

Something's wrong in Washington: Is American democracy in crisis?

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The Federal shutdown may be the most striking evidence to support claims that America's political system is broken, but it is far from the only example. Writing in *Governance*, acclaimed political scientists Norman Ornstein and Jared Diamond explore if tribalism is at the heart of the problem, or if the U.S. is facing a far greater political crisis.

"The state of our overall political process as the most dysfunctional I have seen in over 44 years of watching Washington and American politics up close," writes Norman Ornstein, from the American Enterprise Institute. "If we are not in the most dysfunctional period in our history, we are certainly in the top five."

American political history has recorded many inept and ineffectual congresses, from the scandals of the 1970's to the divided house of the 1860's, so what makes the 112th and 113th congresses any different? Ornstein argues that the rise in political extremism, manifested in open tribalism, is to blame.

From acts seeking to tighten the rules over gun ownership, to commissions established to tackle America's debt problem, the list of legislation that has been sunk by tribalism continues to grow into President Obama's second term.

"Political dysfunction has serious consequences for the health, well-being, and future prospects for the country that go well beyond gridlock or political gamesmanship," concluded Ornstein. "American history

suggests that these problems are cyclical, that eventually we will come out of it and restore a modicum of problem-solving rationality. But 'eventually' does not mean anytime soon."

In contrast, Jared Diamond, writing from the University of California, proposes that the United States is facing four existential threats to its democratic system.

"Our form of government is a big part of the explanation why the United States has become the richest and most powerful country in the world," said Diamond. "Hence, an undermining of democratic processes in the United States means throwing away one of our biggest advantages."

Diamond argues that political compromise has been deteriorating in recent decades, that restrictions on voting are reversing the positive historical trend of political enfranchisement, that the gap between rich and poor continues to grow, and that public spending by the government in areas such as education is declining.

"Large segments of the American populace deride government investment as 'socialism,' but it is not socialism. On the contrary, it is one of the longest established functions of government," said Diamond.

More information: Norman Ornstein, "What's Wrong with Washington? Tribalism," *Governance*, Wiley, [DOI: 10.1111/gove.12085](https://doi.org/10.1111/gove.12085)

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