

Guest Opinion: The sorry, stagnant state of local and national politics



by Chris Vance
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Despite pressing problems, lawmakers in both Washingtons refuse to pull together and get something done. Credit: [Flickr user Flazingo Photos](#)

This week we will pass the midway point in the legislature's first 30 day special session. In Washington, DC, we are approaching the midpoint in Congress's legislative calendar. As the partisan gridlock thickens and hardens every day, Olympia looks more and more like DC. The similarities between the political situations in our state and federal capitols are becoming more striking, and discouraging, as time goes on.

In Washington, DC, Republicans and Democrats face a long term budget crisis in which the debt is [approaching \\$20 trillion](#) and our two most important federal domestic programs, Social Security and Medicare, must be reformed or [face insolvency](#) within 20 years.

Republicans and Democrats in Congress know this is true, but they can't muster the political will to compromise with each other and do anything about it.

In 2010, President Obama created the bipartisan [Simpson-Bowles Commission](#) to recommend a plan to reform entitlements and bring down the debt through a

combination of spending cuts and revenue increases. President Obama refused to support the Simpson-Bowles plan, and Congress chose not follow it.

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Congress did, however, create the so called “Super Committee,” co-chaired by Senator Patty Murray, to recommend a [deficit reduction plan](#). Congress also created a “fiscal cliff” — tax increases and spending cuts — we would all go over in the event the Super Committee could not reach a deal.

Unfortunately, the prospect of making a bipartisan deal was more frightening to lawmakers than the fiscal cliff. The Super Committee failed to reach agreement, and since 2013 all Congress has been able to agree on is a series of short term arrangements that keep the government open while the debt rises and the clock ticks on Social Security and Medicare. No one even talks about a “grand bargain” anymore.

In Olympia, our system for funding our public schools, the state’s paramount duty, has been found [unconstitutional](#). Republicans and Democrats have long known that using levies to fund basic education violated the constitution, but so far they lack the political will to compromise with each other and do anything about it.

To design a new funding system for our schools the legislature created the [Basic Education Finance](#) Task Force in 2008, and the Quality Education Council (QEC) in 2009. The Task Force developed a model for what should be funded in our schools, and the job of the QEC was to recommend a plan to implement that model using only state funding for basic education.

In its 2012 [McCleary decision](#), the State Supreme Court ordered the state to implement the prototypical school model created by the Task Force. Last year, the Court found the state in contempt due to its lack of progress in implementing the recommendations — arrived at by the process the legislature itself initiated. Apparently the prospect of making a bipartisan deal on education funding is more frightening to legislators than a contempt order. So far, no plan to comply with the McCleary decision has even been voted on in committee.

In both capitols, the gridlock extends to all major issues. Immigration reform is going nowhere in Congress this year and the [federal highway trust fund](#) will run out of money soon if Congress doesn’t act. In Olympia, a major, and much needed transportation package is stalled. Again.

In both capitols, politics, theater and playing to base voters trump negotiation and compromise. Rather than offer a healthcare alternative, Republicans in Congress vote over and over again to repeal “Obamacare.” In Olympia this week, there may or may not be serious budget negotiations, but House Democrats will — again — hold hearings on

their proposals to tax carbon and capital gains, despite the fact that neither proposal has passed the House, and will certainly not pass the Republican Senate.

In both capitols it appears that the only thing that is politically possible is to pass are budgets that avoid government shutdowns, but don't solve major structural problems that are obvious to all.

America and Washington State face major challenges. The economy is not producing enough good jobs. Our national debt is rising and our safety net programs are on the road to insolvency. Our infrastructure is crumbling, and our system of paying for our schools is inequitable and unconstitutional. But the biggest challenge of all is the intractable gridlock between Republicans and Democrats which makes solving any of these problems impossible.

It didn't use to be this way, and it doesn't have to be this way. Rs and Ds used to work together and get things done. Now, politicians in both parties refuse to compromise because they believe that to do so will imperil their reelection by infuriating those on the far right or far left. The answer is simple: The rest of us need to stand up and demand that our elected officials move to the middle and reach agreements.

Democracy works. If the rest of us get angry enough and demand bipartisan problem solving, it will happen. How much worse does it need to get before the center rises?

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