
REMAPPING DEBATE

Asking "Why" and "Why Not"

For a handful of lawmakers on Capitol Hill, some deals are too costly

Story Repair | By Mike Alberti | Legislation

Oct. 12, 2011 — In the midst of last summer’s debate over raising the debt ceiling, President Obama delivered a televised [address](#) to the nation in which he urged members of Congress to “put politics aside” and agree on a “fair compromise.” The American people, the President said, are “fed up with a town where compromise has become a dirty word.”

WHAT IS STORY REPAIR?

In this feature, we select a story that appeared in one or more major news outlets and try to show how a different set of inquiries or observations could have produced a more illuminating article.

For repair this week: [“Apocalypse on Capitol Hill: Lawmakers who love to vote no”](#) (Washington Post, Oct. 4).

The premise of the story is that compromise — not, say, thoughtful lawmaking — is “the very thing Congress was built to do,” and that those representatives who fail to fall in line are, at best, “hard left” and “hard right” oddballs. The ideal, apparently, are those past Congresses where “middle-of-the-road lawmakers were wooed and won.”

This repair does not grapple with another premise of the Post story: that a failure to have raised the debt ceiling or to have averted government shutdowns would have been the catastrophes so many said they would be. It also does not address the reasons why, in the two years that Democrats controlled both houses of Congress and the White House, the majority was so eager to accept compromise in a way very different from how a parliamentary majority would normally proceed.

Finally, the repair does not focus on the peculiar methodology by which the Post selected its “apocalypse causus,” a method that discounted larger numbers of representatives who voted “no” on almost all of the votes being evaluated.

— *Editor*

According to Ross Baker, a political scientist and congressional historian at Rutgers University, Obama’s remarks were indicative of a far-reaching tendency in American political life: imagining the idea of compromise as noble and right, no matter what a specific compromise might entail.

“I think that the assumption is that when there’s conflict any compromise is good,” Baker said. “It’s strange to hear people talk about compromise as inherently valuable, as an end in itself, rather than a means to an end.”

Different visions

In the House of Representatives, at least some lawmakers agree with Baker that compromise is valuable only if the end result reflects one’s vision for the country.

By voting against the passage of several high-profile pieces of legislation — [two votes](#) on the fiscal year 2011 budget, on [raising the debt ceiling](#), and more recently, on [three short-term spending bills](#) to keep the government funded through mid-November — these legislators signaled that

they will not compromise for compromise's sake. Remapping Debate contacted the offices of the 20 members of Congress who voted against all of those bills to ask why those specific compromises were unacceptable to them.

For many Democrats, the agreements that were ultimately passed in each case represented an abandonment of the basic principles on which they had been elected. 108 House Democrats voted against a bill in April that avoided a shutdown of the federal government, rejecting the bill's \$38 billion in annual spending cuts. The cuts reduced funding for [long-valued programs](#) such as the Women Infants and Children (WIC) program, which provides food and baby formula to low-income families, as well for enforcement agencies like the Environmental Protection Agency, which saw its budget [reduced by 16 percent](#). The final legislation also did not include any new revenue measures to offset the cuts, an element which many Democrats had pushed for.

In a [statement](#) released before the vote, Rep. John Lewis (D-Ga.) said that he could not vote for the bill in good conscience.

“Democrats are fighting for fairness in budget cuts, not those that rob from the middle class and the poor and require no sacrifice from the rich,” he said. “There will be cuts, but the Republicans want to change the way Americans live. That is a betrayal of Americans’ trust.”

There were other principles at play for Democrats as well. Spokespeople for Reps. Dennis Kucinich (D-Ohio) and Barbara Lee (D-Calif.) explained to Remapping Debate that both lawmakers had voted against the budget bill because it included funding for foreign wars, which they both vehemently oppose.

More than 50 Republicans also voted against the bill. For many of them, the spending cuts simply did not go far enough. “While these cuts are clearly a step in the right direction, they were simply not bold or serious enough,” said Rep. Joe Walsh (R-Ill.), in a [statement](#) after the vote. “There are only a few times in our country’s history when we have the opportunity to dramatically redirect where our country is heading. This is one of the times.”

According to Baker, we should not be surprised that compromise has been so hard in coming, given the very different visions that lawmakers have for the country.

“The basis of a compromise has to be mutual advantage,” he said. “It’s very difficult to identify right now what the mutual advantage is. You need to have a meeting of the minds and right now the minds are simply not meeting.”

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— House Democratic staffer

“A line in the sand”

The conflict was replayed again in August, when Congress voted on a bill to raise the country’s debt limit while [cutting more than \\$2.1 trillion of federal spending](#) over 10 years. Again, Republicans argued that the cuts did not go far enough.

In a statement to Remapping Debate, Representative Justin Amash (R-Mich.) indicated that, as far as spending cuts are concerned, he would only be willing to compromise with Democrats if the deal included either much farther-reaching cuts, or an [amendment](#) to the constitution that would limit how much the federal government can spend annually.

