

The Congressional Agenda: National Security or Domestic Policy?

During World War II, national security dominated the congressional agenda. With the massive mobilization of American troops and economic production geared to support the war effort, domestic policy commanded only modest attention in Congress. But in prolonged "shadow wars," such as the cold war and the current war on terrorism, the appropriate balance between national security and domestic concerns is much harder for Congress to define. In the months after the terrorist attacks, the partisan differences that had dominated Congress prior to September 11 evaporated as Democrats and Republicans united behind the president. Divisive domestic issues, such as taxes, Social Security, health care, and the environment were replaced with bipartisan cooperation around the common interest in national security. As the immediate threat of terrorism appeared to recede, President Bush and many Republicans sought to keep Congress focused on national security, the issue on which they are politically strongest. Many Democrats and some conservative Republicans, by contrast, hoped to steer the congressional agenda toward domestic policy issues.

Congress cannot afford to be distracted by partisan disputes over domestic issues when the national security is at stake, say those who believe that national security should dominate the congressional agenda. With the threat of terrorism ever present, the public expects Congress to unite behind the president rather than to quarrel over domestic issues. Partisanship dominated Congress for much of the 1990s, reducing congressional effectiveness and damaging public confidence in government. Now is the time for Congress to leave behind these divisive domestic issues and concentrate on the broader public interest in protecting the nation.

In the months after September 11, public confidence in Congress increased precisely because members put aside the narrow interests of their constituencies and parties and worked for the safety of the American people. Congress quickly passed the USA PATRIOT Act, which gave the government new powers to fight terrorism. It supported increased spending for national security and backed the war

in Afghanistan. Congressional support for each of these measures was overwhelming, with very few dissenters. The passage of time since September 11 should not alter the congressional focus on national security, say supporters of this agenda. President Bush underscored the ongoing centrality of the war on terrorism in June 2002, when he asked Congress to make the Office of Homeland Security a cabinet department. The president needed congressional approval to reorganize the bureaucracy to fight a new kind of war. The complex measure involved multiple congressional committees and filled the congressional schedule well into the fall election season. By then, a new national security threat, the possibility of war with Iraq, dominated public debate.



Critics believe that security is a central issue for Congress but they contend that the public is equally concerned about such domestic issues as economic security, the future of Social Security, corporate crimes, and the cost of health care. It is possible, they argue, for Congress to support antiterrorism initiatives and to consider key domestic issues on which partisan differences are more likely to arise. The collapse of the giant energy

company Enron and growing evidence about other instances of corporate misconduct require congressional attention to the problem of the accountability of America's elite business leaders. The Social Security system needs congressional action to ensure that benefits will continue for a future generation of retirees. Legitimate differences over the environment should be aired in Congress. Many supporters of this view are congressional Democrats who believe that the president has sought to sideline domestic issues because he is politically weaker in this area. Throughout the 2002 campaign season, congressional Democrats struggled with little success to draw attention to domestic issues, as the president emphasized the need for war with Iraq. The broad public interest is not served by failing to consider issues that are central to the well-being of Americans.

Some conservative Republicans agree. Anxious to push forward a socially conservative congressional agenda, they argue that by neglecting domestic issues, the president is ignoring the views of the voters that put him in office.

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- 1) The war on terrorism resulted in _____ cooperation.
- 2) Why did public confidence in Congress increase after 9/11?
- 3) When national security is the focal point, which political party normally is strongest?
- 4) What types of issues were neglected shortly after 9/11?
- 5) What circumstances must be present for issues such as social security and health care to be enacted by congress?