

BOX 6.3 Wrapping Up the Senate's Day

It took just a few minutes for the Senate to act on some 150 nominations and a handful of bills early in the morning of November 21 as work wound down for the session. But getting to that point was a long, long process.

"It can consume a lot of time," said Secretary of the Majority David Schiappa.

Each nomination and measure Majority Leader Bill Frist, R-Tenn., rattled off for final action required hours, even days, of behind-the-scenes work by the majority and minority cloakrooms. Every senator's office had to be contacted to win agreement. Objections led to negotiations, trades, and promises as Senate leaders and cloakroom staff sorted out the bills individually.

Every day when Congress is in session, the majority and minority cloakrooms update the inventory of the legislation awaiting floor action. Such measures are known as "hotlined" bills, and Senate offices learn which ones they are from an actual telephone hotline. E-mail alerts are also sent to Senate offices.

"We may be seeking unanimous consent for the following bills," those calls customarily begin. After that, according to interviews with people involved in the process, the outcome relies on a combination of moxie and modern-day electronics.

Staff assistants e-mail hotline lists to appropriate legislative staff. Staff, in turn, must make hasty evaluations of whether their bosses might have a problem with or a strategic reason to try to slow down anything on the list.

Senators' staffs, bill sponsors, and cloakroom personnel then start negotiating. Sometimes, the leadership intervenes. Bills that remain problematic are dropped from the list of measures that can be passed by voice vote—without most senators present—via a unanimous consent request.

The wrap-up list typically is dominated by Post Office namings, congratulatory resolutions, and other measure that are noteworthy only in one locality.