Public cynicism about Congress is running high, and so is the frustration of Members caught up in legislative gridlock. With elections approaching, Capitol Hill seeks ways to clean up its act.

BY RICHARD E. COHEN

When Congress adjourned on Thanksgiving eve, the workplace environment of the Capitol had deteriorated to a poisonous level. The legislative process had given way to posturing, suspicion and deadlock. If Members were becoming unhappy and frustrated with their inability to produce, the public, in turn, was becoming contemptuous of them.

Now, as lawmakers are returning to face grave problems—demands to deal with economic dislocation and social inequities, the consequences of staggering federal budget deficits, a world in profound change—they are mindful of the need somehow to regain the esteem of their constituents. But they must also brace for the heavy partisan warfare of a presidential campaign year laced with an unusually high number of competitive Senate and House elections.

Has Congress ever before seen so much handwringing over internal problems or so many whiffs of scandal? Probably yes. But, in their worst nightmares, few Members could have dreamed that public cynicism about Congress would become as intense as it did in 1991.

For much of the year, they seemed overtaken by front-burner events—from the Persian Gulf war to the lingering recession—over which they had no influence. Disagreements over issues such as taxes, crime, health care and banking regulation also seemingly left Congress spinning in circles with nothing to show for its efforts.

Late in the year, the Senate appeared foolish, if not downright prurient, in the glare of a televised confirmation hearing of a Supreme Court nominee turned into an X-rated national morality play.

At roughly the same time, the House was embarrassed by reports that scores of its Members had bounced personal checks at their private bank, which they promptly voted to close, and a Senate ethics panel balkingly completed its denunciations of the so-called Keating five, a quintet of Senators who’d had dealings with a principal in the savings and loan scandal.

Not surprisingly, already-low public opinion ratings for Congress as an institution and for individual Members from both parties threatened to drop off the charts. In many states across the country, term limitation campaigns caught fire.

Lawmakers may be able to stanch the hemorrhaging sufficiently this year to at least appear to address the nation’s business. And most Members who seek reelection will probably succeed. Whatever the short-term recovery, however, Congress’s distress seems unlikely to be relieved any time soon. Indeed, pressure inside the House and Senate may be building toward a rare period of fundamental changes, driven by generational shifts and by discontent with the status quo rather than reversals in party control.

WHAT AILS CONGRESS

Experienced lawmakers and students of the institution offer various theories on what ails Congress. Here are some of the most popular and deep-seated notions expressed on and off Capitol Hill—views that are largely independent of party or ideology.

Legislating ain’t beanbag: Even under the best of circumstances, the task of building a consensus acceptable to a diverse and factional nation is always difficult. As national and worldwide conflicts become more complex and interrelated, finding solutions will always be challenging, even for the most capable lawmakers. The volatile political environment adds complications.

Divided government: Blaming Congress for lack of direction, some argue, is unfair because the authors of the Constitution never intended that legislators lead the nation. That burden lies with the President. But both branches face hindrances in crafting and implementing rules of the game when Congress and the White House are controlled by different parties. It’s even more difficult now, after a decade of such division.

Administrative nightmares: With overlapping committee jurisdictions, arcane parliamentary rules, erratic scheduling
and fragmented power centers, it is surprising that lawmakers ever get anything done. If only Congress were better managed and met its deadlines, it would appear more credible.

Money is evil: Until Congress overhauls its incumbency-benefiting campaign finance system, its Members will be beholden to the political action committees that heavily finance their reelections. Pending such reform, lawmakers will hesitate to take legislative actions that threaten moneyminded special interests.

The Beltway syndrome: Perquisite-laden Members have become a privileged class out of touch with mainstream America but virtually impervious to electoral challenge. Meanwhile, their penchant for governmental micro-management is imposing ever-growing burdens on the public and the economy. To some advocates of this view, term limits are the best—and perhaps, only—antidote.

