

Why Is Congress So Partisan?

By Lee Hamilton

Early in my career in the U.S. House, I trekked over to the Senate side one day to watch a debate between Hubert Humphrey and Barry Goldwater, two of the great ideological warriors of the era. I don't recall the issue, but I do remember the heat they generated as they went at each other hammer and tongs. They were knowledgeable, passionate, and deeply committed to their vastly different points of view.

I remember just as keenly what happened after they'd tried to eviscerate each other rhetorically: They joked together as they left the floor, heading off to have a drink.

I have a hard time imagining such a scene in today's Washington, where a moment of camaraderie like that might be viewed with deep suspicion, as though personal friendship somehow undercuts ideological integrity. In the intensely partisan atmosphere that reigns today on Capitol Hill, it is much less common for two legislators to pursue their beliefs with such intensity of purpose, yet remain fast friends or work together when their interests coincide.

Americans of all stripes have noticed this, too, and they don't like it. The partisanship that divides Congress, and its members' apparent inability to transcend their divisions, is one important reason the institution's public standing is at historic depths.

How did we get here? In part, the answers lie in a series of long-term political trends that have converged to create this current unhappy mood. For one thing, computers have enabled state legislators — or members of Congress eager to dictate to them — to draw congressional district lines that create safely Democratic or Republican districts. The result is that politicians running for the U.S. House don't have to appeal to the center to win, they need to appeal to the core of their parties' supporters.

This has happened at the same time that the parties themselves have moved toward their ideological extremes, pushed by the interest groups that fund and try to influence them. As members become spokesmen for particular points of view, their positions take on a harder edge, since they are playing to potential campaign funders or to an interest group whose supporters' votes they need at election time. The upshot is that moderate Democrats and Republicans are the exception in office these days, not the rule.

The sad truth, though, is that the electorate, too, is divided, which manifests itself at the moment in a Congress that is narrowly controlled by one party and faces a President of the other. Over the last decade, each party has been struggling to become the majority party, and so every vote on Capitol Hill has taken on heavily partisan implications, since the leadership hopes that by taking the position it does — and forcefully encouraging rank-and-file members to go along — it will pick up a few extra seats at the next election. This invites partisan struggle.

These political trends have been cemented by changes within Congress. If it is hard to find moderates there, it is even harder to find institutionalists — people who worry about the role of Congress as a separate and independent branch of government and who focus on strengthening Congress as an institution. Preoccupation with partisanship and political calculation erodes Congress' role as a deliberative body; "debate" these days is generally two sets of talking points hammering at each other, rather than a genuine effort to reach consensus on the best course for the American people to follow.

Even something as mundane as the congressional schedule now works in favor of partisanship. As their time on Capitol Hill has come to focus on committee hearings, floor debate and other opportunities for confrontation, and as their weekends now are often taken up with travel back to their states to meet with constituents, members of Congress in recent years have found far fewer opportunities to develop the kinds of friendships that cross party lines — and that produced such close friends as Humphrey and Goldwater.

These are all deep-seated trends, and they are not easy to reverse. My hope, oddly enough, lies in the low standing Congress currently enjoys. For all its faults, it does respond to public pressure, and if enough Americans let their members know that they're unhappy with the intense partisanship they see, change will come. Perhaps it will be a move in some states to abandon partisan redistricting and move to some more neutral way of drawing lines; perhaps it will simply be a change in attitude and a greater emphasis on Capitol Hill on careful deliberation and comity, or greater respect for the institution of the Congress. Whatever the case, even little moves in the right direction would be an improvement over the situation as it stands today.