years immediately preceding the Seventeenth Amendment's passage, Republicans, not Democrats, would have benefited," and this "period of Democratic majorities… [came] without a concomitant shift in the balance of partisan sentiments in the electorate" (Schiller and Stewart 2014, 187); meaning that, while shifts in congressional control may have surely facilitated procedural passage, the Seventeenth Amendment was more so a product of its time than the country's partisan politics. Rather, sustained Progressive advocacy and widespread concern over legislative corruption created conditions that made compromise politically expedient, and by 1911, senators were willing to come to the table, as they "feared that further obstruction [to direct election] could prompt another constitutional convention, one in which a wide range of other reforms or changes might also be proposed as amendments" (Stathis 2014, 496).

By the time the 62nd Congress convened for its second session in December 1911, the movement's momentum had grown unstoppable (Kyvig 1996). In May 1912, after extended

debate and a series of compromises designed to placate sectional concerns, Congress approved the proposed amendment and sent it to the states for ratification (Stathis 2014). The states acted with remarkable speed. Within a year, thirty-six legislatures—the minimum required under Article V—had approved the measure, completing ratification on April 8, 1913. The amendment's acceptance reflected the convergence of widespread public support, bipartisan politics, and years of reform advocacy. The first direct elections for the Senate were held in 1914 (Schiller and Stewart 2014), marking the full implementation of the Seventeenth Amendment and closing one of the longest and most persistent, yet often forgotten and understated reform campaigns in American legislative history.

Senate Consideration of SJR 134
(January 13; 16; 19-21; 24; 30-February 3; February 6-11; 13-17; 20; 23-24; 27-28, 1911)
The Senate's floor activity in January–February 1911 around S.J. Res. 134 marks an early and decisive phase in the congressional drive for the direct election of United States Senators. Introduced by Senator William Borah (R-MT), who was generally considered the "most active advocate for popular elections,"[xi] the resolution S.J. Res. 134 was placed on the Senate calendar and called up for consideration at the opening of business on January 13, 1911, where the *Congressional Record* lists the joint resolution among the day's orders and records Senatorial notices and procedural entries relating to the "Election of Senators by direct vote" (*Congressional Record*, 61st Congress, January 13, 1911, 1335).

The *Congressional Record* also reflects that after S.J. Res. 134 was called up, Senator Borah immediately moved that the Senate proceed to consider the resolution, and this was agreed to by unanimous consent. This began the Senate's first day of substantive engagement with direct election that year. Immediately afterward, Senator George Sutherland (R-UT) introduced his now-famous amendment that the "Federal Government would have power to regulate the election of Senators" (Carson et al, 2025, 4). This insertion of federal authority into the resolution set the terms of the controversy from the beginning and became the pivot around which the February debates would intensify (*Congressional Record*, 61st Congress, February 17, 1911, 2756).

In the ensuing days of January 16 and January 19–21, Senators registered initial floor statements and requests for the regular order—revealing both the procedural posture of the measure and the political themes that would dominate debate, *i.e.*, state legislative deadlocks, alleged corruption in selections by legislatures, and calls for popular control.[xii]

During these exchanges, early opposition began forming around the argument that Sutherland's language was a deliberate obstruction. Southern Democrats and insurgent Republicans viewed the amendment with deep suspicion. Senator Isidor Rayner (D-MD) later summarized this sentiment when he stated, "the adoption of the Sutherland amendment will imperil the passage of the joint resolution. It is a fact" (*Congressional Record*, 61st Congress, February 17, 1911, 2756). Senator Borah added his own historical recollection, reminding colleagues that a similar proposal by Senator DePew in 1902 "was offered for the purpose of killing the resolution, and that it did so" (*Congressional Record*, 61st Congress, February 16, 1911, 2647). These retrospective criticisms accurately reflect attitudes emerging already in January.

Throughout late January and into the opening weeks of February the resolution's processing reflected standard Senate floor procedure for constitutional proposals, which included placement on the calendar for second reading, recognition for debate, and allowance for amendments or substitutes to be offered from the floor (*Congressional Record*, 61st Congress, January 24, 1911). The bound *Congressional Record* shows the resolution repeatedly in the Senate's daily proceedings and committee references during January 24 and January 30–February 3, indicating that the chamber treated the matter more as a recurring order of business rather than a one-day special order.[xiii] Senators used those resumed sessions to refine content and to signal possible floor vehicles, including notices of substitutes, that might be offered later in committee or on the floor.[xiv]

By February, the debate had sharpened dramatically, being described as a "bitter sectional debate" on February 10, during which Senator Elihu Root (R-NY) charged Southern states with "disfranchisement" and "lynching," provoking Senator Augustus Octavius Bacon (D-GA) to respond that New York exhibited more "lawlessness and crime."[xv] The introduction of racial conditions into the debate over election procedures intensified Southern Democratic resolve to defeat the Sutherland amendment, which many believed invited federal intervention into state-controlled matters.

