

David S. Broder

Republicans Could Govern

Unless you are of a certain age and were really tuned into politics in the early '50s, the possibility of a Republican Congress is as unfamiliar to you as a balanced budget. The last time there really was a Republican Congress was back in 1953-54. Democrats yielded the Senate majority to the GOP briefly between 1981 and 1987, but they have held control of the House of Representatives ever since 1955.

Anyone under 50 can be forgiven for thinking that the only thing Republicans can do in the legislative branch is oppose Democratic initiatives, support presidential vetoes and defend administration officials and appointees before congressional committees. That's all they've ever seen.

The Republicans are type-cast as naysayers, obstructionists and lackeys of the White House. No wonder, then, that the voters' reflex is to keep electing Democrats to the House and Senate.

For a few hours the other morning, however, it was possible to glimpse what life might be like in a Republican Congress. It was nothing like the stereotype.

Over in a Senate committee room, the Republican Conference Task Force on Economic Growth and Job Creation was holding a mock hearing on tax proposals to stimulate the lethargic economy and ward off an early return to recession.

In a small office in the Capitol, the House Wednesday Group, an informal caucus of issue-oriented Republicans, was holding a press briefing on a report embodying two years of their work on new approaches to cracking the problem of persistent poverty.

My purpose is not to ballyhoo their specific proposals, although many of them make sense. Any open-minded person who was in either of those rooms would come away knowing that he had been listening to intelligent, serious people actively engaged in figuring out answers to major problems—not throwing sand in the gears of government.

The two Republican congressmen who presented the anti-poverty initiative were Reps. Vin Weber of Minnesota and Bill Gradison of Ohio. Their colleagues and congressional reporters know them to be among the brightest and most hard-working members of the House. But after 26 years of combined service, they are virtually unknown to the country, because neither has ever chaired a committee hearing, managed a major piece of legislation on the House floor or directed an investigation. Those are the perks of the majority party, and for 37 years, the voters have denied those opportunities and responsibilities to the Republicans.

The key figures in the Senate mock-hearing were somewhat more familiar: Sens. Phil Gramm of Texas and Bob Kasten of Wisconsin, both key players in the Reaganomics revolution of the early '80s; House Minority Whip Newt Gingrich of Georgia, a star of C-SPAN; and Secretary of Housing and Urban Development Jack Kemp, their ally inside the Bush administration.

Yet for these folks, too, there is immense frustration in the fact that when domestic policy is set, the action flows between the White House and the congressional Democrats. Congressional Republicans and their ideas are often left on the sideline.

Divided government has many costs, ranging from the protracted impasse of last year's budget summit to the ugly spectacle of the recent Clarence Thomas hearings. But the largest cost is that the country never gets to have more than a fraction of the intellectual and political resources of either political party applied to the problems of the nation.

An important objective of both the Wednesday Group and the Senate GOP Task Force was to persuade the Bush White House to take a look at new approaches to the stubborn problems of poverty and the sluggish economy. Were President Bush dealing with a Republican Congress, he would have no choice but to consider such views—and every incentive to weigh seriously what congressional Republicans were suggesting.

For these would be the people who would finally shape whatever legislation was passed. And as his ticket-mates in the next election, they would share a common interest in seeing that the nation's problems were solved.

None of that is true when Republicans are in the minority and Democrats control Congress. The president need not heed advice from congressional Republicans, because they cannot pass any bills. The Democrats can pass bills, but they have no motivation to help make the president a success.

So the system ends up frustrating everyone in it—and serving the country badly. That's why the most critical question for 1992 is not whether the Democrats regain the White House or the Republicans win Congress. The critical objective is to see one party or the other do both—and give this country a government again, not just another set of warring politicians.

Democrats could provide that government if they produce a credible replacement for Bush from their field of presidential candidates. But what I saw on Capitol Hill suggests that Republicans are ready to govern—if given the chance.