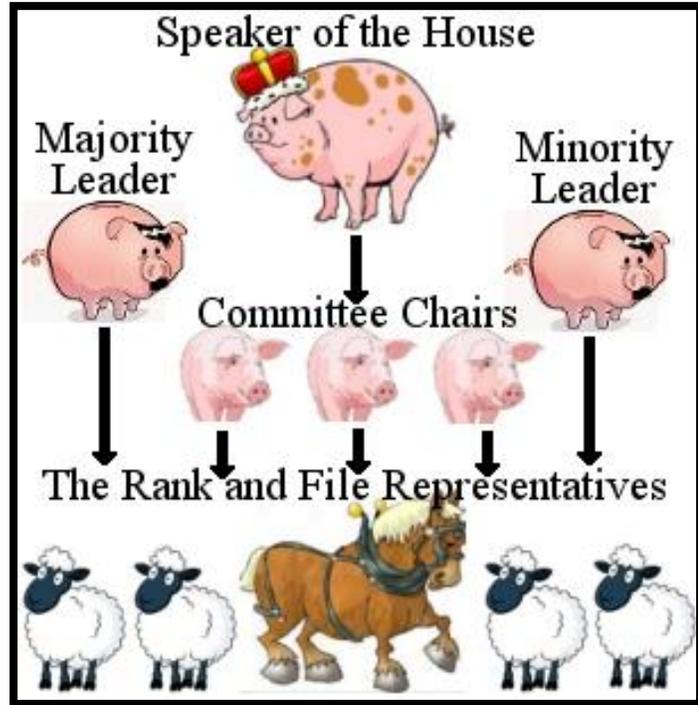


# Why Some Votes Are More Equal Than Others

1/25/16 by Jon Schuessler

George Orwell's dark fairy tale, Animal Farm, featured a revolution by the livestock against a bad farmer. The revolt was inspired by the phrase, "All Animals Are Equal". By the novel's end, however, corrupt pigs had changed the motto:

"All Animals Are Equal – But Some Are More Equal Than Others."



*The General Assembly, a.k.a. Missouri's Animal Farm.*

What does this have to do with Missouri? Well, among other things, it turns out that our state legislature has its own "Animal Farm" system for representing us.

In the General Assembly, you see, all representatives and senators are equal, but some are more equal than others.

We were taught in school that our legislature is *democratic* – that every district has an equal say. My representative, for instance, carries the same influence as yours does.

Unfortunately, this "feel-good" message couldn't be further from the truth. Voters in the House Speaker's district have a lot more influence than voters in other districts. The same goes for the Senate President Pro Tem, or legislators who act as committee chairs, or party caucus leaders, all of whom have more "muscle" to get what they want for their district at the expense of their neighbors.

Instead of an assembly of *equals*, our state legislature is organized like a *kingdom*. Just like kings, the House Speaker and Senate President keep court. They hand out favors to their nobles, who in turn keep firm control over the peasant-legislators of their party.

Sounds incredible? Let's look at some facts:

1) **The Speaker of the House can kill a bill at will.**

All rhyming aside, the Speaker holds god-like power over the life of a bill. According to the Missouri Constitution, a bill *must* go to a committee. By House rules, the Speaker gets to appoint all of the committee chairs and vice-chairs. When a bill is ready to be assigned to a committee, the person who decides which committee gets the bill is – you guessed it – the House Speaker.

Past Speakers have used this power to murder bills they didn't like. Republican Rod Jetton, House Speaker from 2005 to 2010, was publicly blatant about it when he buried a bill sponsored by Sen. Matt Bartle on porn regulation, giving it to a committee chaired by Rep. Johnson. He later said, "Bob Johnson didn't like Senator Bartle. And I didn't much care for Senator Bartle... I knew that Johnson was not going to buckle under pressure from Bartle."

The Senate President Pro Tem has the same set of powers.

2) **Party leaders control the rank-and-file committee membership.**

The legislators who are chosen to be the heads of the Democratic and Republican factions have the power to appoint or remove their fellow legislators from a committee. These party bosses are known as the "Majority Leader" and "Minority Leader". If they don't like you, you won't get on a committee, or you'll be shuffled off to unimportant committees.

Parties use the Majority and Minority Leaders to keep their members voting in lockstep on "important" issues. If you vote independently, you get punished. One instance of this involved House Representative Keith English, a Democrat from Florissant. English voted with Republicans to override the Democratic Governor Nixon's veto on a tax-cut bill in 2014. The very next day, the Democratic Minority Leader, Jake Hummel, stripped English of all four of his assigned committees.

3) **There are powerful committees and there are weak committees.**

The Budget Committees – in both chambers – are examples of powerful committees. By themselves, they control how much every individual part of government gets funded. The House recently instituted a two-tier committee scheme that created 13 extremely powerful "Select Committees" which have to give the final approval on all bills from the two or more committees that they supervise.

Some committees are powerful because their responsibilities cover a topic that is always important, such as education or criminal law. Others are temporarily important when an issue comes up, like the Ferguson riots, but then fade back to obscurity when the problem is "addressed". Then there are

committees that serve only as glorified clerical staff, such as the Administration and Accounts Committee, which distributes supplies for the House, or the Ethics Committee, which hears the rare complaints about fellow legislators, but does no investigation of its own.

Legislators who serve on powerful committees can trade favors and get their bills passed. Legislators who serve on weak committees are often ignored, even when they're the chairman.

4) **Seniority counts more than anything else.**

The system is designed so that the longer a person has served in a chamber, the more clout they have. Confusing jargon, obscure rules, and established cliques create high barriers to entry for “freshman” legislators who wish to take part in lawmaking. To make matters worse, committee assignments are made almost always on the basis of seniority and party loyalty.

The Senate has even institutionalized the problem. In that chamber, bills are heard in order of the sponsor's seniority – not by the order in which they were filed. So even if a bill get filed weeks later than another, it will get priority if its sponsor has several terms of office under his belt.

Why does all of this matter? It matters because it makes some legislators more powerful than other legislators; which means that your vote doesn't carry the same weight as other votes.

In other words, voters are not treated equally. There are winners and losers, haves and have-nots.

So much for what we were taught in school.

Can this situation be changed? It most certainly can. Many of the problems of unequal representation are the product of longstanding House rules and Senate rules. All it takes to get rid of them, is a simple majority vote of legislators who are willing to change the system.

There is an example proposal for change which you can view by clicking [here](#). I believe this system would provide a much more even distribution of power among legislators, while also fighting special interests and partisan influence.

In the meantime, however, we'll have to make do with the ~~Kingdom~~ state of Missouri. So cross your fingers, and pray that your representative is one of the “more equal” ones.