"Twas ever thus: Although many insiders criticize the news media for the tone of their current coverage, they note that Congress—long before the latest rash of scandals—has been a popular whipping boy for the press. "There is no distinctly native American criminal class except Congress," Mark Twain wrote in 1894. A corollary to this thesis is that the public, though it hates Congress, loves its own Member of Congress.

Some of these views appear to diverge sharply, as does the rhetoric of those who espouse them. If Members spend so much time representing narrow, local interests rather than giving political leadership to the nation, for example, how can they have become captives of the Capital culture? The difficulties Congress faces, in short, do not stem from a single factor and are not likely to be fixed with an instant solution.

"Things are much more complicated in the society, not just in Congress. We are in a more participatory society.... The acceptance of hierarchy and authority is much less clear."

—House Speaker Thomas S. Foley

PUBLIC PERCEPTIONS

When it comes to defending itself from attacks, Congress finds itself at a disadvantage. Saddled with built-in partisan divisions and what Foley termed "the anonymity of the faceless institution," it is difficult to mount a focused congressional response. The Congress-bashing propensities of a pair of Presidents—Ronald Reagan and George Bush—have exacerbated the problem.

"President Reagan used the bully pulpit to slam another institution," said Rep. Andrew Jacobs Jr., D-Ind. "A Speaker's press conference doesn't have the gran-

during much of the past decade, people pay less attention to Washington and its shortcomings. But in times of misery, they seek a target.

"With limits on upward mobility as a society, there is a feeling that government is not doing anything about it," said Thomas E. Mann, director of government studies at Brookings Institution.

"Congress has been a particular source of criticism for several reasons.... All of these have eroded the legitimacy of the institution, especially within the political class."

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more readily than they had during eight years of Reagan, the self-styled outsider.

Instead, action to deal with the pervasive budget deficit was deferred until the contentious negotiations of 1990. Congress spent much of 1989 consumed by the Party—and not exactly reassuring to the public—spectacles of the unprecedented resignations under fire of House Speaker Jim Wright, D-Texas, and Majority Whip Tony Coelho, D-Calif.

It may be academic whether the scent of scandal would have been less damaging if there had been serious legislative achievements on Capitol Hill and a more traditional focus on presidential leader-
THE HOUSE'S FAST TRACK IS MUCH TOO SLOW . . .

W ell over a year ago, Rep. Dennis E. Eckart, D-Ohio, realized it was time to leave the House. When Speaker Thomas S. Foley asked him to orient freshmen Members to the sprawling, complex institution, he recently recalled, "I discovered ... that I was telling them to do things that I had made up my mind that I probably was not willing to do anymore."

Like going back every weekend to his suburban Cleveland district to be with constituents; getting a jump on issues by coming in for Monday hearings at the Energy and Commerce Committee when few other panel members are back in town yet, and staying late. Or taking on what Eckart calls the "trashy issues that nobody else wants to work on" in order to win compliments from a subcommittee chairman.

Eckart, ambitious and earnest to a fault, not to mention clean-cut, friendly and articulate, mastered the reelectlon arts during four years as a state legislator and six congressional terms.

At 41, however, he found himself years away from holding real power in the House. He was frustrated and burned out, not willing to take on still more work—such as party fund-raising chores—to quicken his advance into a leadership position. "How many years can you do 90 days on an airplane?" he asked.

With his 16 years in state and national politics coming to a close at the end of this year, Eckart, a lawyer, is now mulling a second career. He said he hasn't decided what it will be or whether he'll leave Washington.

One thing is clear: Eckart's early exit is an ominous message for the House, and for politics generally. For Eckart and his ilk represent the future of the House: Young, hardworking stalwarts, enthusiastic about politics and, more important, keen in the art of legislating.

Eckart, for example, a lieutenant of Energy and Commerce chairman John D. Dingell, D-Mich., was one of a dozen legislators who worked overtime in the back rooms for months to craft a Clean Air Act that was acceptable to several warring factions. The act was finally signed into law in 1990. If such legislative brokering is becoming a lost art, Eckart's departure hastens the trend.

