

Political Gridlock: The Ongoing Threat to American Democracy

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Abstract: My paper answers the question: What are the origins of extreme political gridlock in the United States government and how can it be solved? I use quantitative research in order to measure the exact periods of split government, and I note its effect on the probability of enacting legislation. The qualitative research highlights the key factors that led to increasing political gridlock from 1964-2016. From my case study, I argue political gridlock has increased because of ideological shifts in voters and politicians between 1980 and 1992, voting system imbalances, and critical political and economic juncture. I conclude with a comparative analysis of the US Congress, and possible solutions that can be used to solve gridlock. Each solution is linked to one of the key issues established in the case study, and from them I find that through constitutional reforms of the political system, political gridlock can be countered.

Keywords: Political Gridlock, Democratic Systems, Unified Government, Divided Government, Executive Branch, Legislative Branch, American Politics, Solutions to Gridlock.

Introduction

How is political gridlock created in the US government, and what are some ways to solve it? The United States government is one of the first democratic governments created in world history. Through the signing of the Constitution in 1787, the United States federal government was established with three branches of government, the legislative branch, the executive branch, and the judicial branch. The function of each branch of government is to provide a system of checks and balances to limit the power in each individual branch, to enact laws that further increase the rights of American citizens, and to ensure that the American political system runs to the will of the people. Despite being one of the oldest democratic systems, there are problems currently impacting the United States federal government. The main problem is the clashing of political parties within the government, and the negative impact it has on enacting laws. It is because of political gridlock that laws reduce the government's ability to address critical social and economic problems.

For this study, it is important to understand the definition of democracy, and the different types and structures of democratic governments. In Kesselman et al. (2012), countries with democratic governments are divided into two groups: presidential systems (the government of the United States) and parliamentary systems (the government of the United Kingdom), but there are nations that are a combination of both systems (France and Portugal). While structurally different, in order to be classified as democratic governments, parliamentary and presidential systems contain five key

factors: fair and free elections, institutionalized rules and norms, organized critical opposition, basic civil liberties and human rights, and an independent judiciary.

The differences between these democratic governments is shown through the structure of the governments. Presidential systems have independent legislative and executive branches, and the powers of the executive branch are mainly vested in the office of the President, who is the head of government and head of state. A key factor within some Presidential systems, such as the United States, is the existence of a two-party system, with Single Member Districts in national elections. It is the constricting two party system that locks the United States into having either liberal or conservative ideologies, which when given power within the separate executive and legislative branches leads to political gridlock (Kesselman et al. 2012).

In a presidential system, “the legislature and the chief executive have their own fixed schedule [...] and their own political mandate [...] and often have different political agendas” (Kesselman et al. 2012:69). This shows that due to both the legislative and executive branch being independent bodies from each other, they can set different political goals, and this can lead to clashes between both branches of government. Even when both parties in a presidential system are in control of a branch of government, “stalemates on key items of legislation are common” (Kesselman et al. (2012:69)), and it becomes difficult for laws to be created and passed in a Presidential system. Although Kesselman et al. (2012) provide a potential hypothesis for why political gridlock occurs in the United States – due

to the independent executive and legislative branch – there is not a clear consensus in the literature, and I will highlight other potential hypotheses in the subsequent section. Without a clear answer to causes and solutions for gridlock, American politics is doomed to a continuation of political inaction and lack of progress.

The various beliefs over the causes of political gridlock are introduced in the literature review of this paper. I highlight the insights of the authors of scholarly research on the subject and compare the information of most of my sources to see how the findings of each source compliment or contrast with each other. From there, the case study section takes a quantitative and qualitative examination into political gridlock within contemporary America. Information that describes different methods for avoiding gridlock in the United States and other presidential systems is explored in the “Solutions to Gridlock” section. Lastly, my conclusion section presents my understanding of the key factors of political gridlock, and my theories for multiple solutions to gridlock in the American government.

Literature Review

In reviewing the literature, I found five schools of thought that describe why political gridlock occurs in the United States. Within each section, various political scientists provide information that show how political gridlock occurs from cultural reasons or institutional reasons. Cultural explanations for political gridlock would include critical junctures in American society that changed the

political beliefs of both politicians and voters. Institutional reasons would examine how the structure of government, the relationship between both parties in the United States, and the structure of the voting system in the United States cause political gridlock. The cultural causes of political gridlock, as well as a few of the institutional causes of political gridlock are shown by the authors Dolbeare and Cummings (2004); Brady and Volden (2006); and Thurber and Yoshinaka (2015). Each source provides historical factors that have contributed to political gridlock from the 1960s to the contemporary period, but diverge on the direct factors causing political gridlock.

Dolbeare and Cummings (2004), argues the cause of political gridlock was the shift to the “right” by both voters and politicians, in response to the government’s failure in handling crises in both the 1960s and 1970s. The reason for the pull “right” by voters and politicians was the Democratic Party controlled power in the federal government, and influenced policies to promote the ideas of the “left,” such as the Great Society. This was a failure because when the United States began to experience economic problems, many blamed the progressive policies of the Democrats. Some of the examples that Dolbeare and Cummings (2004) provides are: the economic crisis of stagflation, which was created through excess government spending in both the Vietnam War and Great Society programs, the military defeat in the Vietnam War, and the political corruption that was shown in the Watergate scandal. Watergate would lead to a push in Congress to limit presidential powers in the federal

government, while both Watergate and the excess spending from the Vietnam War would push voters to prefer smaller government.