By February the measure was the subject of more extended floor remarks and formal motions. During the February 6–11 sequence Senators engaged in extended argument about the limits of federal supervision of elections and whether Congress or the states should retain control over "times, places, and manner." The record contains substantive statements for the record on those constitutional and federalism themes, and the daily entries show the Senate operating under its rules for consideration of constitutional amendments, including open amendment and the ability to substitute text on the floor (*Congressional Record*, 61st Congress, February 17, 1911, 2763).

Much of the opposition to rapid passage came from Senator Weldon Heyburn (R-ID), who insisted that there was no identifiable "evil" requiring constitutional change and declared he had no "sympathy with this plea for haste" (*Congressional Record*, 61st Congress, February 17, 1911, 2768–69). He suggested that the movement for direct election was being promoted by immigrants who had "only recently declared their intention to become citizens" (*Congressional Record*, 61st Congress, February 17, 2769), injecting a nativist tone into the federalism debate.

Procedurally significant action occurred at the end of February. The Senate allowed amendments on the measure, and floor managers signaled the intent to craft a version that might command a two-thirds majority.[xvi] Although the formally recorded supermajority roll call on the final adopted text occurred later in the year—and is reported as June 12, 1911—the January–February proceedings show the Senate's work of agenda setting and text-shaping—*i.e.*, placing the resolution on successive calendars, permitting recorded statements and short debate to frame the issue, and opening the possibility for substitutes to be offered that would remove contested language (that is, the "race-rider").[xvii]

On February 24, 1911, the Sutherland amendment passed 50–37. Its adoption proved decisive. When the Senate voted on final passage of SJR 134 immediately thereafter, the resolution failed 54–33—four votes short of the required two-thirds. Twenty-three "regular" Republicans who had

supported Sutherland's amendment voted against the resolution itself,[xviii] confirming the repeated warnings that the amendment had served as a strategic weapon to block direct election.

Taken as a whole, the early 1911 floor handling of S.J. Res. 134 illustrates the Senate's methodical legislative practice when confronting constitutional change. The chamber used recurring calendar placement and repeated reading to let the measure mature on the floor, permitted broad debate on federalism and corruption themes, and left open the procedural paths (committee referral or floor substitute) that would culminate in the Bristow substitute and the later roll-call. These days in January and February thus represent the deliberative, rule-governed preparatory stage that made substantive amendment and final passage possible in the months that followed.[xix]

House Consideration of HJR 39 (April 13, 1911)

On April 13, 1911 the House of Representatives formally processed H.J. Res. 39—the joint resolution proposing a constitutional amendment for the popular election of United States Senators—moving the measure from introduction into committee consideration and onto the House calendar. The House convened at noon, and the day's journal records the reading of the Clerk's entries and the referral to various measures; among the entries, H.J. Res. 39 was placed into the House's legislative procedures and directed into the committee system for further action (*Congressional Record*, 62nd Congress, April 13, 1911). That procedural motion—read, referred, and calendared—reflected ordinary House practice for constitutional amendments—*i.e.*, introduction, reference to the committee of jurisdiction, in this case the Judiciary Committee, and scheduling for report and floor consideration under House rules (*House Joint Resolution 39*, May 1, 1911).

Representative William Rucker (D-MO) again served as sponsor. Early in the session, Representative Horace Young (R-MI) offered an amendment closely paralleling Senator Sutherland's position in the Senate, warning that the proposed amendment would "take away the power even to regulate the election of Members of this House" (*Congressional Record*, 62nd Congress, April 13, 1911, 207). Young's argument revived the same federal-supervision issue dominating Senate debate.

Former Speaker Joseph Cannon (R-IL) reinforced Young's position, insisting that the federal government "should always have the power to perpetuate itself without regard to what any State or any States may do in failing to perform their duty" (*Congressional Record*, 62nd Congress, April 13, 1911, 213). The amendment failed by a recorded vote of 122–190, with Republicans voting in favor and Democrats almost uniformly opposed.

H.J. Res. 39—with the race-rider clause intact—was then passed overwhelmingly by the House, 297–15.

April 13 was not the date of final passage in the House, which would occur later, but it served as the pivotal day in which the House committed itself to deliberation on the direct-election proposal. Floor entries and the *Congressional Record* show that the resolution's text and purpose were discussed in general terms with members framing the problem in Progressive Era terms, including state legislative deadlocks, allegations of corruption in senatorial selection, and the

democratic demand for direct participation. Committee managers and proponents, however, clarified that H.J. Res. 39's language then before the House included the contentious "race-rider" clause preserving state authority over the "times, places, and manner" of elections (*Congressional Record*, 62nd Congress, April 13, 1911, 223).[xx]

Procedurally, the April 13 entry indicates that the House adhered to Rule XXIII and other governing provisions for joint resolutions proposing constitutional amendments by referring the measure and assigning the Judiciary Committee to review it and report its findings.[xxi] The referral meant that any hearings, committee deliberations, or informal consultations would occur under the committee's institutional authority and then be returned to the full House with recommendations and, potentially, floor amendments.

