

# Divide the power

## *Advantages of denying either party total control*

October 31, 2010|By Steve Chapman

Divided we stand, united we fall. I know, I've got the old adage backward. But when it comes to solving one of the biggest problems looming over the nation — the federal budget deficit — backward could be the best way to go.

We may soon find out. For the past two years, Democrats have controlled Congress as well as the presidency. With that dominance, they were able to pass a giant fiscal stimulus package and a major health insurance overhaul, among other rich items.

The deficit, which was gigantic under President George W. Bush, grew large enough to fill the Grand Canyon. For the foreseeable future, federal outlays are projected to remain at the highest level, as a share of the economy, since World War II.

But if the GOP captures one or both houses, as expected, the dynamic will change. We will be back to a government with power divided between the two parties.

Republicans, of course, have vowed to cut federal expenditures, a promise in accord with popular sentiment. Pollster Scott Rasmussen recently said their political comeback can be traced to one moment in the fight over President Barack Obama's fiscal stimulus plan — "when every Republican (in the House of Representatives) said they would oppose the stimulus package."

Now, by a 2-to-1 margin, he noted, "voters say they prefer a congressman who will reduce overall spending to one who promises to bring a 'fair share' of government to their congressional district."

That doesn't mean a Republican victory will actually lead to lower outlays. In the first place, GOP leaders show curiously little interest in identifying what programs they will slash or eliminate. Even if they can agree on some major cuts, they will have to persuade the president.

Another obstacle is that, during the campaign, both parties have taken the path of least pain. Robert Bixby, executive director of the budget watchdog group The Concord Coalition, told me, "Republicans are asking for a mandate not to raise taxes, and Democrats are asking for a mandate not to cut entitlements."

In fact, everyone has embraced the fantasy of maximum government at minimum cost. Democrats tout tax cuts for all but the rich. Republicans reject the administration's effort to squeeze modest savings out of Medicare.

Both parties pledge to uphold popular government benefits and send the bill to the taxpayers of tomorrow. No one wants to admit that most Americans will have to accept less from federal programs they value — and pay more for what they get.

Still, divided government offers tightwads grounds for hope. The biggest one is historical. William Niskanen of the libertarian Cato Institute, who headed the president's Council of Economic Advisers under Ronald Reagan, notes that over the past 60 years, federal spending has risen least when one party occupied the White House and the other had control of at least one house of Congress.

Why would that be? It can happen because the parties cooperate in attacking the deficit, as Democratic President Bill Clinton and Republican House Speaker Newt Gingrich did — producing the now-unimaginable feat of a budget surplus.

Or it can happen because they disagree on giant undertakings, leaving them to wither on the vine. Niskanen says that when one party has all the power, our leaders are more likely to enact a huge new entitlement (like Medicare under President Lyndon B. Johnson and the Medicare prescription drug benefit under George W. Bush) or plunge into an endless war on the other side of the planet (again, Johnson and Bush).

It seems neither party can help itself from going on benders. It needs the other party to lock up the liquor supply.

The framers of the Constitution split power among three branches of government so that each could keep the others from running amok. What James Madison and Co. didn't foresee was the rise of political parties that would often overcome this safeguard.

When one party has all the power, we have learned to our sorrow, Congress checks the president about as effectively as the levees protected New Orleans. It's different when each party has a share. Republicans, bless their hearts, love nothing better than riding herd on Democrats, and vice versa.

After all the angry charges and negative ads in this campaign, Americans may feel, with even more vehemence than usual, that they don't trust either party to exercise power responsibly. The only consolation is that with divided government, they don't have to.

*Steve Chapman is a member of the Tribune's editorial board and blogs at [chicagotribune.com/chapman](http://chicagotribune.com/chapman).*