

Bill Kaplan: Congress beset by obstructionist GOP and divided Democrats

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The congressional stalemate continues, with the jarring possibility that congressional inaction will lead to catastrophe:

There was a slight glimmer of hope when Congress approved a stopgap funding measure to avoid a government shutdown. The bad news is that the government is funded only until December 3. Worse, most Republicans voted no, abdicating their responsibility to keep the government functioning. Wisconsin representatives and senators split along party lines, with Democrats voting yes and Republicans voting no (for shutdown).

Moreover, a more disastrous threat lies ahead: default after October 18. Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell and Wisconsin GOP Senator Ron Johnson have adopted an unprecedented position. They along with other GOP senators will not support raising or suspending the debt ceiling and will filibuster any Democratic measure to do so. Wisconsin Democratic Senator Tammy Baldwin tweeted: "Mitch McConnell is playing a dangerous political game with the full faith and credit of America and our economy." But Johnson disingenuously said: "Democrats need to take responsibility and be held accountable for adding trillions of dollars more to our national debt." However, Washington Post columnist Dana Milbank wrote: "In fact, the debt ceiling must be raised to pay the interest on debts already incurred, 97 percent of which were accrued before Biden's presidency." Default will lead to a recession, high unemployment and insufficient funds for the military, social security benefits and much more.

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Meanwhile, the House Progressive Caucus continues to block the Democratic-led House from approving the Senate passed bipartisan infrastructure bill. Wisconsin Democratic Representative Mark Pocan is one of its leaders thwarting this popular, indispensable legislation. Perhaps the irony of blocking a bill that Senator Ron Johnson obstructed and opposed escapes Pocan. He and other House liberals erroneously believe it gives them leverage over moderate Senate Democrats to vote for the “Build Back Better Act” (reconciliation bill). On Friday, President Biden met with House Democrats. Politico reported: “After strongly signaling to progressives ... to hold the line on their demands for a massive climate and social spending bill, President Joe Biden ... deliver(ed) another message: prepare to eat half the loaf. ... Biden warned progressives that they would likely have to accept a reconciliation bill with a price tag between \$1.9 trillion and \$2.3 trillion - well below (their) \$3.5 trillion” Spot-on!

In a 50-50 Senate, West Virginia moderate Democratic Senator Joe Manchin has outsized power. He would support \$1.5 trillion. Biden and House Speaker Nancy Pelosi can count votes. Congress must pass both the infrastructure and reconciliation bills. However, a more realistic reconciliation bill is urgently needed. It will be sharply reduced in amount and scope. Difficult decisions will need to be made as to which provisions are prioritized, modified or eliminated. A Democratic-led Congress can revisit deferred critical issues down the road. Nonetheless, it will still be “historic.” Action is needed to address the continuing pandemic, a battered inequitable economy, climate change and a democracy under siege.

The stakes are too high for GOP obstruction and Democratic division.

-Kaplan wrote a guest column from Washington, D.C., for the Wisconsin State Journal from 1995 - 2009.