



## Is it Really “Gridlock” if It’s by Design?

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The close of the first session of the 110th Congress brings a pause in what has been an active and often contentious period on Capitol Hill. The recess also brings me a much-needed opportunity to catch my breath and reflect on my first few months working in the office of Senator Bill Nelson (D-Fla.) as the newest GSA-USGS Congressional Science Fellow.

As I anticipated, being a native Washingtonian (yes, there really is such a thing) and a former government contractor somewhat eased my transition into the culture and frenetic pace of Capitol Hill. While I was familiar with having to produce the best work possible under ambitious deadlines, nothing truly prepares you for the first time you hear something you’ve written broadcast on live television. Most surprising, however, has been the extent to which this adventure has challenged many of my lifelong perceptions of my hometown and taught me how our government finds a way to function, often in spite of itself.

It seems only yesterday that I was beginning the fellowship orientation sponsored by the American Association for the Advancement of Science. The two-week session oscillated between two vastly different outlooks on Washington and the future of science, technology, and research and development in the United States. It was exciting to be immersed in the inner workings of our representative democracy and hear how scientists are contributing meaningfully to policy. At the same time, much of what we heard from speakers and former fellows described a federal government overshadowed by geopolitical and economic challenges and strong partisanship. Though certainly not intended to dampen our enthusiasm for the fellowship, the orientation provided a valuable reality check.

One of the key concepts discussed during orientation was that the federal government (especially the legislative branch) was not so much designed to create laws, but rather to prevent “bad” laws from being enacted. Of course, what constitutes a “bad” law is a matter of opinion. That said, when one considers the multitude of procedural steps and potential stumbling blocks that a bill must clear in both chambers of Congress, with the president, and (once enacted) in the courts, it seems the founders of this country wanted the lawmaking process to be difficult. In the ideal case, laws that are enacted should be well thought out and have broad support—geographically, politically, and otherwise.

After considering this take on the founders’ intent, the term “gridlock in Washington” took on a completely new meaning for me. Out of the thousands of bills introduced in each Congress, only a few hundred actually become law. The vast majority of these have noncontroversial purposes; as the press like to point out, Congress is very effective at naming post offices and congratulating sports teams. When it comes to the meaty, complicated, and contentious issues of the day, the pace of progress slows considerably. Rather than seeing the lack of new laws or programs as the failure of government to do its job, one could argue that the system appears to

be working as designed, preventing the imposition of ill-conceived or very narrowly supported proposals.

That’s not to say that the system is working particularly well in addressing the nation’s needs. In my few months on the Hill, far more time seems to be spent on procedural maneuvers to delay or stop controversial bills for political reasons rather than to engage in substantive debate. As we saw with record-breaking frequency in 2007, controversial matters rarely moved forward in the Senate unless a 60-person, bipartisan majority voted to avoid a filibuster. These days, the mere threat of a filibuster or presidential veto is often enough to stop a bill dead in its tracks. I’m not a constitutional scholar by any means, but I don’t think this is what the founders had in mind.

So what does this all mean? Is Washington really gridlocked? Is it unreasonable to expect our elected leaders to make rapid progress on the problems we sent them to Washington to solve? If scoring political points has become the paramount concern, is there any real way to make headway on tough issues and ensure that sound science factors into the process? Could I, in good faith, encourage other scientists and engineers to devote more of their time to public policy matters given the challenges that now exist?

I certainly don’t have answers to all of these questions today, nor may I ever. Nonetheless, as I reflect on these first few months of the fellowship, I have found many reasons to remain optimistic that our government can tackle difficult issues and that the need for scientific input on policy has seldom been greater.

As we’ve seen with the recent congressional action on greenhouse gas emissions and climate change, progress can be made in this system if you have the right combination of patience, persistence, and creativity. Every day, lawmakers are developing new ideas to address the causes or impacts of climate change. A multitude of bills are working their way through congressional committees, and science is key in the evaluation of

the potential effectiveness of each proposal for reducing climate change and/or its impacts.

A prime example is the Lieberman-Warner America's Climate Security Act, which was approved by the Senate Committee on Environment and Public Works in December. This complex legislation, which would establish a cap-and-trade system for greenhouse emissions, is on track to be the first comprehensive climate change bill to be considered by the full Senate. You can bet there will be many attempts to amend this bill, and some changes will likely be incorporated in hopes of securing broad support sufficient to avoid a filibuster of the final measure.

Even if the Lieberman-Warner bill does not ultimately pass the Senate, I believe its progress illustrates that the Founders' system is, for the most part, working. Though the lawmaking process is imperfect and vulnerable to political maneuvering, it is only through intense scrutiny and improvement by compromise that we give ourselves the best chance of enacting good laws. From what I've seen thus far, there's hope for us yet.

*This manuscript is submitted for publication by Maria Honeycutt, 2007–2008 GSA–U.S. Geological Survey Congressional Science Fellow, with the understanding that the U.S. government is authorized to reproduce and distribute reprints for governmental use. The one-year fellowship is supported by GSA and by the U.S. Geological Survey, Department of the Interior, under Assistance Award No. 07HQGR0140. The views and conclusions contained in this document are those of the author and should not be interpreted as necessarily representing the official policies, either expressed or implied, of the U.S. government. Honeycutt can be reached at maria\_honeycutt@billnelson.senate.gov.*

## Cyberinfrastructure Summer Institute for Geoscientists

GEON (the Geosciences Network) will hold a week-long Cyberinfrastructure Summer Institute for Geoscientists (CSIG) from August 11-15, 2008 at the University of California, San Diego. The CSIG is designed to introduce geoscientists to commonly-used as well as emergent information technology (IT) tools. Topics to be covered include: an introduction to Geoinformatics; data integration challenges; data sharing portals and networks; remote-sensing data (including LiDAR); Service Oriented Architecture and Web Services; knowledge representation and ontologies; and visualization of 3D and 4D data.

Graduate students and Post Docs, as well as university faculty and instructors with the goal of promoting the development of curricula and courses in geoinformatics are highly encouraged to apply to this Institute.

The CSIG is made possible through funding provided by the NSF (<http://www.nsf.gov>).

Registration Deadline June 2, 2008. Information and Online Registration at <http://www.geongrid.org/CSIG08/>

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