Brady and Volden (2006) agree with Dolbeare and Cummings (2004) that the shift to the “right” in the 1960s and 1970s did lead to political gridlock in the 1980s, and stress the exact cause for the shift was the crisis of stagflation. This is shown when Brady and Volden (2006) point out how the clashes between both the Democratic and Republican parties were mainly over the issues of taxation and government spending. During the presidencies of Ronald Reagan and Bill Clinton, policies that were created by the President of the rival party were able to be passed as legislation in Congress, even if the opposing party controlled it. Brady and Volden (2006) showed that by building coalitions with Congressional members from the opposing party, Presidents still had the ability to pass their own policies for taxation and government spending with little opposition.

Thurber and Yoshinaka (2015), who greatly disagree with Brady and Volden (2006), point out that Presidents have the ability to pass policies within a divided government. Bond, Fleisher, and Cohen. (2015) show how the amount of policies that a President can pass is mainly dependent on their ability to work with both chambers of Congress, not on the popularity of the President. Bond, Fleisher, and Cohen (2015) showed that over time (1953-2012), the success rates of majority Presidents and minority Presidents had greatly widened in the House of Representatives, but the success rates of majority and minority Presidents maintain a steady rate in the Senate. Thurber and Yoshinaka (2015:144) present the argument that the success of

minority presidents mainly rests in the hands of politicians in the House of Representatives, as when party polarization increases in the House “majority presidents win more and minority presidents win less (a lot less).” I will explore this specific dynamic in greater depth with my case studies of gridlock and individual presidential behavior below.

The next set of sources focus on the effects of political gridlock on both the American government and society. Saeki (2009), in addition to Callander and Krehbiel (2014), present the argument that political gridlock causes a barrier for policy implementation in the federal government. They also agree that there are some ways that politicians in the federal government try to prevent political gridlock. Saeki (2009) presents the concept of a “winset,” which is when veto players in Congress “unanimously support a bill for passage” and mainly occurs when interactions occur between politicians of opposing ideologies. Callander and Krehbiel (2014) show how different types of delegations (representative actions) can prevent different types of political gridlocks.

From my research, I have also found the voting system of the United States can be a contributing factor to political gridlock in the federal government. The authors behind such arguments include Adams (1996), Cox and Morgenstern (1993), Abramowitz and Saunders (1998), and Longley and Peirce (1996). Both Adams (1996) and Cox and Morgenstern (1993) show a deeper analysis for the differences between Single-Member Districts and Multi-Member Districts. The same results of the analysis show that even though the

United States mainly uses the “winner-take-all system” of Single-Member Districts at a federal level, on the state/local level Multi-Member Districts are used to elect members for state Houses of Representatives, as they promote more ideological diversity within governments. Cox and Morgenstern (1993) convey how in both state and federal elections, the politicians that have a higher chance of winning those elections are those with incumbency advantages, meaning that they have already served a term in the position that is up for election. Some of the examples of incumbency advantages that are provided include having a higher access and patronage for advertising/media and providing “personal service” to their supporters.

Dolbear and Cummings (2004) agrees with Abramowitz and Saunders (1998) about the shift of American voters to the “right” being caused by issues. These issues called “short-term forces” present cases that show how political realignment of voters lead to the increase in Republican control of Congress in the 1980s. Longley and Peirce (1996) present the argument for how the Electoral College creates an imbalance between the popular votes and the electoral votes that are casted in Presidential elections, and how this imbalance causes groups of people to become discouraged from voting as they feel that it takes away their “voice” in the political system. Abramowitz and Saunders (1998) reinforce the argument that the national voting system of the United States does not help promote the different ideologies of the people, as it mainly promotes the liberal ideals of the Democrats or the conservative ideals of the Republicans,

but fails to provide any room for the ideals of other political beliefs or third parties to gain offices in the federal government – in other words gerrymandering. Dolbeare and Cummings (2004), Abramowitz and Saunders (1998) and Longley and Peirce (1996) show that the use of Single-Member Districts does not allow for better representation of the ideologies of voters, and can be seen as a factor that prevents the political representation that can promote quality legislation.