There is a bigger if: If the House worked better, then the long hours, the weekends of campaigning and fund raising, the years of waiting to move up the seniority ladder might be worth it. But for now, for Eckart, it isn't. And his impatience with congressional ineffectuality is mirrored by growing public animosity toward the institution.

"There's a veritable feeding frenzy out there, and the Congress is the first entrée on the menu."

Maybe it's because the 1980s were an exhausting time in Congress. Since his arrival in January 1981, Eckart said, the House has been "a veritable frustration roller coaster. It's been the hottest ride in the park."

That year, Democratic solidarity was broken when President Reagan successfully rounded up enough conservative Democratic votes in the House to pass his landmark package of spending and tax reductions.

Then, "social security and Claude Pepper saved us," Eckart said, recalling the 1982 elections, when the Democrats, led by Speaker Thomas P. O'Neill Jr., of Massachusetts, exploited fears that Republicans would cut social security benefits and picked up 26 seats, solidifying their House majority for the remainder of the decade.

But the '80s hardly calmed down: There were more budget battles, bitter fights over U.S. policy in Central America, the Iran-contra affair and the scandal that toppled Speaker Jim Wright of Texas. Only with the 1989 ascension of Washington's Foley—in Eckart's view a wise leader who "banked the fires of frustration that Jim Wright fostered"—did the House settle down a bit.

So why is Eckart leaving? In lots of reasons. But at the heart of it, perhaps, is the sense of stalemate that pervades Washington in the 1990s. With neither the money nor seemingly the energy for bold initiatives, life in the House has become less than compelling.

"All of us, Republicans and Democrats, liberals and conservatives, come to government with an agenda. Now, things seem to be beyond our control. . . . You can't advance new programs, new ideas, within the budget constraints that we have. And when you go home to talk about national health insurance, the first question is 'Did you bounce any checks?' [Eckart says he did not.] It is frustrating. It's easy to see why Members can say this just ain't much fun any more."

Eckart has always had an ability to step back and analyze the institution even while he's been in it, and he is no less introspective on the way out the door. Within the over-all malaise, he identifies several interlocking problems.

The Democrats, including Foley, don't have their act together, he charges. They have been too timid to test President Bush. "We only politically prosper when we engage the President, put messages on his desk, let him veto them; maybe we can override, maybe we can't. The only way you can force agreement is to let him take the heat and smell the smoke of political gunfire."

Of Foley, he said: "I think Members would just like to see him occasionally pick a partisan fight to help protect us. That's the frustration."

Like many others, Eckart also believes the House moved too far toward decentralization of authority in the 1970s, with the result that legislative paralysis can be cured only by another wave of reform.

"We have balkanized the power of the Congress into dozens of competing fie-
... FOR OHIO'S DENNIS ECKART

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domn's, and thus make it more difficult, absent an ironfisted ruling Speaker, like Jim Wright, to define a congressional agenda. We need to do what [former Rules Committee chairman] Dick Bolling suggested [in 1974], and that is go back and redo our entire committee organization structure to eliminate time-consuming, overlapping jurisdictions.

That might make it easier to pass needed legislation. "We need to show the American people that we are capable of addressing problems," Eckart said. "When we do not have a real agenda, they will focus on what appears to be an agenda—check cashing at the House bank."

But can Members really tackle tough issues? Eckart concedes that pressure from interest groups and constituents makes it harder for legislators to craft solutions that might not completely please anyone but that might address the problem.

"It's what I refer to as the politics of absolutism," he said. "Either you are absolutely with [a particular interest group] or you are absolutely wrong. That has grown since I came here. To step outside the protective cocoon of being the Chamber of Commerce's congressman, or the environmentalist's congressman, you risk drawing withering fire from both sides. The price for sticking your neck out around this place has gotten higher and higher."

Members, meanwhile, hear more and more from their districts. "This place responds to constituents perhaps too well," Eckart said. "We respond to the floods of phone calls and to the mass mailings. If people really knew how intimidated we are...."