Substantively, the debate recorded around the referral day centers on the competing rationales for reform—deadlocks, corruption, federalism concerns, and so on—which would later shape negotiations with the Senate as well.[xxii] April 13 therefore functioned as both procedural gateway and rhetorical opening, with the House committed to expert committee review while enabling proponents to frame the public-facing argument that would later be deployed on the floor and in conference with the Senate.[xxiii]

In sum, House consideration on April 13, 1911 was primarily a procedural turning point, which saw H.J. Res. 39 entered into the House record, referred to the Judiciary Committee, and calendared for report and floor action. That day did not settle the amendment's final form but established the formal path—committee consideration, committee report, floor debate, and final House action—through which the House would both shape and, ultimately, after inter-chamber negotiations, concur in the text that became the Seventeenth Amendment.[xxiv]

Senate Consideration of HJR 39 (May 8-9; 15-17; 22-25; June 7-8; 12, 1911)

When H.J. Res. 39 came before the Senate in May 1911 the chamber confronted the choice of adopting the House text, amending it, or substituting a new form. On May 23, 1911, Senator Joseph Bristow (R-KS) presented the substitute and explained its purpose directly on the floor, stating, "I offered the substitute for the joint resolution chiefly for the reasons: First, I think it desirable, because it makes the least possible change in the Constitution to accomplish the purposes desired… and, second, because it is in the same form in which it was voted upon at the last session" (*Congressional Record*, 62nd Congress, May 23, 1911, 1482).

The Judiciary Committee had reported the resolution favorably on May 1 by a vote of 7–5, with regular Republicans opposing. When the motion to proceed was raised, the Senate agreed 66–5. Bristow then read the operative language aloud on the floor: "[t]he Senate of the United States shall be composed of two Senators from each State, elected by the people thereof" (*Congressional Record*, 62nd Congress, May 23, 1911, 1482). Southern Democrats viewed the Bristow substitute with alarm, interpreting it as reviving federal oversight of elections. The *Montgomery Advertiser* reported that the amendment would "reestablish federal oversight in Southern states," echoing longstanding concerns over Reconstruction-era election supervision (*Congressional Record*, 60th Congress, June 16, 1912, 2122).

Speakers urging a clean text without riders reinforced Bristow's approach. Senator John Smith (R-MI) argued that the amendment should be "shorn of every burden or subterfuge calculated to defeat it before the legislatures of our States," and Senator Borah expressed his preference for a "naked proposition… unincumbered [*sic*]" (*Congressional Record*, 62nd Congress, May 23, 1911, 1484).

When the Bristow substitute came to a vote on June 12, the result was initially tied. Republicans called Senator William Lorimer (R-IL), who was in Chicago, back to Washington to cast a decisive vote. Vice President James Sherman then broke the tie in favor of the Bristow amendment. Senator James Reed objected, insisting there was "very serious doubt about the right of the President to cast the deciding vote in a matter of this kind" (*Congressional Record*, 62nd Congress, June 12, 1911, 1924).

A substitute offered by Senator Bacon (D-GA) to remove the Bristow language failed 43–46. The Senate then passed H.J. Res. 39, as amended, by a vote of 66–25, with sixteen Republicans and nine Southern Democrats opposed.

Senator Reed's motion to reconsider on June 13 resulted in a 33–33 tie, leaving the Senate's action in place.

Procedurally, this sequence exemplified the Senate's deliberative approach to constitutional amendments. The measure remained continuously before the body for over a month, moving through referral, amendment, substitution, and final passage under the standard rules for joint resolutions. Substantively, the Senate's action transformed the proposal—removing controversial racial and federalism language and producing the version ultimately ratified by the states.[xxv]

This period also demonstrates the Senate's institutional self-conception. Although many members feared a diminution of prestige under direct election, they acknowledged the irresistible current of public opinion. The Senate's extensive debate and recorded roll calls provided both a democratic imprimatur and a detailed legislative history that later guided courts and scholars in interpreting the Seventeenth Amendment's scope (Clopton 2013).

House Consideration of the Senate Amendments to HJR 39 (June 20-21, 1912)

On May 13, 1912, the House again took up H.J. Res. 39 as part of the continuing legislative process that would culminate in final concurrence with the Senate the following month. The House proceeding that day functioned primarily as a procedural reaffirmation. The committee manager restated the House's position in favor of direct popular election and the House refreshed its prior record so that the posture of the lower chamber would be clear going into final inter-chamber negotiations.

