

Congress no longer makes sweeping bipartisan legislation. An account of the phenomenon.

“The president believes that now is the moment to rise above that cynicism and show the American people that we can still do Big Things.”

—White House spokesman Dan Pfeiffer, on the debt-ceiling negotiations, July 9, 2011

The debt-ceiling stalemate is a perfect microcosm of Washington’s inability to do the Big Things: deficit reduction, economic growth, tax reform, energy, immigration, and transportation. “I think anyone who understands what the country needs right now—and, for that matter, what the institution needs in terms of being able to rise to the challenge and maintain its legitimacy—has to be worried about this,” said Rep. David Price, D-N.C., a former professor and a congressional scholar. “People seem to have concluded around here that we can’t do anything. Not just big things.” The collapse of President Obama’s “grand bargain” for deficit reduction drove the point home.

But this is only the latest example of how hard it has become in recent years for Congress to enact ambitious bills with buy-in from both sides. Major legislation can still advance when one party controls all levers of government, which is how Democrats moved the stimulus, health care, and financial-regulatory bills. That’s also how House Republicans during the Bush era enacted tax cuts, the prescription-drug bill, and the Central American Free Trade Agreement. And lawmakers still work across the aisle on smaller-bore problems, particularly when it suits their interests, as they may do this year on, say, free trade or education reauthorization. But compromise on the Big Things—even when members agree on the need to tackle them—has become exceedingly rare.

Presidents still urge lawmakers to move beyond partisan differences and aim high, as George W. Bush did with comprehensive immigration reform in his second term. But after three failed attempts between 2005 and 2007, Congress gave up on any ambitious reform that might address the estimated 12 million undocumented immigrants in the United States. That’s because the issue eventually threatened to split the Republican Party; even Sen. John McCain R-Ariz., who authored one of the compromise measures, had to abandon the issue.

Something similar happened with sweeping energy reform. Experts are nearly unanimous about the threat of global warming, and just a few years ago, many Republicans professed a belief in

anthropogenic climate change; some even supported cap-and-trade measures to limit greenhouse gasses. Yet when the Democratic House passed a climate-change bill in 2009, it died in the Senate. Congress has done nothing to answer Obama's call, during his State of the Union this year, for a "Sputnik moment" on clean energy and electric cars.

Even when lawmakers are able to compromise for a Big Thing, as they did on the No Child Left Behind Act in 2001, they have suffered buyer's remorse. In the decade since, conservatives have distanced themselves from the law, citing federal overreach, and Democrats have complained about insufficient funding, leaving the education reform act with a muddled legacy. The last great unadulterated bipartisan effort was the 1997 budget deal crafted by President Clinton and congressional Republicans.

Still, members of Congress are not ready to concede that Big Things are impossible. Tea party candidates charged into office with an ambitious agenda to reduce the size of the federal government, overhaul the tax code, reform the housing market, and repeal the president's health care law. And Democrats still hope to enact energy and tech-innovation bills when they have the power.

But the realization that Congress is hamstrung has finally begun to take hold. A House subcommittee hearing this week on reforming mortgage lenders Fannie Mae and Freddie Mac unleashed a venting session by lawmakers frustrated that a series of piecemeal bills (something Congress is actually capable of doing) is taking precedence over a comprehensive overhaul for the government-sponsored enterprises (something that the White House, with bigger fish to fry, is ignoring right now). **"Will there not be a hearing on any of these bills?" asked a frustrated Rep. John Campbell, R-Calif., about three comprehensive proposals, one of which he coauthored.**

Rep. John Mica, R-Fla., holds what used to be one of the most enviable perches in Congress: chairman of the House Transportation and Infrastructure Committee and, therefore, the driver of the highway bill—which was among the most popular, bipartisan pieces of legislation. But his blueprint for a \$230 billion, six-year reauthorization, unveiled earlier this month, is far less ambitious than previous iterations. Mica's plan reflects the fiscal and political realities more than the policy needs. (The American Society of Civil Engineers currently gives the nation's infrastructure system a D grade and argues that the U.S. needs to invest \$2.2 trillion.) Democrats have rejected Mica's proposal—less than half of the \$556 billion that the president requested—as a job-killer. Even GOP leaders haven't scheduled floor time for the bill yet, in part because, modest as it is, the legislation still spends government money rather than cutting it.

Conventional wisdom has long held that divided government is better suited to solving the nation's big problems, because it represents a broader spectrum of interests and can force competing camps to compromise. But in today's political climate, divided government is creating an atmosphere of perpetual gridlock, raising questions about Washington's ability to keep the lights on, let alone solve the Big Things.