

# The Oregonian

## Washington's partisan politics turn adversaries into enemies

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By Charles Pope, The Oregonian

WASHINGTON – Even before "snowmageddon" buried Capitol Hill last week, things in Congress had bogged down.

A combination of partisan politics, the election season and unusually strong party unity constructed a sturdy barrier to movement on major issues such as health care reform, a new jobs bill, regulating the financial industry and even confirming mid-level nominations.

Work is especially slow in the Senate, where Sen. Ron Wyden, D-Ore., calls current conditions "corrosive."

Freshman Sen. Jeff Merkley, D-Ore., says the normally plodding chamber has achieved "a level of dysfunction" that's far different from what he experienced as speaker of the Oregon House or what he found in Washington as a Senate intern in the 1970s and 1980s. Relationships between senators are "shallow" now, Merkley said, noting that many senators go home for the weekend and rarely socialize with people from the other party.

In this climate of sometimes vicious animosity, efforts to break the gridlock meet suspicion and dismissal.

Last week, Sens. Tom Harkin, D-Iowa, and Jeanne Shaheen, D-N.H., unveiled a proposal that would slowly and gradually rein in filibusters, the cherished right of every senator to stall legislation. The goal, they said, was to maintain the mechanism for principled disagreement while improving the chance that something -- anything -- can move in reasonable time.

Harkin and Shaheen prompted a burst of bipartisan opposition that was both ironic and telling: Majority Leader Harry Reid of Nevada said the change could only pass with a 67-vote majority, so it wouldn't, and Republican leader Mitch McConnell of Kentucky labeled the effort a "dumb idea."

Meanwhile, President Barack Obama moved to break the health care gridlock by inviting Republicans to meet with him Feb. 25.

The public is "tired of every day being Election Day in Washington," Obama told reporters a week ago. "And at this critical time in our country, the people who sent us here expect a seriousness of purpose that transcends petty politics."

Good luck.

In response to Obama's request, House Republican Leader John Boehner and his deputy, Rep. Eric Cantor, sent a letter to the White House outlining conditions. "If the starting point for this meeting is the job-killing bills the American people have already soundly rejected, Republicans would rightly be reluctant to participate," they wrote.

And in response to that jab, the liberal interest group MoveOn.org released a statement calling the letter a "GOP ransom note."

How did we get to this point, where even a request for a meeting becomes the subject of a media campaign that includes twitter feeds and saturation cable coverage? And more importantly, how do we break the cycle that has soured many Americans on Congress and the ability of government to serve their needs?

Norman Ornstein, a senior fellow at the American Enterprise Institute in Washington and an acknowledged authority on Congress, says the problem is more than just partisanship.

Partisanship, he says, is built into the institution and is an accepted, even necessary, feature of its success.

"What's different about what we have now is... we've really gone from viewing the other side as simply adversaries to enemies," he said, noting that President Ronald Reagan would fiercely resist legislation backed by Democratic Speaker Tip O'Neil, then have drinks once the battle was over.

"The problem is not the rules as much as the culture," he said. In contrast to the past, lawmakers -- and especially Republicans -- have voted for bills in committee only to oppose the same legislation later. Democrats were incensed two weeks ago when a bill to create a commission to find ways to reduce the deficit was defeated even though seven Republicans had co-sponsored it. None voted for it when it came to the Senate floor.

### **Partisan history of Congress: canes, fists and lost wigs**

Congress has always been a partisan place. Accounts from the Senate Historical Office and the Office of the Historian, U.S. House of Representatives record just how partisan:

**1798:** On Jan. 30, Sen. Matthew Lyon, a Vermont Republican, implied that Connecticut Federalists, including Sen. Roger Griswold, were corrupt. Griswold responded by calling Lyon a coward, which led Lyon to spit in Griswold's face. A motion to expel Lyon from the Senate failed. On Feb. 15, Griswold retaliated on the Senate floor, striking Lyon on the head with a heavy wooden cane. Lyon grabbed two hot tongs from the fireplace but was disarmed by Griswold. The two kept fighting until they were separated.

**1832:** In a March debate, Sen. William Stanberry, R-Ohio, took to the floor of the House of Representatives and accused Sam Houston, then former governor of Tennessee, of corruption in his dealings with the Cherokee. In April, during a trip to Washington, Houston confronted Stanberry on Pennsylvania Avenue and began beating him. Stanberry drew a pistol and attempted to shoot Houston, but the gun misfired.