Once the Senate had transmitted its amended form, Representative Martin Olmstead (R-PA) moved that the House concur, arguing that the Senate version would "take away from Congress the power which it now has under the present Constitution" (*Congressional Record*, 62nd Congress, June 21, 1911, 2405).

Representative Samuel Witherspoon (D-MS) gave the leading speech in opposition. He warned that the Bristow amendment's object "is to wrest the political power of Mississippi… and vest it in the ignorant and vicious class… to destroy the civilization of the South" (*Congressional Record*, 62nd Congress, June 21, 1911, 2415).

The House rejected concurrence by a vote of 111–171 and requested a conference.

The June 20–21 debates underscore how political pragmatism, rather than pure ideological unity, ensured the Seventeenth Amendment's success. The House's decision to yield on federal oversight reflected an acknowledgment of constitutional balance between state and federal authority while simultaneously confirming popular sovereignty as the defining principle of Progressive Era reform.

Secondary House Consideration of HJR 39 (May 13, 1912)

When the Senate's amended text was returned to the House in June 1912, the House considered those amendments under a special order (one hour of debate under the resolution that governed consideration). The House debated the practical effect of the Senate's changes and then refused a motion to recommit; by vote and subsequent voice concurrence the House accepted the Senate alterations and completed its concurrence so the amendment could be enrolled and sent to the states for ratification.

Press accounts suggested the conference had deadlocked. Representative Rucker therefore moved that the House recede from its own position and concur in the Senate's version. Representative Oscar Underwood (D-AL) supported the motion, declaring that he feared "no force bill" and did not "believe that the election of United States Senators by the people will overthrow the guaranties of the Constitution" (*Congressional Record*, 62nd Congress, May 13, 1912, 6362).

The motion to recede passed overwhelmingly, 238–39, with most opposition coming from Southern Democrats still objecting to the Bristow amendment.

Within weeks, the Senate would finalize its version of the resolution and return it to the House for concurrence—culminating in the June 20–21 debates that produced the final enrolled amendment. The House's secondary consideration of the measure on May 13, 1912, thus marked the crucial turning point between years of legislative effort and constitutional amendment—a somewhat reaffirmation that the House's role in this historic reform was both initiatory and resolute.

Member Spotlight

Born April 27, 1861 in Manchester, England, William Lorimer (R-IL) would not immigrate to the United States until 1866—his family first settling in Michigan, then in Ohio, before finally moving to Chicago, Illinois in 1870.[xxvi] Lorimer's father, William Lorimer, Sr., was a Scotch Presbyterian minister, often accompanied by his son who carried his father's Bible and hymn book on Sabbath visits to various churches throughout the Midwest (Tarr 1971). By 1870, the Lorimer family had settled in the section of Chicago known as the West Side, the largest geographical area in the city. The West Side was a mixed industrial and residential neighborhood, "noted for the various nationalities that crowded together there"; in its streets, one could find German, Irish, Bohemian, Polish and Russian workingmen living in "jerry-built tenements or cheap one and two-story houses," often rundown, cold, and unsanitary (Tarr 1971, 8). Sometime early on during the Lorimers' permanent settlement in Chicago's West Side, William, Sr., would die.

Figure 3. Pictured above is Senator William Lorimer, circa 1912.

The loss of Lorimer's father forced William to take on an advanced role in the family in order to provide. In his teenage years, Lorimer worked as a newsboy, a bootblack, and in the city's meat-packing houses, and possibly also as a laundry solicitor and department store cash-boy.[xxvii] Lorimer was self-educated and had apprenticed under a sign painter.[xxviii] His first foray into politics would come in 1886, after turning 25 years old. After landing a job as a streetcar conductor—a vast improvement from working in Chicago's 'packingtown' (Tarr 1971)—he organized the Street Railways Employees' Benevolent Association and was voted constable.[xxix] The next year, venturing into the real estate business, he was named assistant superintendent of water main construction and superintendent of the local water department soon after.[xxx] Lorimer's first stab at elected office came in 1892, where he sought the Republican nomination for a superior court clerk's position. This attempt was met with failure (Tarr 1971).

