



## Why Washington D.C. is Broken - And How It Can be Fixed

**Thomas E. Mann**, University of California-Berkeley

Americans are disgusted by much of what they see in Washington DC. Congress is deadlocked, and the major political parties are ideologically polarized and engaged in a permanent state of war. Problem solving and compromise have given way to pitched doctrinal battles and obstruction at any cost. Even the perilous state of the economy has been insufficient to break the political stalemate. As the public loses faith in the government's capacity to solve pressing problems, the U.S. Congress garners the lowest approval ratings in polling history.

What has gone wrong? Standard diagnoses don't capture the driving forces. We cannot make improvements until we better comprehend why the present situation is so dysfunctional.

### The Constitutional System Meets a New Partisan Extremism

Drawing on years of analyzing developments in Congress and trends in national politics, Norm Ornstein and I have concluded that two dysfunctions are central to the current impasse:

- The first is a mismatch between the checks and balances built into U.S. government and the extreme polarization now separating the two major political parties. By constitutional design, U.S. policymaking moves slowly; the president cannot direct Congress and legislators use separate procedures in the House and Senate. In the past, compromise solutions to major challenges eventually emerged – usually when at least some legislators worked across party lines. But recently the parties have moved apart ideologically. Leaders crack the whip and fewer members – especially Republicans – are willing to compromise.
- Second, one of the two major political parties, the Republican Party, has become the home for ideologically extreme insurgents who shun conventionally understood facts, evidence, and science, and scorn the very idea of working out compromises with a legitimate political opposition. This radicalized GOP is now willing to use all the levers in the constitutional system to produce delay and deadlock.

From the time of the Civil Rights revolutions in the 1960s into the 1980s, partisan polarization was a two-sided affair, as southern conservatives moved into the Republican Party and the Democratic Party became more exclusively the home of liberals and moderates mostly outside the South. But in recent decades, the GOP has moved ever further to the right – far beyond the mid-point of public opinion. First, anti-tax forces gained leverage, and more recently insurgents taking extreme stands on a full array of issues have moved in.

America's pundits and journalists have been slow to recognize the current lethal combination of one-sided partisan extremism and the unlimited use of institutional levers available to create deadlock in Washington DC. Many journalists and other observers of U.S. politics admirably embrace professional norms of fairness

and balance and do not want to be perceived as “taking sides” in partisan disputes. But when reality is imbalanced, it does not help public understanding or the search for remedies to ignore the facts.

## Fixing the Party System and Reforming Governance

To get beyond the present impasse, Americans will need to support reforms in both the party system and our governing arrangements. To begin with the former, parties play a vital role in assembling coalitions and clarifying public issues for voters, so we should not pretend that formless “bipartisanship” is the answer to every difficulty. But we should look for ways to encourage party-identified officeholders to accept one another’s legitimacy and be open to deliberation and bargaining. Three kinds of reform might help:

- Expanding the electorate in primary as well as general elections, so moderate-minded voters gain greater sway. Simplified voter registration; more convenient elections days and times; even mandatory voting – all could enlarge the electorate and lead to the election of more representative officeholders.
- Further boost the leverage of moderates by reducing the gerrymandering of legislative districts, holding primary elections open to all citizens not just partisans, and experimenting with some forms of proportional representation.
- Change the rules for funding campaigns to require public transparency for all independent fundraising organizations and encourage candidates to raise resources from large numbers of small donors.

As for reforming governance institutions, the temptation is to think big, because the problems are so large and vexing. But wholesale restructuring through Constitutional amendments is a long-term task at best, and it is fraught with daunting obstacles and the possibility of deleterious unintended consequences. Wiser and more feasible to make the following modest adjustments:

- To restore some semblance of majority rule in the Senate, we could mandate fast-track action to up or down votes on presidential nominations that have cleared committees, and require forty-one votes to continue debate instead of sixty votes to end it, properly testing the commitment of those seeking to prevent action.
- A second approach to institutional reform involves delegating certain kinds of delicate and recurrent decisions to bodies such as the Independent Payment Advisory Board established in 2010 as part of the Affordable Care Act, with the understanding that Congress can review and reject board decisions.

Beyond electoral and institutional reforms, the American public also has a vital role to play. Together, thoughtful citizens, responsible journalists, and leaders in the private, nonprofit, and public sectors all have a responsibility to tell it like it is and hold the true culprits to account. Undifferentiated disgust with Washington and government in general has ironically given extremists a pass to double down, exacerbating current dysfunctions. Too often, voters and commentators have unintentionally enabled irresponsible behavior, rather than choosing and applauding representatives willing to work together to address pressing national challenges.

**Read more in Thomas E. Mann and Norman J. Ornstein, *It’s Even Worse than It Looks: How the American Constitutional System Collided with the New Politics of Extremism* (Basic Books, 2012).**