Case Study

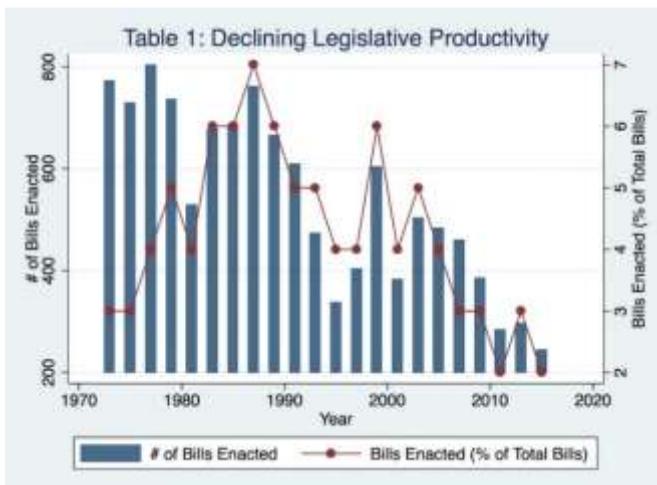
The first step in my research was a quantitative inquiry into gridlock, where I used STATA statistical software to test how legislative success rates in the United States were impacted by three scenarios. First, I show how particular party control of the executive branch can influence the passing of laws. The second variable is party control of the legislative branch, which I used a dichotomous coding for both the executive and legislative variables (dichotomous= 1,0). The last independent variable is unified party control over the federal government, which are periods in time where one party controls both the executive and legislative branches.

To map out these three independent variables, and to see how they relate to the passing of laws in the federal government, I examined party affiliations in the federal government and the number of laws passed by Congress from 1963-2016. For presidential party affiliation, I found that there are four Democratic presidents and five Republican presidents. In terms of Congress, I wrote which party had

control in both chambers of Congress, and found periods where one political party had control of both chambers. Specifically, from 1963-1981, as the Democrats were in control of Congress, which reinforces why voters and politicians made a shift to the “right” during that time-period.

For unified party control of the federal government, I looked at the points in history that one party controlled both chambers and the office of the president, and found that there are four periods where each party had unified control of both branches. The Democrats had three periods of unified party control, which were: Jimmy Carter (1977-1981), Bill Clinton (1993-1995), and Barack Obama (2009-2011). The Republicans had control of both branches during the Presidency of George W. Bush (2001-2007). Although Republicans had control of the executive branch through the first two years of Donald Trump’s Presidency, these results are not included in this paper.

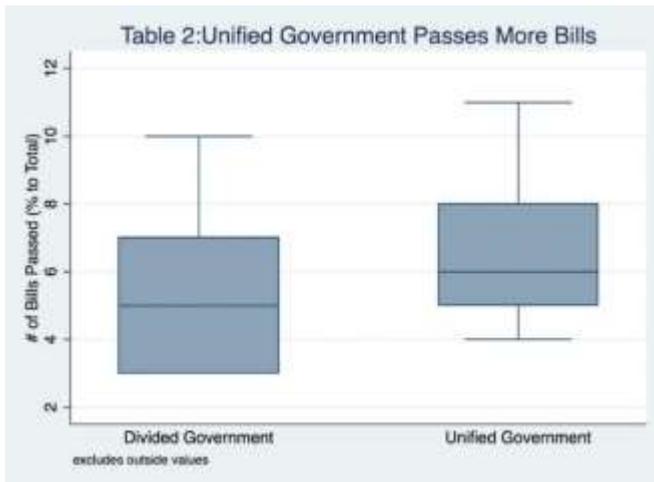
Table 1: Declining Legislative Productivity



To find the amount of legislation passed by Congress, I used the website Govtrack, which provided the number of laws that were passed, enacted, received a formal vote, failed in the legislature, or were vetoed, out of a total number of laws presented in session of Congress from 1973-2016. For my research, I wrote down the number of passed resolutions, which were laws/bills that were passed in both chambers of Congress, the number of enacted laws, and the percentages when compared to total amount of laws in that session of Congress. I recorded these numbers, along with the party identification of Presidents and House of Representatives, and used the information to create two graphs. As shown from the graph “Declining Legislative Productivity”, President Reagan had the highest percentage of enacted bills within the last 43 years, with 7% of Bills Enacted. President Clinton had the second highest percentage with 6% of bills enacted. Ultimately, this graph shows that the amount of enacted legislation has been decreasing in the federal government over the course of 43 years, and with the current situation in Washington it is very likely to continue decreasing.

From the information that I gathered to make the previous graph, I created three T-tests in Stata, to show which independent variable would have a greater effect on the passage of bills, and the number of enacted laws. The T-test “Bills passed by Unified Government”, uses dichotomous variables 0 and 1, the 0 represented divided government, while the 1 represented unified government. The results of that T-tests were then translated into the graph box titled “Unified Government Passes more Bills.”

Table 2: Unified Government Passes More Bills



As shown in the graph, the mean of the passage of bills under a divided government is “-5.2-”, while the mean of the passage of bills under unified government is around “-6.-” While this graph illustrates the fact that under unified government, more bills can be passed in the United States, the T-test conveys another interesting fact. When examining the probability, the test gave a 95% significance that the probability is greater than zero, and that under unified party control, there is an average 30% increase in the percent of bills passed. Although my quantitative research confirmed that legislative productivity in the federal government is not only decreasing, it does not explore how productivity was possible during periods of divided government.

