

Happy Together?

Americans love to complain about gridlock in Washington and partisan warfare between presidents and Congress. Yet the record suggests that unified party government is no panacea.

BY DONALD R. WOLFENSBERGER

ON THE CAMPAIGN TRAIL, BARACK OBAMA PROMISED to bring change to Washington and a post-partisan, non-ideological approach to governing. In his first post-election press conference on November 7, he reiterated this hope: "I know we will succeed if we put aside partisanship and politics and work together as one nation."

These snowflakes of soothing rhetoric drift slowly down on a Capitol Hill power plant fueled by partisanship and politics. What will happen when the snow hits the furnace—where majority Democrats and their allied interest groups have long been denied their wishes by Republican presidents and Congresses? The question is not whether President Obama can forge an extrapolitical national consensus to solve problems, but how effectively he will be able to govern with his own party in the majority in Congress.

One should not assume that Obama will get everything he wants from congressional Democrats any more than they will succeed in getting him to sign off on all their pent-up demands. Not only does the spike in

deficits from the financial bailout and economic recession impose severe constraints, but the history of unified party government suggests that it is no more a guarantor of success than divided government is of failure. Indeed, American chief executives from Harry S. Truman to Ronald Reagan enjoyed some of their greatest successes in periods of divided government. In the end, what the people want and are willing to speak up for usually matters more than all the frantic maneuvering in Washington.

One of the features of the American system that most baffles visitors from parliamentary democracies is the paradox that it can create unified party government without total party unity. They find it hard to believe that our system was intentionally designed with internal checks and balances precisely in order to prevent hasty action and the concentration of too much power in any one place. As James Madison put it, "Ambition must be made to counteract ambition." And the Pennsylvania Avenue axis of power between the White House and the Capitol is aswirl with ambition. Even when politicians belong to the same party, they represent different geographic and demographic constituencies that often put them at

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odds with one another and their own party's president. The system was not designed for action. It typically reacts only when required by events, public opinion, and presidential prodding.

That is why the young scholar Woodrow Wilson dismissed the Madisonian system as outmoded. "As at present constituted," he wrote in his 1885 doctoral dissertation, *Congressional Government*, "the federal government lacks strength because its powers are divided, lacks promptness because its authorities are multiplied, lacks wieldiness because its processes are roundabout, lacks efficiency because its responsibility is indistinct and its action without competent direction."

As president, Wilson would reconcile himself to Madison's Constitution as a "living" and "evolving" document. Building on his admiration for the British system of responsible party government, Wilson gave us the first "legislative presidency" as he moved his New Freedom agenda through a Democratic Congress in his first two years. He did so by addressing joint sessions of Congress (a record 22 appearances over eight years); traveling frequently to Capitol Hill to meet with Democratic leaders and their committee lieutenants; holding informal press conferences; and even scheduling forums in the White House on whether he should sign legislation sent to him by Congress.

But the Capitol Hill experiences of the Obama administration are not likely to resemble those of Wilson, nor of the other great examples of "unified" party government, which gave us Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal and Lyndon B. Johnson's Great Society.

FDR's presidency occurred under very unusual circumstances (notwithstanding some parallels to today's economic troubles). President Johnson's Great Society successes were made possible in part by the emotional backwash from the assassination of President John F. Kennedy and in part by LBJ's unique mastery of congressional procedures and personalities.

Moreover, Congress as an institution has changed considerably since those periods of presidential dominance. Compared with earlier times, when powerful, autonomy-minded committee chairmen ruled the Hill, the political parties and their leaders in Congress play a much greater role today in directing legislative policy-

making. Congress entered this new age in the early 1970s as a result of congressional reforms that produced a resurgence of internal party cohesion and activity to levels not witnessed since the turn of the 20th century. Inspired in part by opposition to the Nixon administration, the Democratically controlled Congress and its members became more assertive, entrepreneurial, and independent of the executive branch.

The more relevant examples of unified party government are the presidencies of Jimmy Carter, Bill Clinton, and George W. Bush—all of whom came to the White House from the governorships of southern states, and all of whom promised to change the way Washington worked. All three experiences provide highly cautionary lessons.

Carter was elected in 1976 after the contentious Nixon years. Although he had a firm working majority of Democrats in both houses—292–143 in the House and 61–38 in the Senate—he never had a firm working partnership with Democrats on the Hill. His arrogant and dismissive attitude toward the Capital establishment offended his own party's leaders in Congress, as did his appointment of Washington neophytes to key staff positions in the White House. (After being refused a common courtesy by the White House, Speaker of the House Thomas "Tip" O'Neill [D.-Mass.] derisively referred to Carter aide Hamilton Jordan as "Hannibal Jerkin.") And Carter's attempt to eliminate pork barrel projects did not endear him to those members of Congress with a taste for that "other white meat."

