

Why can't Democrats work with Republicans?

BY RAMESH PONNURU BLOOMBERG OPINION

“I came in expressing a strong spirit of bipartisanship,” President Barack Obama said, “and what was clear was that even in the midst of crisis, there were those who made decisions based on a quick political calculus rather than on what the country needed.”

At the start of 2010, his second year in office, Obama was remembering what he called “the classic example” of Republican intransigence from his first year: He went to share ideas with House Republicans about the stimulus bill, only to find out that their leader, John Boehner, had already issued a statement opposing it.

During the Obama years, Democrats cited incidents like this one to cast Republicans in a bad light. Obama and several other Democrats also complained that Senate Republican leader Mitch McConnell had announced at the start of his first term that his top priority was preventing a second one. Democrats said they tried again and again to meet Republicans halfway on health care, too, and were rebuffed.

With President Joe Biden in the White House, Democrats are saying that the Republicans' behavior then justifies ignoring them now: There's no point wasting time trying to negotiate with them.

The incidents didn't actually happen, though, or at least didn't happen the way Obama related them. Before he met with House Republicans in January 2009, House Democrats had already introduced a stimulus bill without any of their input, and Republicans had already made public

statements of opposition. In his meeting with the Republicans, Obama reportedly said he was open to changing the bill; the Republicans then voted against the unchanged bill; and Boehner issued a statement saying he would still like to work with Obama on the issue.

McConnell's remark, meanwhile, was made well into Obama's term, right before the midterm elections of 2010. He said in the same breath that he would work with Obama if he moderated the way the previous Democratic president, Bill Clinton, had: "I don't want the president to fail; I want him to change."

He reiterated the message after the election: While he hoped Obama would cooperate on Republicans' legislative goals, achieving them would probably require that he lose reelection. It was a statement of the obvious, which didn't stop Nancy Pelosi from bringing it up eight years later to call it "racist."

Democrats also overstate how hard they tried to work with Republicans on health care 10 years ago. They are right to note that the Affordable Care Act included ideas some Republicans had earlier favored, such as the individual mandate that Mitt Romney had signed into law when he was governor of Massachusetts. But it also included items they had never shown much support for: It has been decades, for example, since any congressional Republican has voted for tax increases on the scale the bill required.

The Obama administration made a significant concession by dropping the public option from the legislation. But it had to make that move to win sufficient support from Democrats. And it refused to make other adjustments. Adding malpractice reform to the bill, for example, would not have changed any of its basic features while making it more palatable for Republicans. The Obama White House rejected the idea for fear of offending trial lawyers.

Even leaving aside the actual history of the first Obama term, there's something strange about Democrats' reaching back to it to justify their behavior now.

Republicans and Democrats worked together to pass a large COVID-19 relief bill last spring, and did it again a few weeks ago. The second one was passed after Biden had won the election and the Electoral College had met. Republicans knew that any positive effect it had would buoy Biden politically, and did it anyway.

There's no moral or constitutional obligation for Democrats to bargain with the Republicans. Obama came into office with large Democratic majorities in Congress, and had the votes he needed to pass the stimulus and his health care bill without Republicans.

Maybe they will have the votes this time too. But it would be nice if they would stop pretending that they have no other choice.

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