However, by the mid-1890s, Lorimer had become a key figure in Chicago's 17th Ward Republican organization. At some point during this time, he married into an Irish-Catholic family and subsequently converted to Catholicism. In his 20s, Lorimer would father at least 8 daughters, many of whom later worked for the city of Chicago.[xxxi] In 1894, Lorimer won his first major election to the U.S. House of Representatives from Illinois's 1st Congressional District.[xxxii] Emblematic of the new style of urban machine politics, Lorimer's political ventures took advantage of the hierarchical system of political organization that controlled cities for much of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, using a network of bosses and precinct workers to exchange favors and patronage for votes (Tarr 1971). Over time, "Lorimer became the political favorite of ethnic voters on the city's West Side, including many… who had previously voted Democratic. Lorimer was not a reformer; he believed in [local] competition."[xxxiii] During his tenure in Congress—serving several non-consecutive terms between 1895 and 1909—Lorimer became known as a reliable party man, committed to protecting Chicago's economic interests and ensuring the flow of federal resources into Illinois. While not a major legislative innovator, he

was renowned for his ability to broker deals and secure benefits for his constituents, enhancing his reputation as a so-called political "fixer."

Sometime during these early stages of his political career, William Lorimer was dubbed "the Blond Boss of Chicago." Appearing in the early century, "the Blond Boss" made reference to Lorimer's reputation as a classic political 'boss'—with his fair complexion also more than likely contributing to the nickname.[xxxiv]

By the time Lorimer entered the U.S. Senate in 1909, he had risen from poverty, built a formidable political machine, and secured a reputation as one of the most effective Republican organizers in Illinois. Yet the height of Lorimer's power would arrive at precisely the moment that the national political mood was placed in limbo. Reform currents—Progressivism, civil service reform, and the growing critique of urban machines—began to challenge the legitimacy of patronage-based politics.[xxxv] As a result, Lorimer's rise would not only expose the full machinery of Chicago-Illinois Republican politics but would eventually become one of the most influential catalysts for the adoption of the Seventeenth Amendment (Tarr 1971).

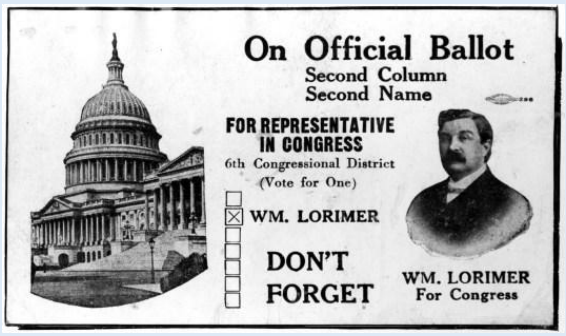

Figure 4. This electioneering card here is probably from the first time he ran, according to the Chicago Tribune in 1969. (Source: Chicago Tribune)

Prior to the adoption of the Seventeenth Amendment, Illinois—similar to many other states—selected its senators through a vote in the state's General Assembly. Each chamber first cast ballots separately, and if both houses did not agree on a candidate, they were required by federal law to meet in joint session and continue daily balloting until a majority chose a senator.[xxxvi] The system had led to controversy in the past,[xxxvii] and, in 1909, after days of debate, Lorimer was narrowly able to secure his Senate seat after an exceptionally bitter and chaotic contest within the Illinois General Assembly (Tarr 1971). After months of deadlock among Republican and Democratic factions, Lorimer was unexpectedly elected through a coalition that included a bloc of Democrats who crossed party lines.[xxxviii]

Initially, Lorimer's election attracted little controversy; cross-party voting was neither rare nor inherently illegal under Illinois law (Tarr 1971). But on April 30, 1910, the Chicago Tribune published a front-page story alleging that four Democratic legislators had been bribed to vote for Lorimer.[xxxix] Democratic Illinois state representative Charles A. White had written a confession claiming that he had received $1,000 for his vote for Lorimer. White insisted that the bribery was orchestrated by figures closely associated with Lorimer's political organization. [xl] Additional legislators—including Michael Link, Henry Beckemeyer, and others—later testified that they too had received bribes as part of a slush fund allegedly used to purchase votes for Lorimer during the Senate election of 1909 (*U.S. Senate Committee on Privileges and Elections 1910, S. Rept. No. 942*).

The Senate's first investigation, conducted by the Committee on Privileges and Elections, concluded in March 1911, with its report exonerating Lorimer. The full Senate subsequently voted 46–40 to uphold Lorimer's right to his seat.[xli]

The second Senate investigation, launched in 1911, proved far more damaging. This time, investigators uncovered clear links between Republican state leaders in Illinois, businessmen in Chicago, and the legislators who had voted for Lorimer. A central figure in this inquiry was Edward Hines, a wealthy lumber magnate and close associate of Lorimer (Tarr 1971).

Hines was accused of raising as much as $100,000 from business interests to secure Lorimer's election, distributing funds through intermediaries to sway legislators. While Hines denied all accusations, the testimony built a damning portrait of a coordinated effort by Lorimer and his coconspirators.[xlii]

On July 13, 1912, after three years of investigations, the Senate voted 55–28 to unseat Lorimer.[xliii]

Following his expulsion from the Senate, Lorimer attempted to rebuild his life and political standing, but the scandal had effectively destroyed his national ambitions. He returned to Chicago, where he focused on business ventures, including a bank known as the Lorimer Bank, which eventually failed in the 1920s. He remained a polarizing figure in Illinois politics—celebrated by old loyalists, but condemned by reformers, and largely abandoned by the broader Republican Party. In later years, Lorimer expressed deep bitterness about his treatment by the Senate and by the press (Tarr 1971).