“Short-term political deals are not real compromise,” Amash said. “Real compromise requires each side to take serious steps to address the government’s fiscal crisis.”

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— Republican
Representative Joe Walsh
on the FY 2011 budget vote

Jamie Dickerman, press secretary for Representative Steve Pearce (R-N.M.), agreed. “People already have a cynical view of politicians,” she said. “If no politician followed through with their word or principles then policy would flitter in the wind and there would be no long term solutions to our long term problems.”

For their part, Democrats in the House were evenly divided on that bill, with 95 voting for it and 95 against. Many of those voting against the legislation again expressed dismay at the extent of the budget cuts.

But several House Democrats have pointed out that there is no substantive reason why any spending measures should be attached to debt ceiling bill. Ilan Kayatsky, a spokesperson for Representative Jerrold Nadler’s (D-N.Y.) office, said that the Congressman had voted against the bill because voting for it amounted to “negotiating with hostage-takers.”

According to Jennifer Porter Gore, communications director for Representative Keith Ellison (D-Minn.), co-chair of the Congressional Progressive Caucus, Ellison believes that the consequences of any of these bills not passing have to be weighed against the consequences of continuously giving in to the demand of “hostage takers.”

The Tea Party caucus in the House, Gore said, “expects everyone else to just capitulate to their demands. At some point you have to draw a line in the sand on the other side, you have to pull the other way. Otherwise, you’re not really representing the people who sent you here.”

A troubled history

According to Baker, in the current political debate, compromise tends to be somewhat idealized, while historically, the results of compromises or “grand bargains” have been quite mixed.

“There are examples of compromises that we look back on now and say, ‘It’s good thing that happened,’” Baker said. “But history is replete with examples of compromises that basically betrayed fundamental principles.”

For example, he said, there was the Compromise of 1820, through which Missouri got to be established as a slave state, and the balance of the Louisiana Purchase not yet incorporated as states were divided between slave and free territories at the 36° 30’ latitude line.

Baker also referenced the Compromise of 1877, also known as the “Corrupt Bargain,” in which Rutherford Hayes was proclaimed the winner of a contested presidential election on the informal understanding that he would remove all federal troops that had been enforcing the rights of former slaves from South Carolina, Florida and Louisiana, thereby effectively ending the Reconstruction Era.

More recently, Baker said, came the long period in Washington, ending only in the 1960s, where Southern opposition to national civil rights legislation was not seriously challenged.

“If all of Congress’s major compromises over the history of the country were tallied up,” Baker said, “I think we might see that most of them actually made things worse.”

Many compromises that are hailed as victories at the time are later seen as “kicking the can down the road, or setting up dangerous precedents,” Baker said.

Regarding the compromise over the debt ceiling this summer, Baker said that only time will tell whether this proves to be another failure. “If the Republicans take this victory and use it as a precedent to demand spending cuts every time a vital piece of legislation comes to the floor, I think Democrats may look back on this [deal] and regret it,” he said.

Conflicting pressures

Steven Smith, a congressional historian at Washington University in St. Louis, said that lawmakers have long been faced with conflicting pressures as to whether to adhere to their principles (or their campaign promises) or to go along with what their leaders and most of their colleagues say is the best deal that can be gotten as a practical matter.

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“In some ways, it’s an effect of the way our political institutions are set up,” he said. On the other hand, Smith added, there have been numerous examples in American history of elected officials bucking the party leadership to vote their conscience and reject the compromise that had been tendered.

“Most of the major social movements in American life — from the populist movement to the progressive movement to civil rights activists to the Tea Party movement — have succeeded when a few people in Congress proclaim that they’re not going to compromise on their principles.”

Other democracies do it differently

According to Smith, the current situation in the United States stands in sharp contrast to many parliamentary systems, where the majority party has full control of the both the legislative and executive branches of government. Smith said that compromise is less common in parliamentary systems.

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“The majority party is much more free to pursue its values,” he said. A commonly cited example of a parliamentary majority enacting its platform is the Conservative Party that controlled the British Parliament from 1979 to 1997, enacting a series of free-market reforms, especially under the influence of Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher (Thatcher was replaced by her Conservative colleague John Major in 1991). In the 1997 election, the Labor party swept aside the Conservatives in a [landslide vote](#) that was [largely seen](#) as broad public rejection of those policies.

In the American system, which is more susceptible to having a divided government, there are more opportunities for gridlock, Smith said.

When the attitudes of elected officials are too disparate to be reconciled, “there is more onus on the public to weigh the arguments and choose,” Smith said.

Jennifer Porter Gore of Representative Ellison’s office said that the Congressman agreed with that statement. “He has said repeatedly that elections have consequences,” Gore said. “He was elected to uphold certain principles. His constituents did not send him here to vote for anything, just to go along to get along.”

This content originally appeared at <http://remappingdebate.org/article/handful-lawmakers-capitol-hill-some-deals-are-too-costly>