

[Witcher on Andelic, 'Donkey Work: Congressional Democrats in Conservative America, 1974-1994'](#)

Review published on Friday, July 10, 2020

Patrick Andelic. *Donkey Work: Congressional Democrats in Conservative America, 1974-1994.* Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2019. 304 pp. \$34.95 (cloth), [ISBN 978-0-7006-2803-2](#).



Reviewed by Marcus M. Witcher (Huntingdon College) **Published on** H-1960s (July, 2020)
Commissioned by Zachary J. Lechner (Centenary College of Louisiana)

Printable Version: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showpdf.php?id=54940>

Patrick Andelic's *Donkey Work* argues that the Democratic Party—and liberalism by extension—did not disappear after George McGovern's disastrous defeat in 1972. Indeed, Andelic insists that congressional liberal Democrats successfully limited the effects of the Reagan revolution even while they failed to produce a coherent ideological and policy response to conservatism. Andelic decenters the political narrative from the presidency to Congress and details the efforts of Democrats to govern from Congress from 1974 to 1994. Finally, he offers some insight into the evolution of the Democratic Party, the rise of neoliberalism, and the reasons for the failure of congressional governance.

Looking back, many historians claim that conservatism was on the ascent during the 1970s and that this momentum resulted in Ronald Reagan's victory in 1980. Andelic reminds readers, however, that after Watergate and President Gerald Ford's pardon of President Richard Nixon, Democrats were ascendant. In fact, the 1974 congressional elections resulted in huge victories for the party: gaining forty-nine seats in the House and four in the Senate. This new class of freshman legislators were known collectively as "Watergate Babies." Although from different districts and backgrounds, they were "sensitive to minority rights, champions of the suburban consumer, environmentally conscious, and dovish on foreign policy" (p. 19). Despite having little seniority, they were able to play important roles in Congress due to changes in the House rules. As Andelic demonstrates, after 1974 the Democratic Party was triumphant.

Unfortunately for Democrats, determining what type of liberalism to promote with their majorities in both Houses proved difficult. Many of the new members believed that "New Deal liberalism was defunct" and some of them attempted to replace it with "hardheaded, pragmatic liberalism" that did not overpromise (p. 20). Consequently, the Democratic Party was at odds with itself when Jimmy Carter won the White House in 1976.

Carter came into office controlling both chambers of Congress, but neither he nor Congress "felt any gratitude to the other" (p. 62). As Andelic illustrates, both the divisions in the Democratic Party and Carter's unwillingness to embrace a bold liberal legislative agenda crippled attempts to fashion a new liberalism. Despite the failure of Representative Phillip Burton and Senator Herbert Humphrey to gain leadership positions in 1976, the advocates of a more active liberal agenda pressed the pragmatic Carter to embrace full employment. The result was the Humphrey-Hawkins Full

Employment Act, which in its original form would “have extended a legal right to a job to every American” (p. 72). Carter insisted that the measure was inflationary and refused, initially, to support the legislation. Despite polls demonstrating that the American people supported the measure, Carter was concerned about the costs. He was not alone in his concerns; many of the Watergate Babies and business leaders also opposed the more extreme elements of the bill. Ultimately, a much-watered down version passed with the support of Carter.

The election of 1976 gave Democrats a real opportunity to unite their party around a new political ethos that combined the economic liberalism of the New Deal and the civil rights liberalism of the 1960s. Andelic argues, however, that as much as congressional Democrats hoped to be a coequal branch in governing, they discovered “that grand visions of a ‘New New Deal’ would go nowhere without forceful presidential leadership” (p. 89). Democrats failed to capitalize on their opportunity to present the American people with a new and revitalized liberalism. At the same time, Reagan channeled the disillusion of the American people and promised a new hopeful conservative agenda that would address both inflation and unemployment. Andelic argues that although Reagan won an impressive victory, it was not clear the American people had given him an ideological mandate. Although Republicans had captured the Senate, Democrats still possessed an impressive majority in the House. Reagan got his tax cuts and some limited spending reductions through Congress, but when it came to significantly reducing the size and scope of government, Democrats successfully fought back.

Andelic joins an emerging group of historians who are demonstrating the limits of the Reagan revolution in 1980. For instance, he argues that “after a faltering start, the Democratic Party would prove surprisingly adept at using Congress to contain the Reagan administration during the early 1980s” (p. 128). Andelic details Democrats’ successful efforts to defeat Reagan’s cuts to Social Security and concludes that the victory demonstrates “the extent to which many components of [Reagan’s] political agenda lacked a popular mandate” (p. 145). In short, although Speaker of the House Tip O’Neill and the Democrats did not implement any new sweeping measures, they were successful in defending existing programs.

Andelic concludes by discussing the evolution of neoliberalism and the emergence of New Democrats in the 1980s and early 1990s. Unlike other historians who view these movements as reactions to the electoral success of the Republican Party, Andelic demonstrates that both had roots in the Democratic Party—dating back to at least the Watergate Babies of 1974. Ultimately, “all the top-tier [Democratic primary] candidates” in the 1992 election (Arkansas governor Bill Clinton, former Massachusetts senator Paul Tsongas, and California governor Jerry Brown Jr.) “were pushing some version of the ‘neoliberal’ agenda” (p. 179).

Andelic should be praised for his thorough treatment of conservative Democrats and for challenging the extent to which conservatism was triumphant in 1980. In doing so, he draws on an impressive array of archival sources, including the papers of Jimmy Carter, Tip O’Neill, Gary Hart, Timothy Wirth, Jerry Brown, Paul Tsongas, Herbert Humphrey, Walter Mondale, and Morris Udall, among others. He also consulted newspapers, journals, memoirs, and diaries, and conducted interviews. The result is a book that is impressively and meticulously researched.

Although Andelic has successfully argued for the importance of Democrats post-1972, there are a

couple places where he misses the mark. For instance, Andelic relies on polling data in 1977 in which a majority of respondents were in favor of a full employment bill. He uses this data to claim that even at the highwater mark of the Reagan revolution, 78 percent of Americans “were in favor of the federal government doing more to provide jobs for all Americans” (p. 84). The issue of course with polling like this is that it does not present the cost of such measures. Respondents are more likely to support government intervention if they do not consider the expense. After all, everyone wants access to jobs, healthcare, and education. Similar polling results can be found throughout the 1990s, 2000s, and today, when people are not asked to weigh the costs of such programs. When Americans are presented the costs, however, support for the programs decreases. In short, it is not clear that these polls accurately capture the mood of the nation and as a result may have led Andelic to overstate the political viability of large governmental programs in the late 1970s.

Furthermore, Andelic may overemphasize the importance of congressional Democrats to stunting the Reagan revolution. He seems to assume that Reagan himself was a radical who wanted to fundamentally alter the size and scope of government. While Reagan was indeed a conservative, he was also prudent, and recognized the limits to what he could accomplish. Likewise, many of Reagan’s own appointees were not on board with the conservative agenda. The failures of the Reagan revolution were as much the product of a pragmatic administration as they were the doing of the Democratic opposition.

These small criticisms aside, Andelic has written a readable, well-researched, and convincing history of congressional Democrats from 1974 to 1994. Despite its focus on Congress, the book demonstrates the limits of congressional governance and offers a lesson of caution to any political party that tries to govern from the legislative branch. For better or worse, the presidency remains powerful and change will be incredibly hard to enact for the party out of the White House.

Citation: Marcus M. Witcher. Review of Andelic, Patrick, *Donkey Work: Congressional Democrats in Conservative America, 1974-1994*. H-1960s, H-Net Reviews. July, 2020. **URL:** <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=54940>

This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/).