Having established some trends in the data, I now explore how my findings relate to the general findings found in the literature

to present the qualitative research for my findings. Many of the sources directly link political gridlock to two presidencies, which are the Presidencies of Ronald Reagan (1981-1989) and Bill Clinton (1993-2001) (Brady and Volden 2006; Heffner 2005). Some of the factors that lead to political gridlock are shown to occur before the Presidential election of 1980. To highlight the progression of political gridlock in the American government, I have divided information that I have gained from my sources into Presidential terms, including a brief description of the Presidencies of Richard Nixon to Bill Clinton. Perhaps most importantly, I provide an overview of the personalities of the presidents in terms of their dealings with Congress, political views and as overall individuals (Haffner 2005). Relating this data to the statistical results may show how the personalities of Presidents can make or break political activity in the federal government.

Richard Nixon: 37th President (1969-1974), party: Republican

Even though Nixon was a Republican President and had a Democratic Congress, political gridlock was not a significant problem according to Gillon (2013). Nixon “adopted moderately progressive positions [...] favoring cooperation over confrontation” and continued some of the progressive policies within Washington created by Johnson’s Great Society. Under the median voter theorem, an event where those in power promote laws that are favored by people in the ideological center, politicians from both parties were able to vote for or against any legislation, without any problems, an example being how liberal Republicans voted for the liberal policies

of the Great Society (Gillon 2013). We will see under both Reagan and Clinton how conservative Democrats could vote for conservative taxation laws. Under the Nixon administration, many progressive laws were passed with the support of Congress, which included: Affirmative Action, increase in desegregation, and the Clean Air and Clean Water acts.

However, two events under the Nixon administration can be seen as contributing to later political gridlock in the 1980s. The first was the use of the “Southern Strategy” in the election of 1968, which was a campaign strategy that Nixon used in order to get Republican votes within the Southern States, which at the time was largely Democrat. As shown in both Brady and Volden (2006) and Abramowitz and Saunders (1998) most of the ideological shift to the “right” occurred from voters and politicians from the South. It also showed that men were most effected by the shift, as “in the late 1970s, Southern whites still identified with the Democratic Party [...] By the mid-1990s, southern whites had become more Republican than their northern counterparts” (Abramowitz and Saunders 1998:640).

The second event that occurred in the Nixon administration was the Watergate Scandal, during Nixon’s reelection of 1972, where he won a second term. During the election, Nixon had people wiretap the Democratic headquarters of the Watergate Hotel in order to gain information about the Democrats tactics for the election. However, through an investigation, authorities were able to link the events of Watergate to Nixon, which lead to the second impeachment process in American history, and to Nixon becoming the first president to

resign from office. While this event did not increase the ideological shift that will lead to political gridlock, it did show both Congress and American citizens the dangers of having too much power being abused by the President. This shows that Watergate led to an increase in checks on executive power by Congress and from the public through investigative journalism in order to prevent the President from gaining too much power. Watergate can be seen as the first step to limiting Presidential power to oversee legislative policies, and establishes an imbalance between policy making of both the President and Congress, as Presidents have to gain Congressional support in order to promote any legislation that they created.

Both events show the advantages and disadvantages of Nixon's personality in terms of his executive relationship with Congress, or with his skills as a politician. Nixon's implementation of the "Southern Strategy" demonstrates his ability to be strategic as it gained him success in winning his Presidential election. Still, a disadvantage was his "obsession with power, and had to be in control at all times" (Haffner 2005), which pushed him to abuse his executive privilege and to believing that he was above Congressional authority.

Jimmy Carter: 39th President (1977-1981), party: Democrat

Carter was the last president to have an ideologically moderate Congress, as many sources have pointed to the election of 1980 being the first national election where hard leaning conservative politicians had gained power in the federal government. The Carter administration was greatly defined by the further continuation of the

economic downturn that began under Ford, which worsened due to the stagflation crisis (Brady and Volden 2006). The stagflation crisis was the result of too much government spending in both the Vietnam War and the Great Society programs. This led to high levels of “inflation, unemployment, and recessions” for people living in the Northwestern states where the stagflation and oil crisis had led to a decline in the industrial sector of the economy (Brady and Volden 2006). It was because of the stagflation crisis being linked to the increased government spending for the Great Society. Many people, particularly in the Southern states, had low confidence for the liberal policies of the federal government as many of them felt left out from the benefits of the Great Society and that their lives were not improving under the rule of liberal ideology. The factors of the 1960s and 1970s showed the path to the ideological shift to the “right” in the 1980s, and the background to both ideological gridlock and institutional gridlock.

In terms of Carter’s personality, unlike the other presidents mentioned in the paper, Carter was not very keen in taking part in Washington’s political system. As described by Haffner (2005), Carter “found the political games of Washington unsavory, and [...] refused to play them” (Haffner 2005). This shows that Carter’s lack of political cooperation led to little successes during his presidency, and shows that the importance of an open executive personalities.

Ronald Reagan: 40th President (1981-1989), party: Republican.

Many sources used for my paper point to the election of 1980 and the Presidency of Ronald Reagan as being the main catalysts for political gridlock in the federal government. As noted by Brady and Volden (2006), many changes had occurred in the 97th Congress of 1981: first was that the Republicans had gained control of the Senate “for the first time in 26 years,” but this Republican Senate was the first to experience an ideological shift to the right. Second was that despite winning both the White House and the Senate, the Republicans did not have control of the House of Representatives, thus showing that both chambers of Congress were being occupied by both parties (Congressional gridlock).

