

# Governing in a Polarized America



Our nation is in the midst of an extremely polarized political era, making it difficult for lawmakers to legislate and meet the needs of the American people. Following the mid-term elections, the 116th Congress provides a unique opportunity to revitalize the governing process.

## *Recommendations from the Commission on Political Reform*

The Bipartisan Policy Center launched the Commission on Political Reform with Senators Tom Daschle, Trent Lott, and Olympia Snowe, along with Secretary Dan Glickman, to advocate for specific reforms that will improve the political process in this polarized atmosphere.

### **You Can't Run a Superpower on Wednesdays Alone**

- The House and Senate should schedule synchronized, five-day workweeks in Washington, with three weeks in session followed by one-week state and district work periods. According to BPC's Healthy Congress Index, neither chamber is working an optimal number of days in the Capitol.

### **Committees are the Workhorses of Congress**

- Important legislation should not be brought to the floor without the benefit of committee deliberations and a full report. According to BPC's Healthy Congress Index, committees in both chambers are actively reporting bills, but it is unclear if these bills ultimately make it to the floor.
- Committee chairs must take a greater lead in passing authorization bills after thorough oversight hearings and full committee deliberations. According to BPC's Healthy Congress Index, programs whose authorizations have expired account for one-quarter of all federal spending.
- Committee chairs should solicit the views of all committee members well in advance of a committee markup and pay special attention to the minority members so that efforts are made to incorporate as many of their suggested changes into the chairman's mark before the bill is marked up by the full committee.
- Full-fledged conference committees between the chambers on important legislation are essential to ensuring greater member participation in the policy process. According to BPC's Healthy Congress Index, the use of conference committees has declined over the last decade.

### **Building Bipartisanship**

- Joint party caucuses should be scheduled in both chambers at least once a month to discuss potential areas for legislative cooperation.
- The joint leadership in the House and Senate should each plan periodic, informal gatherings for their members that are centered on a particular theme or speaker to allow for more relationship building across the aisle.

## Giving Members a Say

- Bills should be posted a minimum of three days in advance of a vote to allow sufficient time for members and the public to read and discuss the measures.
- Too many bills come to the House floor under closed rules, allowing no amendments. The House Rules Committee should report more modified open rules that: (a) require all amendments to be pre-printed in the Congressional Record before their consideration and (b) set an overall time limit for the offering of amendments on most bills. According to BPC's Healthy Congress Index, the House has increasingly considered bills under closed rules over the last decade.
- The Senate should eliminate filibusters on the motion to proceed by limiting debate to two hours, equally divided between the two parties. According to BPC's Healthy Congress Index, legislative cloture votes continue to be a regular obstacle for legislation on the floor.
- The Senate should guarantee consideration of a minimum of ten amendments offered by and alternating between senators of both parties when considering any legislative measure. According to BPC's Healthy Congress Index, in the 115th Congress, amendments in the Senate are at a ten-year low.

## The Most Basic Function: The Federal Budget

- Congress should adopt a biennial budget process that includes two-year budget resolutions and appropriations bills. According to BPC's Healthy Congress Index, Congress has mostly failed to adhere to the regular budget process over the last decade.
- Congress should more strictly enforce existing rules prohibiting legislative language of a new and substantive policy nature from being included in appropriations bills and from being offered as floor amendments to appropriations bills.

## Reviving Ethics in Campaign Spending

- Congress should pass legislation requiring detailed disclosure of spending by congressional leadership PACs and mandating that leadership PAC funds be used solely for political activities (such as donations to other candidates) and not for personal use.
- In its rules, Congress should limit the use of leadership PACs to the top three congressional leaders of each party in both the House of Representatives and the Senate.

# Other Congressional Reforms Ripe for Bipartisan Consensus

## Implementing Broad Congressional Reform through a New Committee

Congress should create a Committee on the Organization of Congress to help rebuild public confidence in Congress and restore individual members' roles in the legislative-making process by examining Congress's rules and procedures and proposing comprehensive reforms to make the institution more efficient, effective, and accountable to the American people.

## Restoring Congress's Power of the Purse

Congress should revive congressionally directed spending and implement necessary guardrails to restore its authority to direct how money shall be expended from the U.S. Treasury. The restoration of an effective system will increase Congress' capacity to tackle deficit reduction and political gridlock while restoring its constitutional power to determine how money should be spent within individual districts.

## Leadership Coordination

A member of each party's leadership team should be tasked with handling nominations while another member of leadership meets regularly with their counterparts from the other party to seek areas ripe for cooperation.