Eckart also concedles that the related ills of modern politics—excessive campaign spending, the power of incumbency, "safe seats" created by state legislative redistricting—have eroded voter trust. "People are frustrated that the process of politics excludes them, that their modest contributions of time and to the mailing box are so overwhelmed by the PAC [political action committee] contributions and the TV commercial and the consultant's sage wisdom that they just don't think elections are fair anymore."

The public's solution? Term limits, which Eckart decries because he says it would deprive voters of their democratic right to elect whomever they choose.

Eckart's decision to pack it in offers another piece of evidence that the House is out of whack; it suggests that more than a few Members are dissatisfied with their life, just as voters are with their performance.

He has chosen to leave now, while he's young enough to launch a second career. "There's no reasonable opportunity for me to be committee chairman," he said, "without... making a commitment of dozens more years here."

Eckart movingly described the costs of his congressional career on his personal life and the time spent away from his family home in a Virginia suburb of Washington. There is a hint of bitterness, and though he insists it is only one element in his decision, it may be the most compelling one.

Eckart is partly wistful, for example, about time lost with his son, "Eddie's 12, and I've been home for four 'trick or treats.' Every other October, where am I? I'm in Ohio. 'Hey, I'm doing a great job. Send me back."

"In the off-years [when you have to pass these [appropriation] bills, you get home at 8 or 9 o'clock and you help him wash off his makeup. You look at the pictures of what he was for Halloween."

Eckart admits that it was his decision to put so much into the job and that he might have "defined better the parameters of what I was willing to sacrifice personally for this. But you're young and ambitious, and [reporters are] writing stories about how you are on your way up and you want to fulfill those prophecies."

He's found, however, that it's not so easy to shift career gears. Last August, after deciding not to seek reelection, Eckart treated himself to a rare luxury: a real vacation during part of the August recess. But he couldn't relax.

"It was abysmal for me the first few days. I'd never done it. I was missing a county fair that I had always gone to. And, sure enough, when I came back [to the district] in the last half of August, people kept saying, 'Gosh, we didn't see you at the fair.'"

Though a few minutes earlier, Eckart had gushed about serving his constituents, there was a caustic note in his voice as he described the powerful, intimate pull voters have on their Representatives.

Politics has its price, and even a nice guy like Dennis Eckart has had to pay. —Christopher Madison

ship. But one event after another has stoked public perceptions of Congress during the past three years.

In the Keating five influence-peddling case, the merits of the changes of unethical conduct and their ultimate resolution tended to be obscured by the spectacle of the Senate system being placed on trial. Add to that two brouhahas over congressional pay raises since 1989, and there is no shortage of live ammunition for critics who portray Congress as the gang that can't shoot straight.

On a tawdrier level, Sen. Edward M. Kennedy, D-Mass.—the Member of Congress with the most public private life—figured prominently in the Palm Beach (Fla.) incident that led to rape charges being filed against his nephew, William Kennedy Smith. After a trial that turned into a press circus, a jury found Smith not guilty. Donald E. (Buz) Lukens, an obscure House Republican from Ohio, saw his tenure cut short in 1990 after he was convicted of having sex with a teenage girl.

Congressional sex scandals are by no means a new phenomenon, but these incidents—along with other alleged abuses ranging from reports of publicly financed vacation junkets to easily ridiculed pork barrel proposals such as federal money for a Lawrence Welk museum—besmirched an institutional image that was already tarnished. Worse yet, they added to the perception that the privileges of office make lawmakers oblivious to conventional norms and to public sensibilities.

In contrast with often-arcane legislative disputes, in which public desire to sort out issues and track developments is often limited, personal peccadilloes arouse wide attention. "There's a veritable feeding frenzy out there," Rep. Dennis E. Eckart, D-Ohio, said, "and the Congress is the first entrée on the menu."

(For a report on why Eckart is retiring, see box, pp. 120-21. And for a report on why Rep. Peter J. Visclosky, D-Ind., is not, see box, p. 123.)

Nor has the public found a whole lot to cheer about when it has turned its attention to Congress's legislative labors. "What I find over and over again in meeting with constituents is that people think that what we do doesn't affect their daily lives," Senate Majority Leader George J. Mitchell, D-Maine, told reporters. "If the agenda of the American Congress were truly the agenda of the American family, the standing would go up."