Lorimer died in 1934 at the age of 73. He was buried at Calvary Cemetery in Evanston, Illinois.[xliv]

Today, while historians note that corruption existed both before and after the Seventeenth Amendment, Lorimer's case uniquely exposed the weaknesses of the old system. The scandal surrounding Lorimer directly accelerated the movement for direct election of senators, giving reformers a powerful narrative to support constitutional change (Kyvig 1996). While he himself opposed such reforms, the public outrage provoked by Lorimer's actions demonstrated that confidence in the Senate could not be maintained under the existing system. Lorimer's unseating in 1912 came shortly before the ratification of the Seventeenth Amendment in 1913.

Aftermath

The ratification of the Seventeenth Amendment to the United States Constitution in 1913 marked a watershed moment in American democracy, fundamentally altering the relationship between the federal government and the electorate. The immediate consequence of the Seventeenth Amendment was a democratization of the Senate. By transferring the power to choose senators from state legislatures to the general electorate, the amendment brought the upper chamber more directly under public control (Crook and Hibbing 1997). This shift reflected the broader Progressive Era ethos, which emphasized reform, transparency, and the reduction of corruption in governance (Schiller and Stewart 2014).

However, the Seventeenth Amendment also generated complex consequences for the federal system. By diminishing the role of state legislatures in the selection of senators, the amendment altered the Senate's original function as a protector of state sovereignty. The framers had envisioned the Senate as a stabilizing institution that balanced the democratic impulses of the House of Representatives with the interests of the states.[xlv] Direct election weakened this structural role, shifting the Senate toward greater responsiveness to national popular opinion, as seen in the elections following the amendments enactment (Crook and Hibbing 1997).

The amendment also shaped policy outcomes in ways that reflected the growing influence of public opinion. Senators, now accountable to voters directly, increasingly championed legislation that resonated with constituents' concerns. This responsiveness was evident in areas such as social reform, labor policy, and infrastructure development, where the alignment of electoral incentives and public priorities encouraged proactive legislative action. Conversely, some scholars have argued that direct election fostered short-termism, with senators more focused on immediate electoral considerations than on long-term policy coherence. Balancing state interests with popular pressures became an ongoing challenge, and the tension between national policymaking and local priorities has persisted as a defining feature of Senate politics (Clopton 2015).

In essence, the history of the Seventeenth Amendment illustrates both the transformative power and the unintended consequences of institutional reform. By establishing the direct election of senators, the amendment responded to widespread concerns over corruption and accountability, reshaping electoral politics and enhancing democratic participation. Yet it also altered the Senate's original role in representing state interests, contributing to the gradual centralization of federal authority and the professionalization of campaigns. Over the decades that followed, these changes manifested in more responsive, visible, and partisan senatorial politics, while simultaneously introducing new pressures associated with statewide elections. Today, the legacy of the Seventeenth Amendment remains evident in the Senate's dual character as a chamber of both popular representation and state advocacy, a reminder that reform can simultaneously solve old problems and create new challenges.

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Notes

[i] See https://www.reaganlibrary.gov/constitutional-amendments-amendment-17-direct-election-senators.

[ii] *Ibid*.

[iii] See https://www.archives.gov/milestone-documents/17th-amendment.

[iv] The Progressive Era (approximately 1890–1920) was a period of widespread social activism and political reform in the United States. Reformers sought to address problems arising from industrialization, urbanization, and political corruption, promoting initiatives such as antitrust regulation, labor protections, women's suffrage, and greater democratic participation. See, https://www.britannica.com/summary/The-Progressive-Era-Key-Facts.

[v] Several states experimented with popular or advisory systems for selecting U.S. Senators prior to the ratification of the Seventeenth Amendment. Oregon pioneered the so-called "Oregon Plan" around 1904, in which the state held a popular vote and the legislature pledged to select the winner. Illinois adopted an advisory party primary in 1912, allowing voters to express a preference while leaving the formal selection to the legislature. South Carolina's Democratic Party had conducted senatorial primaries since 1896, and by 1912 the state legislature routinely ratified the results of these primaries. These early experiments demonstrated both the feasibility of incorporating popular input and the growing demand for reform at the state level. For further discussion on state-level reforms, see William Bernhard and Brian R. Sala. 2006. "The Remaking of an American Senate: The 17th Amendment and Ideological Responsiveness." The Journal of Politics 68(2): 345-357. Chicago: University of Chicago Press (Journals).

