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It's time for Congress to embrace its bipartisan legacy

By ROBERT WEINER
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Midland, Texas Mayor Jerry Morales, left, embraces Odessa, Texas Mayor David Turner following a press conference at the University of Texas Permian Basin on Sunday, Sept. 1, 2019 in Odessa, Texas. (Ryan Michalesko/TNS)

The weekend mass shootings near Odessa, Texas, have only amplified calls for an overhaul of our nation's gun laws. Last month, after horrific shooting incidents in El Paso, Texas and Dayton, Ohio, President Donald Trump urged Congress to work on gun legislation in a bipartisan fashion. "Now is the time to set destructive partisanship aside," he said, and suggested both "red flag" warning-signal laws and background checks "like we've never had before."

But with the current gridlock in Washington, it's hard to envision bipartisan anything — let alone gun legislation — passing Congress any time soon. It's even harder with the president adjusting his positions every couple of days. That raises the question: What more can be done to foster bipartisanship and big achievements in Congress?

The answer may be to look to history — and train members and staff in the findings. Lawmakers today are conditioned by party loyalty, without understanding the effective bipartisan congressional legacy that has shaped our current society. For example, the Social Security Act, the Age Discrimination in Employment Act and the Voting Rights Act passed both chambers by strong bipartisan margins. In years past, both parties came together to solve systemic issues facing the nation. This sort of across-the-aisle leadership has been absent in Washington for at least the last decade or so.

It's time for the speaker, the Senate majority leader and the House Administration and Senate Rules committees to instruct the Congressional Research Service to offer sessions to all members on how the two parties worked together in the past. Members should be educated on congressional leaders such as former House Aging Chairman Claude Pepper, who helped push for reforms to programs such as Social Security and abolishing mandatory retirement at 65. The Florida Democrat railed about making people wait longer and pay more to get Social Security, but he ultimately said, "There was no (political) alternative or the program would die."

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In 1983, Pepper and Speaker Tip O'Neill rolled up their sleeves and worked with President Ronald Reagan, Kansas Republican Sen. Bob Dole and New York Democratic Sen. Daniel Patrick Moynihan on a compromise to help save Social Security. The new law added solvency for 75 years.

Pepper also pushed for abolishing mandatory retirement at age 65 — in 1978 for federal workers and in 1986 for everyone else — with the help of two Republicans, Illinois Rep. Paul Findley and Iowa Sen. Chuck Grassley. The legislation was opposed by the Business Roundtable, a notable right-leaning interest group, and the AFL-CIO, a notable left-leaning organization. Both sides wanted more control over hiring, but due to the bills' overwhelming bipartisan support, the interest groups were powerless to stop them from passing both chambers.

Members used to understand that “conservative” and “liberal” were just labels and that governing was more important. When I was the House Aging Committee's chief of staff and a Democrat, Grassley said to me at a breakfast he'd invited me to, “I'm a conservative and you're a liberal, but we're friends and work well together.”

Members of Congress need these vital history lessons to remind them of past bipartisanship that has helped propel the nation forward. As Marcus Garvey once wrote, “A people without the knowledge of their past history, origin and culture is like a tree without roots.”

Lawmakers on Capitol Hill are currently rootless, unaware of how to break political gridlock, and hopelessly wishing the next election will give their party a government trifecta. This attitude has distorted American views on two-party governing. A Gallup poll from last fall found that more Americans favored single-party government (36 percent) than divided government (29 percent).

After the recent mass shooting tragedies, there couldn't be a better time to unite and embrace the bipartisan legacy left by leaders like Pepper, O'Neill, Dole and Grassley. The House Administration and Senate Rules committees should immediately instruct the clerk of the House and secretary of the Senate to have the Congressional Research Service incorporate these lessons into congressional orientation — and include current members and staffs too.

Robert Weiner was a White House spokesperson during the Clinton and George W. Bush administrations. He also served as spokesman for the House Government Operations Committee and former Reps. Ed Koch, Charles B. Rangel, John Conyers Jr. and Claude Pepper, and was chief of staff for the House Aging Committee under Pepper.