**1856:** On May 19, 1856, Sen. Charles Sumner, R-Mass., made a speech on the Senate floor regarding slavery which, in part, attacked South Carolina Rep. Andrew Butler, a Democrat. Three days later Rep. Preston Brooks, a close ally of Butler, entered the Senate and struck Sumner repeatedly with a cane. The attack lasted a full minute, causing Sumner to bleed severely and almost die.

**1858:** In a heated House debate over whether Kansas would be admitted as a free or slave state, two members of the House, Laurence Keitt of South Carolina and Galusha Grow of Pennsylvania, exchanged insults. They rushed at each other and started fighting. Soon the entire chamber was in bedlam with more than 50 members fighting or wrestling on the floor. The Sergeant at Arms tried to stop the fight and the Speaker of the House banged his gavel -- to no avail. The incident ended when one brawler grabbed the hair of William Barksdale of Mississippi only to discover that he had pulled off Barksdale's wig.

**1890:** Speaker Thomas B. Reed of Massachusetts was the leader of the Republicans, who had a narrow majority. At the time, members were required to vote to be counted for a quorum. The House could not convene without a quorum and Democrats exploited the rule to cause problems. Reed revolutionized House rules by counting members who were in the chamber whether they voted or not, outraging the Democrats. They shouted at the Speaker that he couldn't count them just because they were there. Some members tried to hide under their desks so Reed could not see them. Others tried to leave, but Reed ordered the doors of the chamber locked.

**1902:** Sens. Ben Tillman and John McLaurin were both South Carolina Democrats and close allies until Tillman accused McLaurin of giving in to "improper influences." McLaurin took to the Senate floor on February 22, 1902, and accused Tillman of a "deliberate lie". Tillman then turned around and punched McLaurin in the face. The two were separated moments later.

**1964:** Sen. Strom Thurmond, R-S.C., got into a fistfight with Sen. Ralph Yarborough, D-Texas, after Yarborough tried to drag Thurmond to his committee seat to vote on Civil Rights legislation.

**1995:** As Sen. John McCain, R-Ariz., read his opening statement during a meeting of the Armed Services Committee, Chairman Strom Thurmond asked McCain if he was almost finished. McCain ignored Thurmond and continued reading. McCain later confronted Thurmond on the Senate floor. A scuffle ensued but no punches were thrown.

-- *Charles Pope*

Experts say the culture and the gridlock are reinforced by the recent tendency of both parties to vote as a bloc.

"Party discipline has increased," Senate Historian Donald A. Ritchie said in an interview. " In the 1970s, the two parties each had very strong liberal and conservative wings" that

forced compromise and opened paths to passage.

Back then, defections were common and expected. Oregon Democratic Sen. Wayne Morse, he noted, was famous for breaking frequently with his leadership. At the same time, Oregon Republican Sen. Mark Hatfield "would rarely vote with the Goldwater wing of the Republican Party."

While Republicans have most often raised objections and procedural barriers, Democrats do it as well.

Only last week, a bi-partisan \$85 billion jobs bill written by Sens. Max Baucus, D-Mont., and Charles Grassley, R-Iowa, received a warm reception from the White House. But Reid splashed cold water on the bill and offered a separate \$15 billion proposal that even some Democrats disliked.

"Senator Reid's announcement sends a message that he wants to go partisan and blame Republicans, when Senator Grassley and others were trying to find common ground on solutions to help get the economy back on track and people back to work," Grassley spokeswoman Jill Kozeny said Thursday.

By some measures, today's partisanship is tame. In times past, there were numerous instances where disagreements in the House and Senate floor escalated to fistfights and even firearms. More recently, the blows have been rhetorical but no less publicized.

In 2004, a brief argument on the Senate floor between then-Vice President Dick Cheney and a senior Democratic senator, Patrick Leahy of Vermont, led Cheney to tell Leahy, obscenely, what to do with himself.

And last year Rep. Joe Wilson, R-S.C., became famous for blurting out "you lie" at Obama while the president was addressing a joint session of Congress. House Democrats censured Wilson because his outburst was a breach of decorum and that "it made the institution look bad." Wilson had privately apologized to Obama, but that was not enough for the Democrats.

Despite the difficult Senate environment, Wyden and Merkley both insist they want to work with Republicans whenever possible.

The "quarreling and bickering" is damaging, Wyden said. "That's not what Americans and Oregonians want." He noted his successful deal for managing Oregon's eastside forests, his health care proposal that -- though unsuccessful -- had seven Republican co-sponsors, and his ongoing efforts to revise the tax code, which he hopes will draw some Republican support.

"People know it's easier to burn the barn down and it's harder to build them."

-- Charles Pope