[vi] "Offered $1,000 for Lorimer Vote." 1911. *Urbana Courier-Herald*, Oct. 12.

[vii] https://history.house.gov/Institution/Party-Divisions/Party-Divisions/; https://www.senate.gov/history/partydiv.htm.

[viii] https://www.archives.gov/milestone-documents/17th-amendment.

[ix] Voters were dissatisfied with President Taft during the 1910 midterms largely because many Progressives felt Taft had abandoned the reformist policies of his predecessor, Theodore Roosevelt—especially on trust-busting and tariff reduction. Specifically, his support for the Payne-Aldrich Tariff, which raised many tariffs instead of lowering them, angered reformist voters and deepened divisions within the party. Additionally, his perceived conservatism and conflicting views with Progressive Republicans led to a sense that the party was out of touch with the public's desire for political and economic reform. Ultimately, Roosevelt, displeased with his former protégé, would run against Taft in 1912 as a member of the Progressive Party (or, as it is popularly known, the Bull Moose Party)—spitting the Republican vote. For more on T.R.'s influence on the 1910 midterms, see George E. Mowry. 1939. "Theodore Roosevelt and the Election of 1910." *The Mississippi Valley Historical Review* 25(4): 523–534. https://www.jstor.org/stable/1892499.

[x] https://history.house.gov/Institution/Party-Divisions/Party-Divisions/; https://www.senate.gov/history/partydiv.htm.

[xi] See*, e.g.*, "Direct Election Wins," *The Washington Post*, May 14, 1912.

[xii] For Representative floor treatment and recurring statements, see January entries in the bound Congressional Record, vol. 46. GovInfo. https://www.congress.gov/congressional-record/61st-congress/browse-by-date.

[xiii] (See previous in-text citation); see also the *Congressional Record* daily calendars for January–February 1911 showing S.J. Res. 134 on successive days. GovInfo bound PDFs.

[xiv] For references to floor notices and the emergence of substitutes, see the *Congressional Record* Jan.–Feb. 1911 daily entries and the Library of Congress Congressional Record browse. https://www.congress.gov/congressional-record/61st-congress/browse-by-date.

[xv] Corrigan, John. 1911. "Back and Root in Bitter Clash on Senate Floor." *Atlanta Constitution*, February 11.

[xvi] For references to the "race-rider" controversy and the later Bristow substitute that would remove it, see National Archives, "17th Amendment" milestone page and the Archives' H.J. Res. 39 summary. National Archives, https://www.archives.gov/milestone-documents/17th-amendment; https://www.archives.gov/legislative/features/17th-amendment/hjres39.html.

[xvii] For later roll-call and adoption context (which flowed from these preparatory months), see U.S. Senate archival artifact and the June 12, 1911 roll-call entry. U.S. Capitol / VisittheCapitol.gov artifact page. https://www.visitthecapitol.gov/artifact/roll-call-vote-hj-res-39-seventeenth-amendment-june-12-1911.

[xviii] See "Kills Move to Elect Senators by People," *New York Times*, March 1, 1911.

[xix] For scholarly synthesis of the legislative choices and Bristow's role, see Clopton, Z. D. 2015. "The Meaning of the Seventeenth Amendment and a Century of Congressional Practice." *Northwestern Law Review* 107. https://scholarlycommons.law.northwestern.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1051&context=nulr.

[xx] See also the House daily entries and legislative calendar recorded in the bound *Congressional Record* for April 1911; the April 13 entries show reading and referral actions and include general floor statements framing the amendment. U.S. Congress. *Congressional Record—House*, April 13, 1911. GovInfo.

[xxi] For House committee referral practice and the handling of constitutional-amendment joint resolutions under House rules (Rule XXIII), see the House records guide and the bound *Congressional Record* procedural entries. National Archives, Guide to House Records: Chapter 14 (Records of the Judiciary Committee). https://www.archives.gov/legislative/guide/house/chapter-14.html.

[xxii] For contemporaneous framing of the debate (deadlocks, corruption, federalism concerns) see the *Congressional Record* entries and the Archives' summary of the amendment's history. U.S. Congress. *Congressional Record—House*, April 1911; National Archives, "17th Amendment" milestone page. https://www.archives.gov/milestone-documents/17th-amendment.

[xxiii] For how House referral and calendar scheduling operated in practice for H.J. Res. 39, see the April 13 calendar and referral notices in the bound *Congressional Record* and the Serial Set / reports index for the 62nd Congress. U.S. Govt. Printing Office, *Index to the Reports and Documents of the 62d Congress*. GovInfo.

[xxiv] For the subsequent House passage (May 1, 1911) and the later inter-chamber exchange culminating in the House's eventual concurrence, see National Archives, "House Joint Resolution 39, May 1, 1911" and the *Congressional Record* entries for May 1911 and May 13, 1912. National Archives; U.S. Congress. *Congressional Record*.