Carter had a tendency to overload Congress's circuits by submitting many legislative proposals simultaneously, generating sparks and committee power outages. He sent his welfare reform proposal to the Hill, for instance, when the House Ways and Means Committee was already bogged down with his energy and tax reform initiatives. His attempt to enact a comprehensive energy plan faltered in Congress as special interests picked it apart, and it emerged much diminished. Four years of unified party government ended with the economy in dreadful condition and a hostage crisis in Iran (which was beyond Carter's control). The Democrats lost the White House and the Senate.

Bill Clinton took office in 1993 determined not to repeat Carter's mistakes. He made a point to meet with Democratic leaders in Congress prior to his inauguration



No precedent: Unusual circumstances helped President Lyndon Johnson, shown signing a bill in 1965, push many groundbreaking bills through Congress.

to map out legislative priorities. He was persuaded to delay his campaign pledge to “eliminate welfare as we know it,” and reluctant congressional Democrats agreed to move forward on a deficit reduction package to reassure financial markets in return for his backing of an economic stimulus package.

Clinton eked out narrow victories in both houses on his deficit package after being forced to abandon a hefty BTU energy tax proposal and settle instead for a 4.3-cents-per-gallon gasoline tax increase. His \$16 billion economic stimulus club was whittled down in the Senate to a scrawny \$840 million twig. The first lady’s secret health-care task force produced a bulky plan that couldn’t get off the ground in either house as key congressional committee chairmen who had been shut out of the plan’s development were unable to reach consensus.

The Clinton-era experiment with unified government ended ignominiously in 1994 with a Republican electoral sweep of both houses of Congress—which included the first GOP majority in the lower house in 40 years. Some of Clinton’s signal achievements, however,

were still to come. Even before the GOP takeover, his victory in passing the North American Free Trade Agreement in 1993 depended heavily on Republican support to offset large Democratic defections. Once Republicans took control of Congress, Clinton built on this tactic of “triangulating” between the two caucuses to enact welfare reform and balanced budget legislation.

George W. Bush came to office in 2001 after losing the popular vote and narrowly winning the Electoral College bowl in a sudden-death overtime refereed by the Supreme Court. Notwithstanding widespread press assertions that he had no mandate, he proceeded as if he did, assiduously courting members of both parties to pave the way for his priorities. Even though the Senate flipped to Democratic control in mid-2001 with the defection of Vermont Republican James Jeffords, the GOP still controlled the House. By the end of the year Bush managed to enact his No Child Left Behind education

reform with bipartisan support, and his tax cuts with only minimal Democratic support.

Bush failed to achieve two other priorities of his administration, Social Security reform and immigration reform, but it was less party rivalry in Congress than a lack of firm support in the country that did them in. Democrats artfully played his proposal for

however, it is suddenly able to juggle numerous high-level investigative oversight hearings into executive branch activities simultaneously.

Where might an Obama presidency fit in this historical mosaic of unified party governments? Unlike four of the last five presidents, who were governors, Obama is not a stranger to Washington's ways. His

four years in the Senate count for something (though he spent most of the last two years running for president). His early picks of experienced hands to run his White House, cabinet departments, and legislative affairs office bode well for his success. But it will not be enough to have the

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private accounts in Social Security as an attempt to "privatize" the system, frightening seniors and forcing even Republicans to abandon it. Immigration reform was shot down by members of Bush's own party in Congress, aided by radio and cable shock jocks who claimed he was giving "amnesty" to "illegals."

The Bush presidency was at its apex in the wake of the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks, when a divided Congress worked together to produce a blizzard of legislation in response. The president's job approval rating shot up to 90 percent, and even Congress briefly enjoyed an unprecedented 84 percent approval rating (more than double its customary level). Five years later, however, in the 2006 elections, Democrats retook control of both houses of Congress as public opinion turned against the Iraq war.

Within Congress itself, unified party government has generally had two less than salutary characteristics. The legislative branch tends to spend more money than it does under divided party government. It is generally more demanding, and presidents more giving (an arrangement that provides new meaning to the term normally used to describe the final review of legislative text before passage—"bill markup"). At the same time, Congress tends to slack off on its oversight responsibilities when its majorities share the president's party label. Under divided party government,

best people giving the best advice in the White House and cabinet. It will ultimately depend on the president himself to show he can work with an independent, coequal branch made up of diverse personalities, interests, and ideologies—a branch that enjoys bipartisan unanimity on at least one principle: It is not about to abandon politics. Politics, after all, is simply a process of working through problems to build a consensus around mutually agreeable solutions—sometimes known as deliberative democracy.

If there is any conclusion to be drawn from recent history on the relative benefits of unified versus divided party government in the United States, it is this: The American system is capable of monumental accomplishments in times of crisis regardless of which party is in control of what lever of government, but the system can be just as incapable of doing anything when the people are not behind it—even with unified party control.

President Abraham Lincoln said as much when he observed, "With public sentiment, nothing can fail; without it, nothing can succeed." The success or failure of the Obama presidency will ultimately depend on the extent to which the people rally behind the plans and programs the new president and Congress are able to develop together as they work to address some of the most difficult problems this country has ever faced. ■