A third change was that a shift in ideologies had occurred in both parties during the election of 1980, which Brady and Volden (2006) showed to the reader through the scores on the Americans for Democratic Action survey – a survey that is used to measure the ideological mindset of politicians. The score range was as follows: if politicians had a score of 100, then that meant they were very liberal; and if a politician had a score of 0, then that meant that they were very conservative. For Republicans, the median score in 1981 was 10, which was a great decrease from the Republican median score of 17 “during the Nixon-Ford and Carter years” (Brady and Volden 2006). For the Democrats, the median score in 1981 was 70, which was a sharp increase from the previous median score that was set “between 56 and 66” (Brady and Volden 2006). The shifts in the ideologies of both Republican and Democrat legislators represented the overall

cultural shifts that were occurring in different sections of the United States. As legislators shifted to the “right,” it reflected the shift to the “right” that was occurring in the Southern states, while legislators that shifted to the “left” reflected the shift to the “left” of the Northeastern states (Brady and Volden 2006).

Despite having a Democratic House of Representatives, Reagan was able to form a coalition in the House between Congressional Republicans and Conservative Democrats. Brady and Volden (2006) showed that many of the Conservative Democrats or “Reagan Democrats” came from the Southern states, and were Reagan’s major tool in order to prevent gridlock within Congress. In the Senate, out of the 45 Democratic Senators, 20 Senators had made the shift to the “left” and became more liberal, while 11 Senators had made the shift to the “right” and became conservative. Through the Republican Senate, and the coalition in the House, Reagan was able to pass many taxation/government spending laws, which included a “\$50 billion in spending cuts” on programs like social security, food stamps, urban development, an increase in defense spending, and policies that decreased government control over the economy (neo-liberalism) (Brady and Volden 2006).

The rest of the Reagan administration was shown to shift back and forth between him and the Democrats in Congress, which was a result of Reagan’s personality. Reagan was described as being a great communicator, calm, and having a good sense of humor, which at times helped him connect to the Democrats of Congress. It was through these aspects of his personality that made Reagan “well

liked in Washington” (Haffner 2005) by people in both political parties. Brady and Volden (2006) note that while the Republicans were able to hold control of the Senate in the 98th Congress, there was a shift to the left in terms of the House as the Republicans had lost 26 seats to the Democrats. The loss of those seats came from the Southern states, border states in the Midwest, and in the Northeast. Altogether this showed that the nation made a shift to the left. The relationship between Reagan and the Democratic Congress had established a symbiotic balance, as Democrats who supported Reagan were able to retain their seats in Congress. As when Reagan “supported shifts back to the left, Congress was able to move policy back toward the median members” when Reagan raised opposition to the shifts that would lead to gridlock in the government (Brady and Volden 2006).

Haffner (2005) stated that second terms for most presidents are “traditionally much tougher than the first.” Brady and Volden (2006) convey that this statement applied to Reagan as well, since in 1986 the Democrats were able to regain control of the Senate, and thus had regained control of Congress. This led to a divided government for Reagan in the last three years of his presidency, as the Democratic Congress prevented Reagan from proposing or passing any conservative taxation acts, thus putting an end to Reagan’s tax revolution. The takeover showed that despite Reagan’s open and positive personality, his relationship with Congress declined in his second term. This division between a Republican presidency and a Democratic Congress continued during the presidency of George

H.W. Bush, which Brady and Volden (2006) stated was the first time that the “important sense divided government became an issue,” as his conservative policies could not get passed the heightened liberal ideology of the Democratic House and Senate.

Bill Clinton: 42nd President (1993-2001), party: Democrat.

While the Presidency of Ronald Reagan can be seen as the start of political gridlock in the modern American political climate, the presidency of Bill Clinton can be seen as the both the continuation and the final “cementing” of political gridlock. Bill Clinton was the first Democratic president that had to deal with a conservative Republican Congress, as he only had two years of a Democratic government from 1993-1995, then the Democrats had lost control of both the House and the Senate after the mid-term election of 1994 (Brady and Volden 2006). It was during the Clinton administration that the full extent of the shifts in voter ideologies occur, showing how the incumbency advantage could be used to keep politicians of either the far left or right of the political spectrum in Congress, and how polarized politics had increased drastically in the federal government.

In terms of his overall presidency, Clinton, despite trying to maintain the mindset of being a median Democrat, enacted taxation policies that showed to both members of his party, to Congress, and to the public that he was becoming more liberal. Some of these policies included: increased taxes for the wealthy sector, cuts on defense spending, and increase spending on social programs (Brady

and Volden 2006). The most famous piece of legislation that Clinton had created was NAFTA (North American Free Trade Agreement), which established trading arrangements between the United States, Mexico, and Canada, and was approved by both Democrats and Republicans in Congress. However, after the mid-term election of 1994, Clinton found himself battling a conservative Republican Congress for the remaining six years of his presidency. Even though Congress was able to disapprove of certain policies (the Kyoto Protocol), and nearly impeached him, Clinton was able to pass a few taxation policies within his first and second term, and maintain his popularity with the people (Brady and Volden 2006).