[xxv] See National Archives. "17th Amendment Milestone Document." https://www.archives.gov/milestone-documents/17th-amendment.

[xxvi] Bioguide. "Lorimer, William." Biographical Directory of the United States Congress. https://bioguide.congress.gov/search/bio/L000444.

[xxvii] We do know that Lorimer worked a wide variety of "low-level" jobs before landing in politics; however, many aspects of Lorimer's life remain speculative. Lorimer, to the dismay of historians, was not much of a letter writer (see Tarr (1971)), and, as a result, parts of his personal life have been left undocumented. See, *e.g.*, Langeveld, Dirk.

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[xxix] Langeveld, Dirk. 2009. "William Lorimer: the fall of the 'blond boss.'" The Downfall Dictionary. https://downfalldictionary.blogspot.com/2009/06/william-lorimer-fall-of-blond-boss.html.

[xxx] See both Bioguide. "Lorimer, William." Biographical Directory of the United States Congress. https://bioguide.congress.gov/search/bio/L000444; and Langeveld, Dirk. 2009. "William Lorimer: the fall of the 'blond boss.'" *The Downfall Dictionary*. https://downfalldictionary.blogspot.com/2009/06/william-lorimer-fall-of-blond-boss.html.

[xxxi] Barsby, Susan. 2012. "Lorimer." American Inquiry. https://americaninquiry.com/2012/07/26/lorimer/.

[xxxii] Bioguide. "Lorimer, William." Biographical Directory of the United States Congress. https://bioguide.congress.gov/search/bio/L000444.

[xxxiii] Barsby, Susan. 2012. "Lorimer." American Inquiry. https://americaninquiry.com/2012/07/26/lorimer/.

[xxxiv] See, *e.g.*, "Harrison Wins." 1903. *Galena Daily Gazette*, Apr. 9.

[xxxv] See Shannon, William V. 1969. "The Political Machine I: Rise and Fall — The Age of the Bosses." *American Heritage* 20 (4). https://www.americanheritage.com/political-machine-i-rise-and-fall-age-bosses.

[xxxvi] See U.S. National Archives. 2013. "The 17th Amendment Observes Its Centennial." Pieces of History (blog), May 31. https://prologue.blogs.archives.gov/2013/05/31/the-17th-amendment-observes-its-centennial/

[xxxvii] The 1858 Lincoln–Douglas debates—seven widely attended debates between Abraham Lincoln and Senator Stephen A. Douglas—were technically part of a U.S. Senate "campaign," but under the constitutional system in place at the time, Illinois voters did not elect senators directly. Instead, the debates were aimed at influencing the outcome of the Illinois General Assembly elections; after legislators were chosen, they met in joint session on January 5, 1859, and elected Douglas by a vote of 54 to 46. The episode became an early and frequently cited example of the democratic shortcomings of legislative selection, showing how a Senate seat could be decided by the partisan control of a statehouse rather than by the preference of voters statewide. See both Encyclopedia Britannica, "Lincoln–Douglas Debates," https://www.britannica.com/event/Lincoln-Douglas-debates; and U.S. National Archives, "The 17th Amendment Observes Its Centennial," Pieces of History (blog), May 31, 2013, https://prologue.blogs.archives.gov/2013/05/31/the-17th-amendment-observes-its-centennial/

[xxxviii] Kyvig, David E. 2009. "Can Illinois Again Lead by (Bad) Example?" *Origins: Current Events in Historical Perspective*, January 2009. https://origins.osu.edu/history-news/can-illinois-again-lead-bad-example.

[xxxix] "Democratic Legislator Confesses that He was Bribed to Vote for Lorimer for United States Senate." 1910. *Chicago Tribune*, Apr. 30.

[xl] *Ibid.*

[xli] See https://www.senate.gov/about/origins-foundations/electing-appointing-senators/contested-senate-elections/095William_Lorimer.htm.

[xlii] Kyvig, David E. 2009. "Can Illinois Again Lead by (Bad) Example?" *Origins: Current Events in Historical Perspective*, January 2009. https://origins.osu.edu/history-news/can-illinois-again-lead-bad-example.

[xliii] See https://www.senate.gov/about/origins-foundations/electing-appointing-senators/contested-senate-elections/095William_Lorimer.htm.

[xliv] "William Lorimer, Former U.S. Senator, Drops Dead." 1934. *Streator Daily Times-Press*. Sep. 13.

[xlvxlv] Hans A. von Spakovsky, "17th Amendment Weakened Balance of Power Between States, Federal Government," *The Heritage Foundation*, October 13, 2022, https://www.heritage.org/the-constitution/commentary/17th-amendment-weakened-balance-power-between-states-federal-government.