

Divided Party Control

Does It Make a Difference?

Since World War II, party control of the U.S. national government has been formally divided for twenty-six years and unified for eighteen. (That is the span between the elections of 1946 and 1990.) Truman, Eisenhower, Nixon, Ford, Reagan, and Bush have had to coexist — for at least a two-year stretch in each case — with opposite-party majorities in the Senate or House or both. Truman, Eisenhower, Kennedy, Johnson, and Carter have had — again, for at least a two-year stretch — House and Senate majorities of their own party.

In other respects bearing on relations between the president and Congress, this postwar era shows a high degree of continuity or commonality stemming from events or precedents of the 1930s and 1940s. The New Deal and the war ratcheted the government to new levels of activity, and Franklin Roosevelt permanently strengthened the presidency. The La Follette–Monroney Act of 1946 streamlined the congressional committee system. Soon after the war the government took on new commitments in defense, foreign policy, and macroeconomic management that are with us still. Truman developed the custom of presenting “the president’s program” to Congress each year. Televising of major congressional investigations began in 1948 with HUAC’s probe of Alger Hiss.

The postwar era presents, then, a checkered pattern of unified-versus-