

Politics in America

What's gone wrong in Washington?

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American politics seems unusually bogged down at present. Blame Barack Obama more than the system

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THIS week Evan Bayh, a senator from Indiana who nearly became Barack Obama's vice-president, said he was retiring from the Senate, blaming the inability of Congress to get things done. Cynics think Mr Bayh was also worried about being beaten in November (though he was ahead in the polls). Yet the idea that America's democracy is broken, unable to fix the country's problems and condemned to impotent partisan warfare, has gained a lot of support lately (see [article](#)).

Certainly the system looks dysfunctional. Although a Democratic president is in the White House and Democrats control both House and Senate, Mr Obama has been unable to enact health-care reform, a Democratic goal for many decades. His cap-and-trade bill to reduce carbon emissions has passed the House but languishes in the Senate. Now a bill to boost job-creation is stuck there as well. Nor is it just a question of a governing party failing to get its way. Washington seems incapable of fixing America's deeper problems. Democrats and Republicans may disagree about climate change and health, but nobody thinks that America can ignore the federal deficit, already 10% of GDP and with a generation of baby-boomers just about to retire. Yet an attempt to set up a bipartisan deficit-reduction commission has recently collapsed—again.

This, argue the critics, is what happens when a mere 41 senators (in a 100-strong chamber) can filibuster a bill to death; when states like Wyoming (population: 500,000) have the same clout in the Senate as California (37m), so that senators representing less than 11% of the population can block bills; when, thanks to gerrymandering, many congressional seats are immune from competitive elections; when hateful bloggers and talk-radio hosts shoot down any hint of compromise; when a tide of lobbying cash corrupts everything. And this dysfunctionality matters far beyond America's shores. A few years ago only Chinese bureaucrats dared suggest that Beijing's autocratic system of government was superior. Nowadays there is no shortage of leaders from emerging countries, or even prominent American businesspeople, who privately sing the praises of a system that can make decisions swiftly.

It's alright, Abe

We disagree. Washington has its faults, some of which could easily be fixed. But much of the current fuss forgets the purpose of American government; and it lets current politicians (Mr Obama in particular) off the hook.

To begin with, the critics exaggerate their case. It is simply not true to say that nothing can get through Congress. Look at the current financial crisis. The huge TARP bill, which set up a fund to save America's banks, passed, even though it came at the end of George Bush's presidency. The stimulus bill, a \$787 billion two-year package, made it through within a month of Mr Obama taking office. The Democrats have also passed a long list of lesser bills, from investments in green technology to making it easier for women to sue for sex discrimination.

A criticism with more weight is that American government is good at solving acute problems (like averting a Depression) but less good at confronting chronic ones (like the burden of entitlements). Yet even this can be overstated. Mr Bush failed to reform pensions, but he did push through No Child Left Behind, the biggest change to schools for a generation. Bill Clinton reformed welfare. The system, in other words, can work, even if it does not always do so. (That is hardly unusual anywhere: for all its speed in authorising power stations, China has hardly made a success of health care lately.) On the biggest worry of all, the budget, it may well take a crisis to force action, but Americans have wrestled down huge deficits before.

America's political structure was designed to make legislation at the federal level difficult, not easy. Its founders believed that a country the size of America is best governed locally, not nationally. True to this picture, several states have pushed forward with health-care reform. The Senate, much ridiculed for antique practices like the filibuster and the cloture vote, was expressly designed as a "cooling" chamber, where bills might indeed die unless they commanded broad support.

Broad support from the voters is something that both the health bill and the cap-and-trade bill clearly lack. Democrats could have a health bill tomorrow if the House passed the Senate version. Mr Obama could pass a lot of green regulation by executive order. It is not so much that America is ungovernable, as that Mr Obama has done a lousy job of winning over Republicans and independents to the causes he favours. If, instead of handing over health care to his party's left wing, he had lived up to his promise to be a bipartisan president and courted conservatives by offering, say, reform of the tort system, he might have got health care through; by giving ground on nuclear power, he may now stand a chance of getting a climate bill. Once Mr Clinton learned the advantages of co-operating with the Republicans, the country was governed better.

Redistricting the redistricters

So the basic system works; but that is no excuse for ignoring areas where it could be reformed. In the House the main outrage is gerrymandering. Tortuously shaped "safe" Republican and Democratic seats mean that the real battles are fought among party activists for their party's nomination. This leads candidates to pander to extremes, and lessens the chances of bipartisan co-operation. An independent commission, already in existence in some states, would take out much of the sting. In the Senate the filibuster is used too often, in part because it is too easy. Senators who want to talk out a bill ought to be obliged to do just that, not rely on a simple procedural vote: voters could then see exactly who was obstructing what.

These defects and others should be corrected. But even if they are not, they do not add up to a system that is as broken as people now claim. American democracy has its peaks and troughs; attempts to reform it dramatically, such as California's initiative craze, have a mixed history, to put it mildly. Rather than regretting how the Republicans in Congress have behaved, Mr Obama should look harder at his own use of his presidential power.