

## Be Thankful the House and Senate are Different

By Lee Hamilton

As the U.S. Senate prepares to take up the nomination of Judge John G. Roberts to be Chief Justice of the United States, there are two things worth pointing out about the role your representative to the U.S. House will play in this matter. The first is that he or she has none; members of the House have no official role at all in approving presidential nominations. The second is that if it were up to the House, Judge Roberts would no doubt already be preparing for the Supreme Court's opening day in October.

That is because, in addition to the constitutional provisions that delineate the responsibilities of the two bodies — only the Senate votes on treaties and nominations submitted by the President, while legislation affecting taxes must originate in the House — there is a vast gulf between the two.

The Senate gives greater leeway to members of the minority party, partly by tradition and partly because Senate rules allow members of the minority party to gum up the works if they're unhappy. In the House, on the other hand, the majority party sets the terms of debate and, if it's cohesive, controls the outcome. Democrats in the GOP-controlled Senate have the opportunity to scrutinize Judge Roberts' record; in the House, they could basically only stand by and watch as the Republican majority did whatever it wanted.

This simple difference is part of the genetic makeup of our democracy. The framers of our Constitution not only gave the House and Senate different responsibilities, they envisioned them as playing divergent roles. The House, whose members are elected every two years from districts drawn (ideally) to ensure their familiarity with the people they represent, was expected to represent the concerns and passions of the American people and to distill the voice of popular opinion.

The Senate, with its six-year terms and members who represent an entire state, was intended to stand at a greater distance from ordinary citizens and to consider legislation with deliberation and forethought. As George Washington once commented, just as we pour coffee into a saucer to cool it, "we pour legislation into the senatorial saucer to cool it."

From this fundamental distinction flows a cascade of cultural differences that you can almost sniff in the air of each chamber. In the House, members take very seriously their closeness to the people. They understand their districts in minute detail — the makeup of the communities they represent, the political and social beliefs of the people who live there, the concerns of their local politicians and civic leaders, the issues that matter to local business people.

If you look at the daily schedule of a House member who is at home, you see it's filled with meetings with neighborhood associations or church groups, with sessions for individual constituents, with visits to this VFW hall or that county fair.

Senators, on the other hand, tend to meet with the state Farm Bureau or statewide Chamber of Commerce, and if they show up at an event, it's the state fair or a state convention.

This lends a faint touch of aristocracy about the Senate. House members like to joke that when one of their own becomes a senator, the first thing he or she does is buy a more expensive suit and start thinking about the White House. But then, senators play on a bigger stage: they

command the attention of the metropolitan media in their state and even of the national press; they are forced by the nature of their duties to be generalists, rather than the specialists produced by the House committee structure; and they have more opportunity, because of the deference accorded individual senators by their chamber's rules, to weigh in on vital matters of state.

For the politicians, partisans and activists who pay close attention to Congress, these differences can be a cause for frustration or relief — depending on where they sit. If you like what Judge Roberts stands for, you might find the delay imposed by the Senate's procedures to be irritating. If you worry about how he might rule on the Supreme Court, you no doubt welcome the chance to learn more.

And that is where the genius of our bifurcated Congress lies. For wherever you line up at the moment, the one thing you can know for certain is that the partisan makeup of the two houses will change at some point in the future. Today's rush to judgment in the House will become tomorrow's echo of the popular will, while across Capitol Hill, today's onerous Senate delay will become a refreshing dose of "cooling" deliberation.