Most actions taken by Clinton during his presidency reflected his personality and approach to political issues, as he is described as being a clever strategist. An example of this is how Clinton was “so interested in different viewpoints” (Panetta and Haffner 2005) that he used public opinion polls to make compromises. Another example includes one of Clinton’s greatest victories during his presidency: his ability to spin the government shut down of 1996 on Newt Gingrich and his conservative allies, thus getting the Republican Congress to compromise with his policies.

Abramowitz and Saunders (1998:635) points out that from 1980-1992 the differences between the “Democratic and Republican identifiers in the electorate declined from 19 points [...] to 10 points,” which shows that the number of median voters in the nation were decreasing as people began to follow the ideologies of their parties. Abramowitz and Saunders (1998) and Brady and Volden (2006)

noted that during the Clinton administration, younger conservative Republicans that came from the Southern states were replacing many of the older moderate Republican members in Congress. This shows that by the time of the Clinton presidency, the South had made its full turn from Democratic supporters to Republican supporters. The process of older-moderate Republicans being replaced by younger-conservative Republicans was even being replicated in terms of voters. Abramowitz and Saunders (1998) note that through intergenerational shifts in political ideology, many young voters in both parties had voted for the opposing party of their parents, but the shift to the Republican party/conservative ideals was larger than the shift to the Democrats/liberal ideals.

Cox and Morgenstern (1993) measured the rates of incumbency advantages among 24 states, from 1970-1986. The results of this study showed that politicians who are the incumbents of any election have the advantages of “advertising and personal service.” While this was measuring incumbency among state and local governments, Cox and Morgenstern (1993) did compare state incumbency rates to the incumbency rates of national elections. The results found that in national elections, incumbents have the ability to spend more money on advertising and campaign than incumbents in state elections.

In contrast, Brady and Volden (2006), did show that Congressmen from one party that had incumbency advantage lost seats to the challenger from the opposing party. This is shown by the results of the 1994 mid-term election, where conservative Democrats

that had supported Clinton's liberal policies, had lost their seats to conservative Republicans. The losses of those seats show that incumbency advantages are dependent on the ideology of the incumbent, the challenger, and the voters. If the incumbency advantage had worked in every election, then there would not have been a transition in power from a Democratic Congress to a Republican Congress in the 1994 mid-term election. It is through the increase of Republican support and the incumbency advantage that conservative Republicans, such as Newt Gingrich, were able to maintain seats in Congress, and keep those positions in the control of conservative Republicans, instead of losing them to moderate Republicans, conservative or liberal Democrats from 1995-2007.

The last effect that the Clinton administration had on the process of political gridlock in the federal government was that due to both Democrats and Republicans shifting to the far end of their respective ideologies, the number of median voters and moderates in the federal government greatly decreased. As shown by Thurber and Yoshinaka (2015) and Saeki (2009), after the Clinton administration, the middle ground for Congressmen in both parties began to drift apart. Both sources show that it became increasingly difficult for both parties to show support for any piece of legislation, and how the success of a president is linked to Congress.

Saeki (2009:592) introduces the concept of a "winset," which are veto players within Congress from both parties that vote "unanimously" on a bill for passage. Within her research, Saeki (2009) displays graphs that measure the continuing polarizations from

the 83rd-106th Congress, and the points of intersection within each graph represents the “winset.” From the 97th Congress graph to the 106th Congress graph, the “winset” is constantly decreasing in size showing a decline in veto players in Congress finding a middle ground on policies.

The further division is shown by Thurber and Yoshinaka (2015), who focus on the political gridlock during the Presidencies of George W. Bush and Barack Obama. Bond, Fleisher, and Cohen (2015) show how polarized governments mainly effect the policies of minority Presidents (the presidents of the party that is not in control of Congress). A graph that measures the success rate of both minority and majority Presidents showed that within a polarized government, majority Presidents have a higher success rate than minority Presidents, as the difference between both rates are about “33%” (Bond et al 2015:145). The evidence from Bond, Fleisher, and Cohen (2015) when compared with Thurber and Yoshinaka (2015) shows why both President Bush and President Obama had a hard time enacting policy in the last two years of their presidencies, as in both cases the opposing party had gained full control of Congress, and with the embrace of far “left” and “right” ideals, made it impossible for either President to pass legislation.

Solutions to Gridlock

The current literature suggests some possible ways to prevent political gridlock in the federal government including requiring amendments to the Constitution, reforming the voting

system, and diversifying Congress. Both Thurber and Yoshinaka (2015) and Callander and Krehbiel (2014) have shown that Congress has different methods to prevent political gridlock, such as the 60-Vote Senate, which is used as a way to combat filibusters in Congress, and the use of different types of delegations in order to get policies through various stages of gridlock.

At the beginning of my research, I thought that the solution to political gridlock could be increasing presidential power over creating and passing legislation. I observed the power of presidents in both Brazil and Mexico, as both countries have been very active and effective executive branches. However, I found that these executive powers, with regards to decree power, a unilateral bill initiation rights, and line-item vetoes, gave presidents substantial ability to pass laws in spite of an opposition-controlled legislature. In order for the President of the United States to gain more legislative power, the Constitution would have to be amended and approved by 3/4ths of the states. I saw this as a problem, because public opinion in America would likely be averse to the idea of giving the President more power as it would decrease the system of checks and balances that have been established since 1787. Another factor I considered was the large possibility that a move to ratify an amendment to grant the President more power in legislation would not pass in Congress before being sent to the 50 states for approval.

