

# Democracy interrupted: America needs civics lessons

With the recent collapse of the bipartisan effort to pass the immigration bill, many people are rightly asking whether the 218-year-old American experiment in democracy has come off the rails.



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MSNBC commentator Tim Russert summed that sentiment up well by saying, simply, that “Washington is broken.”

That fact hits home in our state as our two Republican senators wound up on different sides of the fence on the immigration bill. Jim DeMint hailed the defeat of the bill as a win for the American people, while Lindsey Graham stayed the course on his call for a bipartisan solution reflecting the complex realities of the immigration dilemma.

I find little in the way of a victory for anyone in the defeat of the bill. Yes, the bill may have become overburdened with complexity, compromise and special interest provisions. But the fact remains that Congress lacked both the fortitude and the wisdom to find a way forward in the search for a politically viable solution.

During the contentious public debate over the legislation, Republican presidential candidate John McCain joined Graham as a voice of reason, pointing out the obvious fact that we’re not going to round up and deport 12 million illegal immigrants under any foreseeable scenario.

The defeat of the bill preserves what everyone agrees is an unsatisfactory status quo. Even worse, it defers the issue and preserves the status quo until 2009 or later.

## Critical thinking skills

With the need for our nation to respond to global economic competition, educators emphasize the need to teach critical thinking skills to the nation’s young people. Perhaps a remedial class should be held for our political leaders too.

Here are a few thoughts that reflect my own critical thinking on this issue:

Should we control our borders and prevent illegal immigration? The easy answer is “of course!” But *can* we control our southern border with Mexico? No, we can’t, because the nation and the government lacks the political will and unity of purpose to achieve that goal.

The political equation is only going to get tougher given the rising political strength of American voters of Hispanic origin. In all likelihood, the defeat of the immigration bill and the associated anti-Hispanic rhetoric is going to drive the majority of Hispanic voters back into the Democratic fold.

As a practical matter, that means that Sen. DeMint and his allies can forget about any long term effort to secure our Southern border unless such efforts include a path to citizenship similar to the one in the immigration bill. The idea that the border will be permanently secured over the next 18 months by a lame duck president and an administration in disarray is a pipe dream.

Another piece of critical thinking goes to the economic impact of Hispanic illegal immigrants.

If we really do succeed in squeezing employers until they stop tacitly employing illegals, it may well have a severe negative impact on the U.S. economy, at least in some parts of the country.

That won’t play well with voters in 2008 either, which is why it made sense to craft a solution that address both sides of the issue at one time.

## Sound bite politics

The great outcry against “amnesty” that

helped kill the bill is another example of how democracy is failing here in the homeland. It’s nothing more than “sound bite” politics to seize on that one word to characterize a very complex issue.

Frankly, I don’t care whether you call it “amnesty” or “a path to citizenship” or something else.

The point made by thoughtful Republicans, including John McCain, John Kyl, Lindsey Graham and President Bush, among others, was that we have to come up with some solution that actually works and makes the situation better than it is now. This was the great failing of the Congress, Democrats and Republicans alike.

Together, they lacked both the political courage and the wisdom to find a viable bipartisan solution.

In the end, the blame for inaction lies neither with Congress or the president. The blame falls on the body politic. That’s you and me and every other citizen with the right to vote and the right to let our voices be heard on the issues.

For too many years now, the game of politics at the national level has been played as a blood sport. We have forgotten that we are all part of the same enterprise, the United States of America.

So the civics lesson doesn’t start in Washington. It starts with you and me. It starts by raising the level of discourse, by decrying political hate speech and sound bite politics. It starts by each of us taking responsibility for being well-informed on the issues and doing our best to understand opposing views and support reasoned compromise where compromise is essential to achieve meaningful changes in public policy.

As the saying goes, “freedom isn’t free.” With our troops dying in Iraq to give the people of that country a shot at democracy, we owe them a better performance on the home front. And by that, I mean all of us, including me and you. ■