

Interview with Rep. James A. Burke (D-MA), Democratic committee on committees (Ways and Means)

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“The new ones are a progressive group. We had to liberalize the Appropriations Committee this year. You’re in trouble over there. So we put some people on who would support the administration and the party position. They just squeaked in, but we got the votes.”

“The real surprise was Bob Giaimo [D-CT]. He took away a southern seat. Pat Jennings [D-VA] was the new member from that district, and his newness worked against him. The rest of us took advantage of his inexperience. He just couldn’t put his man across. He came to me and said, ‘I was elected by the southern delegation, and I’ve got to get that job for my district.’ Well, I didn’t say anything. I knew how his man got licked—my man knocked him out. Next time, two years from now, he’ll know how to put his man across. Getting Giaimo across was quite a stunt. The first year I came down here I didn’t have any success with my candidates. This year I got all my men on the committees. It’s quite a workout.”

“You’re not going to vote for a man on that committee who thinks differently from you, a man who will get on the committee and vote against you, against your philosophy, against your party, and against the administration.”

The regional group meets and proposes regional candidates. At this point seniority counts. “Sometimes a man wants it that you just can’t sell to the other members. Gene Keogh [D-NY] got into that position with two men he wanted to get on the committee. I think he got two votes, his and one other. He pleaded with the other members—‘please, give me a vote.’ But he couldn’t sell him to the members. He was just too unpopular.”

How does he go about it? On a fifteen-member committee you need eight votes, and he was quite positive about the necessity for getting only eight votes. First, you go to the men without candidates. You trade a vote and get a pledge from them (five in his example). Secondly, you fill up to eight by going to the people who have candidates and trading votes. You trade just as few of these votes as you need (three of the five in his example). You just get eight—a minimum coalition!

No White House interference at all, he said.

He has a whole brochure on candidates when he meets at the Committee on Committees meeting. He has their campaign speeches, the position they took during their campaign, their platforms, etc. For new members they use Congressional Quarterly as a basis of information. Voting in the Committee on Committees is by secret ballot, a piece of paper.