

Why Holding the Majority Matters By Lee Hamilton

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When you see news stories over the next few months about which party is likely to emerge from the November elections with a majority in Congress, keep one thing in mind: the basement. You might think that congressional leaders care most about the ability that majority status gives them to set the agenda, and you're probably right; but rest assured that they're also thinking about the gloomy corridors underneath the various House office buildings on Capitol Hill.

This is where some members of the minority party in the House can get relegated when they want to host a gathering for constituents or visitors. Members of the majority might instead get the meeting rooms that showcase the grandeur of Congress — the elegant ones just off the House floor in the Capitol, with high ceilings, plush carpets, and rich wood paneling.

I tell you this because it helps to explain why members of Congress behave as they do when control of their chamber is at stake. Sure, being in the minority means losing the House or Senate leadership, committee chairmanships, and the opportunity to set and to advance a party's agenda. But that's just the start of it. The difference between being the majority party and the minority party is so great that in many ways you're talking about two very different experiences of Congress for their respective members. This is one reason the intense partisanship we've seen on Capitol Hill for well over a decade now has such a sharp edge to it.

Party status affects pretty much everything. The majority not only gets nicer spaces and meeting rooms, it also gets to determine which members and staff will go on overseas fact-finding trips, and enjoys all sorts of little perks that make life on Capitol Hill more pleasant. And on congressional committees, the majority often takes two-thirds to three-fourths of the budget and will have three times the number of staff as the minority, so a shift in party control can be traumatic for those suddenly in the minority.

Then, of course, there are the substantive differences. In the House, for instance, the leadership of the majority party controls the legislative agenda entirely. It decides not only which issues will be taken up, but also how they can be debated, whether amendments will be allowed, and how the matter will be handled on the House floor. If it wished, it could — and on occasion does — prevent the minority party from offering even a single amendment to important bills brought up on the floor during the session.

The rules are somewhat less lopsided in the Senate, though the minority there often gets less of a chance to shape legislation — or even attach its members' names to legislation — than it does simply to block a bill entirely.

The result of all this is two-fold: In a closely divided Congress, the stakes in each election are enormous, not simply in terms of which policies and philosophies will prevail, but what legislative life will be like afterward for members of each party; and this in turn feeds an atmosphere of partisanship and mistrust, and makes it harder to cooperate across the aisle, simply because neither party wants to give the other even the remotest advantage.

Americans may be tired of the partisanship they've seen on Capitol Hill, but it's worth knowing that there are some basic institutional forces at work that make it difficult to overcome.

None of this is to say that lessening partisanship is impossible — just that it won't happen without a concerted effort by the majority and minority in both houses of Congress to behave in ways that make the vast gulf in potential power and perquisites somewhat narrower.

How the majority treats the minority, and vice versa, is hugely important in terms of setting the atmosphere and tone on Capitol Hill. As things stand at the moment, each side tries to manipulate the process to set up votes with an eye toward gaining a partisan advantage to enable them to win another seat or two, rather than producing good legislation. This can only be changed by a wholesale shift in attitude on the part of both parties.

For the majority's part, this means being aware that it sets the tone, and that consulting with members of the minority party — treating them fairly, as colleagues and not as enemies — should be a normal part of doing business. Equally important, the minority has a responsibility not to gum up the works by taking advantage of arcane rules of procedure or trying to turn every iota of legislative business to its political advantage.

The tone overall ought to be one of mutual respect and fairness, ruled by a constant awareness that Congress is there to serve the American people and to make the country work, not to offer an arena for conferring on one party or the other a political advantage. Only then can the people who serve in Congress free themselves from the institutional forces that, of late, have made it such an unpleasant place for many of them to serve.

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