

How Divided Government Will Force Congressional Compromise and Solutions

BY NEIL L. BRADLEY

ACROSS THE COUNTRY, Americans voted in record numbers, and they are sending to Washington, not just divided government, but closely divided government. Democrats will have the White House and control of the House of Representatives with the smallest majority in two decades. At best, Republicans will have a two-seat majority in the Senate.

We should not confuse America's vote for divided government as a vote for gridlock. Americans routinely express their displeasure at the inability of Washington to come together to address both urgent and long-standing problems.

Necessary public health measures to combat the pandemic produced the sharpest economic downturn in history. Our ongoing economic recovery has been "K-shaped." For some industries the jobs that were lost were quickly restored, and some sectors are even performing better than a year ago. These represent the top of the "K." In other sectors, businesses – especially those that depend on gathering people together such as hospitality, leisure, and events – have permanently closed and many lost jobs will never be recovered.

Federal relief is essential to help impacted small businesses, families, and communities until we have beaten COVID-19. Yet, Washington spent the summer and fall unable to come to agreement.

The pandemic has also exacerbated long-standing problems from the lack of adequate infrastructure – including broadband – in many communities to the inequality of opportunity that has resulted in systemic racial inequities. A broken immigration system continues to fail the Dreamers, immigrant families, and our economy. The federal government's finances careen out of control as Washington was already on track for a trillion-dollar deficit during the booming

pre-COVID economy. Measures to make even modest progress on these and other issues have largely languished as each side blames the other for the unwillingness to compromise.

So why are we optimistic about an end to gridlock and Washington tackling these problems? The American people may have just figured out the secret to breaking the cycle. Joe Biden will be the first president in 32 years to begin his time in office without his party controlling all of Congress.

The pattern of the last three decades has been for a new president with his party in control of Congress to embark on an ambitious agenda that is passed unilaterally without any involvement from the other party – most recently the Affordable Care Act under President Obama and the tax bill under President Trump. With no meaningful input in major legislation the minority party focuses exclusively on gaining power in the mid-terms.



Then gridlock ensues and the pattern repeats.

A divided government in 2021 means that the most controversial items raised during the campaign are not even up for discussion. A less than 10-seat majority in the House means that legislation is most likely going to have to start out being bipartisan. Groups like the bipartisan Problem Solvers Caucus – which includes many U.S. Chamber-endorsed Democrats and Republicans – will serve as the center of gravity for policy. Bipartisan legislation passed by the House will have more momentum when it reaches the Senate. There, Senators on both sides of the aisle who face competitive 2022 races should be motivated to legislate. And of course, Delaware’s own President-elect Biden has more experience than any previous occupant of the Oval Office when it comes to negotiating with Congress.

The proof of whether Republicans and Democrats seize the opportunity before them will be in the outcome. What would progress and governing look like?

It would begin with quick enactment of additional COVID-relief, supporting small businesses and the unemployed and providing a safe harbor from frivolous lawsuits for employers who follow public health guidance.

Quick action would follow on a broad-based infrastructure package that modernizes our roads, bridges, and transit, expands broadband service, rebuilds water systems, and increases our resiliency against climate change.

A workforce package that helps the unemployed acquire new skills, transitions to lifelong learning, and modernizes our immigration system would

reach the president’s desk before the end of the Congress.

Trade tensions would ease while the U.S. works with allies to confront the economic and national security threats posed by China.

Congress would tackle issues critical to keeping our economy moving forward – like data privacy, climate, and net neutrality – rather than leaving it to regulators and a patchwork of state laws.

And in a comprehensive fashion, business, government, and civil society would begin taking steps to close the opportunity gap.

These are just some of the priorities of the U.S. Chamber of Commerce. But we will not achieve any of them unless we rebuild a coalition of Democrats and Republicans committed to governing. We are asking our members and allies to hold members of Congress and the new administration accountable. For too long we have allowed politicians to assign blame for Congress’ dysfunction rather than forcing them to explain what they are doing to forge the agreements necessary to move our nation forward.

With the 2020 election behind us, the time for politics and blame are over, the time for governing is upon us. The stakes could not be higher. ■



Neil L. Bradley is executive vice president and chief policy officer at the U.S. Chamber of Commerce.

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