

1 **Going Nowhere: A Gridlocked Congress**

2 Sarah A Binder

3 2000 Brookings Review

4

5 Gridlock is not a modern legislative invention. Although the term is said to have
6 entered the American political lexicon after the 1980 elections, Alexander
7 Hamilton was complaining more than two centuries ago about the deadlock rooted
8 in the design of the Continental Congress. In many ways, gridlock is endemic to
9 our national politics, the natural consequence of separated institutions sharing and
10 competing for power.

common

11

12 But even casual observers of Washington recognize tremendous variation in
13 Congress's performance. At times, congressional proWess is stunning. The Great
14 Society Congress under Lyndon Johnson, for example, enacted landmark health
15 care, environment, civil rights, transportation, and education statutes (to name a
16 few). At other times, gridlock prevails, as when, in 1992, congressional efforts to
17 cut the capital gains tax and to reform lobbying, campaign finance, banking,
18 parental leave, and voter registration laws (to name a few) ended in deadlock.

competence

19

20 What accounts for such uneven performance? Why is Congress sometimes
21 remarkably successful and other times mired in stalemate? For all our attention to
22 the minutiae of Congress, we know little about the dimensions and causes of
23 gridlock. How much do we have? How often do we get it? What drives it up and
24 down? Such questions are particularly acute today, as Democrats and Republicans
25 trade barbs over the do-nothing 106th Congress. Despite the first budget surplus in
26 30 years, Congress and the president remain deadlocked over numerous high-
27 profile issues (including Social Security, Medicare, managed health care, and
28 campaign finance reform), and they show few prospects of acting on these and
29 other salient issues before the 2000 elections.

small details

serious

30

31 **An Elusive Concept**

32 Some argue that gridlock is simply a constant of American political life. James
33 Madison bequeathed us a political system designed not to work, a government of
34 sharply limited powers. But surely the framers (dissatisfied with their governing
35 experiment after the Revolution and fearful of rebellious debtors in the states)
36 sought a strong national government that could govern—deliberately and
37 efficiently, albeit insulated from the passions of popular majorities. Gridlock may
38 be a frequent consequence of the Constitution, but that does not mean the framers
39 preferred it.

significant

handed down

although

40

41 Others might object to labeling legislative inaction as "gridlock." If a government
42 that "governs least governs best," then policy stability should be applauded, not
43 derided as gridlock. But views about gridlock tend to vary with one's political
44 circumstance. Former Senate Majority Leader Bob Dole put it best: "If you're
45 against something, you'd better hope there's a little gridlock." Legislative action,
46 after all, can produce either liberal or conservative policy change. "Gridlock"
47 might simply be an unfortunate choice of words, a clumsy term for Washington's
48 inability to broach and secure policy compromise (whether liberal or conservative

ridicule

49 in design). If so, understanding the causes of gridlock should interest any keen
50 observer or participant in national politics, regardless of party or ideology.

51
52 **Evaluating Gridlock**

53 Getting a handle on gridlock is tricky. Typically, scholars assess Congress's
54 productivity, counting up the number of important laws enacted each Congress.
55 When output is low, we say that gridlock is high, and vice versa. But measuring
56 output without respect to the agenda of salient issues risks misstating the true level
57 of gridlock. A Congress might produce little legislation because it is truly
58 gridlocked. Or it might be unproductive because it faces a limited agenda. With
59 little on its legislative plate, surely Congress should not be blamed for producing
60 meager results. We can evaluate Congress's performance only if we have some
61 idea of the size of the underlying policy agenda.

62 **TABLE 2. CONTRIBUTORS TO POLICY GRIDLOCK, 1951-96**

INDEPENDENT VARIABLE	CHANGE IN INDEPENDENT VARIABLE (FROM — TO)	SIMULATED CHANGE IN LEVEL OF GRIDLOCK
Divided government	unified — divided	+8%
Percentage of "centrists"	19% — 34%	-10%
Policy distance between House and Senate	.07 — .30	+13%
Filibuster threat	0 — 7.5	+6%
Budget situation (surplus/deficit as percentage of federal outlays)	-19% — -2%	-2%

Note: The simulated changes in gridlock are based on statistical estimates from a grouped logit model in which the level of gridlock is the dependent variable. Additional independent variables include a set of controls (not shown) for ideological diversity across members, time spent in the minority for each new majority party, and the public mood. Changes in gridlock are simulated by varying the values of each independent variable between the values in column 2 (i.e., one standard deviation below and above its mean value for continuous variables and between 0 and 1 for divided government). For parameter estimates and details on measurement, see Sarah A. Binder, "The Dynamics of Legislative Gridlock," *American Political Science Review*, vol. 93 (September 1999): 519-533.

63
64 But neither institutional nor electoral features of Congress are immutable. True, we
65 are likely stuck with a bicameral system, despite calls from Governor Jesse
66 Ventura (Reform-MN) and others to consider the unicameral alternative. But the
67 impact of the filibuster can be lessened by reforming Senate rules to make it easier
68 to invoke cloture or by eliminating the noxious practice of anonymous holds.
69 Elections, of course, are the ultimate recourse for voters dissatisfied by partisan
70 polarization and the conduct of Congress. Nudging Congress back to the center by
71 sending more centrist legislators to Washington would be one way to alleviate
72 gridlock. Still, diagnosing the ills of a body politic is one thing; rousing the patient
73 to seek treatment is another.

74
75
76

absolute
unlimited debate
vote to end a
filibuster