The last set of sources within this paper offer suggestions to solve political gridlock in the federal government. Some of the methods that are included in this section are increasing the powers of

the president, maintaining presidential elections without the use of the Electoral College, and diversifying Congress. The sources used are Mainwaring and Shugart (1997), Bennett (2006), and Lee (2014).

Mainwaring and Shugart (1997) examine the Presidencies of Brazil and Mexico, and talk about how the office of the President has more power in terms of policymaking. An example of this includes how presidents in Brazil can implement policies through the use of provisional measures, and can make Presidential decrees that can go into effect for 30 days, while Congress decides whether or not to reject these policies or amend them. For Mexico, Mainwaring and Shugart (1997:225) show how the President can “reform the constitution by proposing amendments, which are frequently accepted by Congress with only cosmetic changes,” and can introduce bills directly without going through Congress. However, Presidents in both Brazil and Mexico are given such power over policy making through constitutional powers granted to them – “Article 62” for the Brazilian constitution and “Article 71” for the Mexican constitution. This shows that changes to the US Constitution will have to be made in order to give the President more power in the federal government (Mainwaring and Shugart 1997). However, it is highly unlikely that Americans would support a constitutional amendment that would increase the powers of the executive branch due to fear of corruption and abuse of power. As in both Brazil and Mexico, the United States has witnessed their respective Presidents acting out of their own self interests.

Bennett (2006) presents the reader with a view into how a Presidential election would occur if it mainly used the popular votes without the need of a Constitutional amendment to make the popular vote more valued than electoral votes. Bennett (2006) used the example of elections for the US Senate and the 17th amendment, which allows for the “direct election of Senators,” as the leading provisions to show how popular votes can be the better deciding factor for choosing the winner of a Presidential election. Bennett (2006) points out that while states with the highest number of electoral votes (California and Texas) might be reluctant to give up their voting powers, states with the lowest electoral votes would be open to shifting from electoral votes to popular votes. As the shift would lead to a decrease in “the chances of a disparity between the electoral college and popular votes” (Bennett 2006). Through the use of a Presidential election maintained by the popular vote, the imbalances of the Electoral College that are mentioned by Bennett (2006) and Longley and Peirce (1996) would be solved and allow for an increase in voter turnout from various political ideologies.

The last source provided by Lee (2014) focuses on the introduction of women into the political climate of the United States federal government. One of the most interesting facts learned from this documentary is how women (from both parties) in Congress were able to get their male counterparts from the Democratic and Republican Parties to come together in order to end the government shut down in 2013 (Lee 2014). This documentary made me think that one solution to political gridlock is to diversify Congress. As it was

through the efforts of all of the women members of Congress, who were able to work with each other despite being either Democrat or Republican, that got the federal government back into policy making – imagine what would happen if other groups of people were to gain a seat in Congress.

Further evidence about the effectiveness of women with government power is shown by the UN Women website (2019), which states that in parliamentary systems “women’s leadership in political decision-making processes improves them [...] by working across party lines [...] in the most combative environments.” Even though this is focusing on parliamentary systems, this further reinforces the successes and need for more women in Congress. As most parliamentary systems are a democracy it shows that in any form of democratic government, women in political positions are the key to improving policy making by promoting a unified force in a divided government. My approach in figuring out methods to resolve political gridlock will be discussed in the conclusion section.

Conclusion

From these sources, I have found that the causes of extreme political gridlock in the United States government are linked to five factors. The first is critical events in the United States, which lead to the second factor of ideological shifts from both politicians and voters. This is followed by the third factor of polarization in the federal government that can be influenced by the fourth factor of imbalances in the voting system. The last factor, which is the most important

factor in my opinion, is the personal relationship between the President and Congress. While my research does not present a clear solution for political gridlock in the United States, it does present a few tactics that can be used to counter some of the causes and shows that the personalities of Presidents can enable the government to function, whether it is unified or not. In terms of the voting system Adams (1996), pointed out that use of multi-member districts does lead to increase of political ideological representation, stating that the use multi-member districts only works in state elections/governments. This is because in national elections, it would lead to “increasing the number of seats [which] tends to increase the number of parties” (Adams 1996). However, the Brazilian government uses Multi-member districts and has a politically diverse Congress, as it is made out of different political parties, and when it comes to legislation the Brazilian Congress is not politically polarized to one set ideology.

I think the use of Multi-member districts should be implemented into the national elections when choosing members for the House of Representatives, as it primarily represents the population of each state, and would present more political representation than the current system of gerrymandering. The way it would work is that any candidate from any party within every state will be able to gain a seat in Congress, even if they are a minority party or a third party. Take California as an example: under a Multi-member district system, a majority of its seats in the House of Representatives would be filled with Democrats, but there will be seats available to be filled by Republicans that work within the state, and members of third parties,

such as the Green Party. If Congress had an ideologically diverse House of Representatives, then politicians in the House would be able to better represent the beliefs of the voters, and would have to work together to enact bills that can better help voters of all ideologies within the country, instead of focusing on the ideologies of Democrats or Republicans.