Perhaps the most tangible public policy debacle of recent years has been the collapse of the newly deregulated savings and loan industry, which will cost taxpayers hundreds of billions of dollars. Although federal laws enacted during the
"A system originally designed to help Congress to do the public's business has turned into a machine so complex and bewildering that the public doesn't understand it."

—President Bush

Many changes in the news business in recent years have resulted in a decline in detailed day-to-day legislative coverage by many national outlets—including television and general-circulation magazines. To some extent, the slack has been taken up by the growth of specialized new services in both print and broadcast journalism. Among the consequences have been unintentional coverage of both the local aspects of congressional news and the more eye-catching national stories in forums such as television talk shows.

The problem is not with the coverage of events but how it is used to make the institution more vulnerable to game-players," said Rep. David R. Obey, D-Wis., a leading student of Congress who has led reform efforts for two decades. "One result is to make Members more careful than they should be."

Vin Weber of Minnesota, secretary of the House Republican Conference, added that press coverage of ethical failings has gone too far. "Society gets along partly because you shield part of people's lives," he said. "We have gone way beyond what's useful, for example, in reporting on congressional perks."

Weber added that he had unsuccessfully urged Minority Whip Newt Gingrich of Georgia, a close ally, to back away from his aggressive use of the press to spread charges that eventually toppled Wright.

Recent public opinion polls help to explain why lawmakers are worried about their collective image. A national survey by the Times Mirror Center for The People & the Press, released last month, showed that 84 per cent agreed that "elected officials in Washington lose touch with the people pretty quickly," an 11-point increase since 1987.

LEGISLATIVE OPERATIONS

It's not just the public that's troubled by how Washington conducts business. As more and more Members conclude that Congress does not function properly, they find it increasingly difficult to diagnose the problems and agree upon possible remedies.

While voicing little overt support for radical change in congressional operations, some veteran lawmakers have recently joined in the tough criticism. "Many Members believe that the institution does not work very well," Rep. Lee H. Hamilton, D-Ind., said. He listed, among other problems, overlapping committee jurisdictions, lack of adequate information for Members, misallocation of staff and poor public understanding of what Congress does.

Rep. Willis D. Gradison Jr., R-Ohio, who has joined Hamilton in filing a resolution to create a joint committee to study congressional organization, said that he wants Congress to be able to "take a longer view of things" on such policy issues as education, economic productivity and personal savings rates. "These issues don't fit into our committee jurisdictions and the two-year cycle," he explained.

But other Members of both parties do not agree that the internal study and possible changes Hamilton and Gradison have suggested would have much impact. "They contend that Congress's limitations are more fundamental," he explained.

"The President acts as head of state
and makes Congress the prime minister," Obey said. "Congress has the responsibility for day-to-day governing. But the public doesn't know that the President [because of his veto power] can govern with the support of one-third of the Members of either the House or Senate. In the Senate, where Democrats hold 57 seats, it requires 60 votes to move virtually any controversial measure, thanks to increased use of the filibuster tactics.

On any major issue, Obey said, it is unrealistic to expect major change without a strong Bush initiative. "Congress and policy maneuvering still had to work its course, the corner had been turned on.

"Congress is truly a deliberative world," said Rep. Philip B. Sharp, D-Ind., in reviewing the handling of the clean air bill. "It is not the natural instinct of people to take on tasks that are not necessary.... Bush helped to force the agenda when he made his proposal."

But even when a President leads, divided government doesn't work to everyone's satisfaction. Citing the many explicit requirements in the clean air bill as an example, David M. Mason, director of the Congress Assessment Project at the conservative Heritage Foundation, complained that "in the past 20 years, Congress has stopped legislating and started managing." He added, "We believe that Congress should set broad policy and let the President administer the details."

"It's hard to solve the bigger frustrations until we end divided government," he said. "Most people come here highly motivated to do good. But divided government forces lowest-common-denominator solutions and drains the energy out of people. You are forced into a defensive mechanism to avoid making things worse."

