

Testimony of William A. Galston
Hearing on “Raising the Bar for Congress: Reform Proposals for the 21st Century”
U. S. Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs
March 14, 2012

Chairman Lieberman, Ranking Member Collins, members of the committee:

My name is William Galston. I am a senior fellow in Governance Studies at Brookings and one of the founders of No Labels. I am honored by your invitation and grateful for this opportunity to present my views on congressional reform.

I begin with a brief description of No Labels. We are a classic American grassroots organization—Democrats, Republicans, and Independents united in the determination to make our country better. We began fifteen months ago with a meeting that one thousand citizens representing all fifty states attended at their own expense. Since then, our membership has grown to nearly half a million. We have bipartisan teams of citizen leaders in every state and in all 435 congressional districts.

Our mission can be stated in a single sentence: *we want to help move our country from the old politics of point-scoring toward a new politics of problem-solving.*

A number of No Labels members are here today. As you can see, they are not carrying torches and pitchforks. They are worried but not angry, disappointed but still hopeful. They want a government that makes progress on the country’s real problems. They are not from Washington—and they are here to help.

No Labels is a movement that meets a distinctive moment in our history. Political scientists have confirmed what pundits, elected officials and citizens have long suspected: our party system is more divided than it used to be; indeed, to judge by voting patterns, more deeply divided than at any time since the 1890s. This has had consequences for the ability of government at every level—but especially at the national level—to reach agreement even on routine matters, let alone on the challenges that require our system to break new ground.

Robust debate on fundamentals is the life-blood of a healthy democracy—but not if that debate yields gridlock and recriminations. In the eyes of most citizens, regrettably, that is what has happened. As I am sure you know, trust in the federal government is near an all-time low, and public approval of Congress is even lower.

While some citizens may have lost confidence in the members of Congress as individuals, No Labels has not. We believe that our senators and representatives came to Washington to promote the common defense and general welfare and that they are frustrated by the obstacles they have encountered. In our view, our elected representatives are public-spirited individuals trapped in an increasingly obsolete and dysfunctional system of congressional rules and procedures designed for a very different era. The correct response, No Labels believes, is to fix the system.

Just last week, one of your colleagues, Sen. Olympia Snowe, stunned the political world by announcing that she would not seek a fourth term. She described a Senate that was no longer capable of finding common ground, and in an op-ed in the *Washington Post*, she said:

“I do not believe that, in the near term, the Senate can correct itself from within. It is by nature a political entity and, therefore, there must be a benefit to working across the aisle.” That benefit can come, she believes, only if the American people raise their voices and demonstrate their desire for a less polarized, more problem-solving brand of politics.

That is precisely what No Labels seeks to do.

Our focus this year is congressional reform. Our twelve-item agenda is summarized in this booklet, “Make Congress Work.” Its title expresses the judgment that an overwhelming majority of the American people has reached. It addresses three central elements of congressional dysfunction: hyper-polarization, gridlock, and the dwindling of productive discourse across party lines.

Now, it’s fair to ask: If congressional polarization reflects divisions in the country, how can procedural reforms make a difference? Here’s the answer: Although the American people are more divided than they used to be, they are less divided than are the political parties. This helps explain why so many citizens feel unrepresented and left out, and it suggests that by allowing their sentiments to find fuller expression, procedural reforms could help reduce polarization.

These reforms can also update obsolete procedures to take new evidence and changed circumstances into account. For example: not since 1996 has Congress completed work on its appropriations bills prior to the beginning of the new fiscal year. Whatever the reason, it is clear that the timetable of the 1974 Congressional Budget Act is not working as it was designed to. Our No Budget, No Pay proposal addresses this problem head-on. We can argue about whether it represents the best response. But if we do nothing, the problem will persist.

Some critics charge that our emphasis on rules with teeth is wrong in principle. Instead, they say, we should rely on our representatives’ best judgment and on that of their constituents. While I understand and respect that point of view, the father of our Constitution did not agree with it. James Madison argued that rules without enforcement mechanisms were mere “parchment barriers,” destined to fail. That’s why we need what he called “auxiliary precautions”—that is, enforcement mechanisms. He was right two centuries ago. And he is still right today.

Our Founders established a representative system. They did not believe in government by plebiscite, and neither does No Labels. Nonetheless, the sentiments of the people are hardly irrelevant. An independent poll we commissioned after shaping our congressional reform agenda found that every item enjoys super-majority support. The least popular

proposal is supported by 74 percent of the people; the most popular, by 88 percent. These findings suggest that there is a large untapped demand for congressional reforms—especially when the people can understand them and believe that they would make a difference.

In short, we are at one of those junctures in American history when good government and good politics coincide. For your sake and for the country's, we urge you to seize this moment—by moving to a mark-up for No Budget, No Pay and by giving serious attention to a broader range of congressional reforms.

Thank you very much, and I will try to address any questions you may have.