Another method of diversifying Congress would be through gender and ethnic quotas, as Lee (2014) showed how women members of Congress could put aside their party identification to work together in ending the government shutdown of 2013. It shows how American politicians who are outside the standard gender-ethnic background of Congress are capable of acting outside of party politics, and it is through this act of acting out of party politics that creates a unified, or at least productive government. In a Washington Post article, Vanita Gupa, the President and CEO of the leadership conference on Civil and Human Rights, stated that ““our federal government functions best when it is equipped with qualified individuals who meaningfully reflect and represent the country they serve”” (Davidson 2018). This shows that Congress needs more politicians that come from various ethnic backgrounds so they can have a better understanding of what multicultural citizens in the nation need in terms of policies since they know what challenges their culture faces.

While I applied the use of Multi-member districts to the House of Representatives, the use of adding women or people of color to Congress would be applied to the Senate. The structure of the

Senate allows for an increase in diversity, as currently there are 35 non-white male Senators (US Senate website) – nearly half of the Senate – which could be achieved sooner than diversifying half of the House. In terms of gender, one Senator should be a man and the other a woman in each state, while anyone of different ethnicity should be free to run for the position of Senator. However, this idea cannot be fulfilled if the Senate and House are plagued with a lack of term limits, the use of incumbency advantage, and years of discrimination that has made it difficult for non-white men to gain positions of power in the government.

In terms of diversifying Congress, the establishment of Multi-member districts for the House, and providing a set gender/ethnicity quota for the Senate would require an amendment to the Constitution, which I think would have more support than an amendment to increase powers of the President. With a diverse Congress, more people of different ideologies and ethnicities would participate more in national elections, thus increasing voter turnout in elections and leading to a decrease in polarization and gridlock within both Congress and the federal government. In relation to my quantitative research, the more diversified Congress is, the less polarized it becomes, which means a more unified legislation could lead to a 30% average increase in laws being passed becoming a reality. From this diverse Congress, more bills can be passed and enacted, which would lead to an increase in legislative productivity as opposed to the current decline that we are facing.

Finally, as shown by Haffner (2005), a key component of either progress or stalemate in the federal government are the personalities of the Presidents. Presidents Nixon and Carter showed that by having either a negative personality trait (Nixon's want for control) or choosing to be closed off from most of the political environment (Carter) means political inaction will be prevalent. Presidents Reagan and Clinton show that by having a positive and open personality allows Presidents of the opposing political party to either build good relations with Congressmen from the opposing political party or can put them into a position to compromise on their terms. While the personalities of the president are a factor that cannot be countered, through the Electoral College, American citizens can decide what kind of person to put into the White House. One method to ensure for politicians who Americans want to receive the presidency is to reform the Electoral College. Tewfik (2013) shows a petition was written from a Californian citizen named Hal Nickle that if put on the California ballot would cancel out the "winner-take-all" system of the Electoral College within that state.

This proposal which is called "The Make Our Vote Count Act" would greatly appropriate electoral votes to the popular votes within the state, thus dividing California's 55 electoral votes among the different presidential candidates, instead of all 55 votes going to the dominate political party in the state, which in current day society would be the Democratic Party (Tewfik 2013). The article provides an example of how this proposal would work if it had been enacted in the 2012 Presidential election; for example, President Obama would

have gotten 34 electoral votes, Republican challenger Mitt Romney would have gotten 20 electoral votes, and third-party candidate Gary Johnson would have gotten 1 electoral vote. If California and other states were to adopt this proposal or something similar to it, this could lead to the creation of an updated Electoral College as it would give equal representation within the Electoral College and would decrease public disinterest in voting in Presidential elections because citizens would feel they are being more fairly represented.

While all of the previous solutions to gridlock are steps that can be enacted within the federal government in order to correct itself, if the federal government is incapable of fixing itself then an outside force is necessary to bring about these changes. I think that the use of social movements that are aimed at bringing institutional changes to the federal government along with widespread social change would be an alternative should the government be too divided or inactive to correct itself. Kesselman et al. (2012:626) defines social movements as being “large-scale grass-roots action that demands reforms of existing social practices and government policies.” The most common social movements include Black Lives Mater, #MeToo, Time’s Up, and most recently the Anti-Trump and Pro-Trump protests that were created during the 2016 Presidential election. The most critical components of social movements are a mobilized network, moral authority, collective action, flexible tactics, established norms, and expertise.

The need for a new social movement would arise if there is a continuation of a decline in policy making. As shown in the graph

“Decline of Legislative Productivity,” by 2016 the percentage of enacted laws was already as low as “3%” and it is most likely that it has maintained either a steady rate within the low percentages or at the worst-case scenario experience another decline. As a result of fewer laws being passed to address certain issues, unrest in the American public is likely to increase, and it would be from this unrest that people will seek changes to the American government in order to get it to become more active in policy making, and ultimately improving their lives.

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