In the opinion of Mickey Edwards of Oklahoma, chairman of the House Republican Policy Committee, the tendency to settle for suboptimal solutions is accentuated as "Democrats become more convinced that they will never capture the presidency and Republicans fear that they will not win control of Congress."

The 1990 budget and clean air bills demonstrated an increasing reliance on ad hoc legislative deal making. Both measures were handled mostly outside the textbook process of committee hearings and formal drafting sessions. The final versions of the two bills were written in back rooms without exposure to the sunshine of public scrutiny and then passed with relatively little floor debate. For the most part, key Members working on each bill produced a bipartisan deal in the political center, angering some advocates on the political left and right.

The procedural improvising required to enact the two bills is seen by some as an indictment of the existing legislative process. Nine Democrats on the House Energy and Commerce Committee formed their own informal group to study clean air issues for several months and offer their own recommendations. "I see what we have done as the committee structure of the future," Rep. Jim Cooper, D-Tenn., said. "The learning curve for Members needs to be private.... You need a sustained focus that you can't get in the formal hearings."

In the Senate, the clean air bill was approved only following extraordinary marathon negotiations spearheaded by Mitchell in his private office. The budget agreement was similarly hammered out during months of private talks in settings that included Andrews Air Force Base, Md., and the White House. A striking aspect in each case was the direct involvement of Bush Administration officials in the talks that led up to the preparation of the legislative package.

From the perspective of some Democrats, the budget summit was designed to give cover for Bush's decision to abandon his "no-new-taxes" campaign pledge. "The [Democratic] committee chairman were there to allow George Bush to change his mind and cover his butt because he had lied to people," Obey said.

Republicans, noting that Democrats had failed to complete a budget on their own terms, contend that Democratic leaders have increased the politicization of Congress. "Virtually every issue that

"The American public is angry about their government and angry about their Congress... People believe that government is simply not dealing with their basic problems."


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we try to deal with amounts to pure fin-
got pointing by both parties,” Edwards
said. “It seems that we never transcend
politics to deal with real issues.”

Another growing concern for Congress
is the continuing tension between party
leaders and committee chairmen in set-
ting and carrying out their party’s agenda.
The abrupt switch in House Speakers,
from the combative Wright to the more-
accommodating Foley, who is more at
ease with the workings of divided govern-
ment, has pointed up Members’ ambiva-
ence about whether they want strong
centralized leadership.

But the independence of committee
chairmen is also subject to second-guess-
ing. The House Democratic Caucus
stripped two committee chairmen of their
positions at the start of the current Con-
gress. And several influential Democrats,
led by Rep. Dave McCurdy, D-Okla.,
have filed a bill setting an eight-year limit
for chairmen and giving the Speaker a
stronger hand in their selection. (See N1,
12/7/91, p. 2979.)

“The utility of McCurdy’s proposal is
that it sends signals to committee chair-
men that they are forewarned about their
status,” an influential Democrat said. “In
the future, there will be fewer one-man
bands” as chairmen.

NONELECTIONS

As the perception—by both Members
and observers of Congress—of legislative
paralysis has spread, so too has the
sense—on the part of both camps—that
congressional elections are increasingly
becoming meaningless.

Although the 15 House incumbents—9
Republicans, 6 Democrats—defeated in
November 1990 exceeded the total who
lost in the two previous general elections,
the reelection rate still was 96 per cent.
Only one Senator lost his reelection bid
in 1990. Those success rates were striking,
given that opinion polls at the same time
revealed strong public unhappiness over
Washington’s budget shenanigans.

Perhaps a more relevant statistic was
the 3.9-percentage-point drop in the aver-
age vote for incumbents, to 64.5 per cent,
the lowest level since 1974, according to
Gary C. Jacobson, a political scientist at
the University of California (San Diego).

“Luckily for incumbents of both parties,
the action on deficit reduction came so
late that voters had only limited vehicles
(acceptable replacements) for venting
their displeasure, and few Members lost
their seats,” Jacobson wrote. “Incum-

bents may not be so lucky in 1992.”

