

POWERFUL AND LEGITIMATE

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We still don't know for sure who it will be, but the question asked about both Bush and Gore is the same: "Can he govern?" The answer is yes.

Many are doubtful. Oh my goodness, they say, there is so much partisan bitterness. Oh, the majorities in Congress are so small. The country is split. More gridlock is in the cards. Worst, the new president will not have "legitimacy." This view is addlebrained.

It is also familiar. In late 1994, after the Gingroids swept into Congress, the word on the street was "Clinton is irrelevant." But when the time came for Clinton to say "Bomb Serbia," the planes took off.

According to my unimpeachable source, the Constitution, the president, once sworn, is never irrelevant. His veto is worth 16 Senate votes. He is the commander-in-chief. He appoints the key federal officials and administers a government with 3 million people on the payroll. He issues executive orders. When he steps to the microphone, everyone listens. He pretty well sets foreign policy for the most influential nation in the world, and in the world's history. Such power bolsters legitimacy.

All this will apply to either Gore or Bush when the battle of 2000 is finally over. (And each has a right to fight it out legally as far as he can.)

Now, the Congress is not chopped liver. Its power is great. But its power is collective, and particularly hard to organize when the balance between the parties is close. As my collaborator

Richard Scammon used to say, "You can look all over Washington and not find a single statue to a Congress."

While either candidate will be able to govern legitimately, the current situation would seem to be easier for Bush. Democrats like "strong" presidents, like Franklin Roosevelt and Lyndon Johnson. They had vast domestic programs to enact, which they did, to their credit. The Democratic philosophy is activist; "Don't just sit there, do something."

But, as in most every democracy, there is a countervailing philosophy: "Don't just do something; sit there." That may sound retrograde. But at its root, this represents a powerful idea: It is not the government that makes America great. The free and bubbling American society, the creativity of free people, is what sets the wheels turning. There is growing evidence that the world works best that way.

A president of either philosophy can usually stop things he doesn't like. Clinton didn't cotton to the idea of repealing the Estate Tax, and even though both Houses, controlled by Republicans, passed the proposal -- with much Democratic support -- he vetoed it. It died. But there is no positive veto. The president can't say, "Hey, Congress, here's my health-care plan, and my 16 Senate votes."

The equation is somewhat different for a Republican. He can just sit there, watch America keep on succeeding, and announce that good things happen when people keep their own money and do their own thing. He can approve things he likes. If the Congress again passes a repeal of the Estate Tax (or, wiser, just raises the threshold substantially), President Bush can sign it with a flourish, grandly handing out signing pens.

This time, either new president will have an added advantage. The wingers are weaker. Picture two reverends: Jackson and Robertson. The Rev. Jesse comes to President Gore and says, "You owe me; let's get moving on programs A, B and C." And Gore replies, "Jesse, I appreciate your help, but I won this election by a hair, half the country thinks I stole it, the Congress is Republican, and we can only do things from the center of the political spectrum. Let's go do a photo op." When the Rev. Pat comes to President Bush, roughly the same dialogue would ensue.

As ever, there are great compromises available. Bush said cut taxes this much, Gore said cut taxes that much. Split the difference. Bush said take two percentage points of Social Security for private accounts, Gore said take zero. Do one point.

Gridlock is overstated. There has been less of it than you think, and it's not so bad either. In the last 20 years, somehow a gridlocked America deregulated most of its economy, to the envy of the world. Welfare reform was passed, international trade rules were liberalized, and a whole new program of medical care for poor children (CHIPS) was enacted.

It's said that some Republicans did not regard President Clinton as "legitimate." Maybe so. Maybe not. I'm dubious. But they surely understood that the office of the presidency is legitimate, and is to be honored. In that, they were in harmony with the vast majority of Americans, who revere the office, if not always the man who holds it. It is our sacred secular institution. It is designed to help make America governable, which it will be, under either President Bush or President Gore.

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