It remains to be seen how many serious
challenges to incumbents there will be
this year, with redistricting and the presi-
dential campaign. But some experts are
worried about the continuing trend
toward noncompetitive contests. Most
incumbents in 1990 faced challengers
who did not spend enough money to
establish their own credibility. In 78
House and 4 Senate elections, there was
no major-party opponent at all.

“In the legislatures of the land, espe-
cially in the U.S. House of Representa-
tives, incumbency reigns supreme,”
Elaine Ciulla Kamarck of the Progressive
Policy Institute wrote in a paper prepared
for a recent conference at DePauw Uni-
versity’s center for contemporary media.

“Divided
government forces
lowest-common-
denominator
solutions and
drains [Congress].”


“"If the electoral system cannot respond to
discontent, and if it is failing to provide
alternatives, then something is, indeed,
wrong with American democracy.”

The participants at the conference—
which was entitled “Why Are Elections
Over Before the Polls Open?”—ap-
proved a set of “solutions” to encourage
competitive campaigns. Among them
were well-worn proposals such as free TV
time for all candidates, increased candi-
date accountability for their campaign
advertisements and tax credits for small
campaign contributions. They also en-
dorsed more-innovative measures, in-
cluding four-year terms for House Mem-
bers and a ballot enabling voters to reject
all candidates by marking “ Favor a new
election.”

House and Senate Democrats, mean-
while, have passed separate measures
imposing spending limits and providing
public subsidies for candidates. Even if
they resolve their differences this year in
a conference committee, Bush has said
that he would veto such a measure, thus
continuing the long-running efforts to
change campaign finance laws.

REFORM OUTLOOK

Some congressional problems can be
self-correcting. If, for example, the voters
oust a few well-heeled incumbents in
spite of their financial advantage, or if an
improved economy shifts public attention
to other arenas, some of the current dis-
content with Congress may subside.

But two movements—one internal, the
other external—suggest that congress-
ional shortcomings have become con-
spicuous enough to require attempts at
corrective action no matter what hap-
joined by Sen. Pete V. Domenici, R-
N.M., and Reps. Hamilton and Gradi-
son—filed a resolution last July calling
for the creation of a joint House-Senate
committee on the organization of Con-
gress. At the time, Boren said that he
had hoped the panel would begin its study
in the fall and submit its proposals by

But the proposal has progressed no
further than a relatively friendly hearing
before the Senate Rules and Administra-
tion Committee in November. Its propo-
ments have encountered objections from
Foley, who has expressed concern that
past reform efforts have been divisive
and have immobilized the House; he also
objects to addressing the seemingly
serious problems of the House and Senate in a single
study. Acknowledging internal resistance,
supporters pushed back their timetable
by at least one year.

In meetings during the recent con-
gressional recess, Hamilton and Gradison
received more-positive signals from lead-
ers of both parties. Foley reportedly
gave his OK to a House Rules Committee
hearing on the study proposal, which has
gained some political muscle because of
its 136 co-sponsors, including 80 Demo-
crats. In the past, he has favored incre-
mental reforms prepared by the Demo-
cratic Caucus with little in the way of
public involvement.

Mann, meanwhile, hopes to proceed this
year with fellow congressional scholar
Norman J. Ornstein of the American
Enterprise Institute for Public Policy
Research (AEI) with a comprehensive
study, which would be sponsored jointly
by Brookings and AEI. “We hope to
commission some research and essays
and hold conferences and roundtable
discussions,” Mann said, and submit an
independent report to the congressional
joint committee, once it is established.

The growing support for the studies, in
part, is a defensive response to the
attacks on Congress. It also provides an
alternative to more-radical proposals,
such as term limits for lawmakers.

Whether this approach will satisfy the
political pressures generated by congres-
sional critics and the public will depend
partly on how well Congress manages
to clean up its act—both legislatively
and ethically—this year. November’s election
returns may send a signal as to how well it
is doing.