Opinion

NCR Voices



A view of a 19th-century wooden church, damaged by a rocket attack during the Russian invasion of the Zhytomyr region of Ukraine April 28, 2022. (OSV News/Reuters/Viacheslav Ratynskyi)



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"House Democrats are prepared to use every available legislative tool to make sure we get comprehensive national security legislation over the finish line," said Democratic House Leader Hakeem Jeffries last week. It's about time he unleashed the prospect of a discharge petition in the House of Representatives, forcing a vote on aid to Ukraine and Israel.

On the merits, it is time to stop the gamesmanship regarding the provision of aid to two of our closest allies, both of them engaged in bitter struggles against, respectively, a thugocracy and a theocracy. In both cases, the prospect of U.S. aid being stalled only emboldens those extremists in Russia and Gaza who think they can wait out the West, and achieve the destruction of their enemies. If ever there was a vote that could advance the prospect of a just peace, this is such a vote.

Jeffries' words suggest the end may be coming for the miserable Hastert Rule, the unofficial governing norm implemented by former Speaker Danny Hastert that holds the speaker only brings legislation to the floor if it has majority support from his own caucus. Comprehensive immigration reform was broken on this rule, among other important pieces of legislation.



Israeli military vehicles move out of the Gaza Strip, as seen from southern Israel Jan. 15, 2024, amid the ongoing conflict between Israel and the Palestinian Islamist group Hamas. (OSV News/Reuters/Amir Cohen)

A discharge petition allows a majority of the whole House to bring legislation to the floor, and would, in this fraught moment of political polarization, remind members of Congress that they may represent a district and a party, but they serve the entire country. What is more, it is a tool to embolden Republicans who do not want to run every vote by the Trump campaign to see if he signs off on it. Donald Trump would rather see Republicans nix aid to Ukraine so he can resume his bromance with Russian President Vladimir Putin.

Discharge petitions rarely succeed but, in this moment, it just might work. Three Republicans — Reps. Ken Buck (R-Colorado), Mike Gallagher (R-Wisconsin) and Tom McClintock (R-California) — refused to join their fellow Republicans in voting to impeach Homeland Security Secretary Alejandro Mayorkas, and that was enough to tank the effort in the almost evenly divided House.

Next week, the margin might get even tighter as voters in New York's 3rd Congressional District go to the polls in a special election to fill the seat formerly held by deposed-Congressman George Santos. The Democrat, Tom Suozzi, holds a narrow lead in the polls, and despite the unique circumstances and characteristics of this particular race, Washington strategists will extrapolate a Democratic win as a big warning sign for the GOP. That will make it even harder for Speaker Mike Johnson to keep his caucus in line.



U.S. Rep. Ken Buck, R-Colorado, a ranking member of the House Judiciary Subcommittee on Immigration and Citizenship, participates in an interview after the House vote to impeach Homeland Security Secretary Alejandro Mayorkas failed on Capitol Hill Feb. 6 in Washington. (OSV News/Reuters/Elizabeth Frantz)

In normal times, if we can think back that far, the utility of the two-party system becomes manifest. It is one of the great ironies of American political life that the Founding Fathers worked diligently to produce a constitutional framework that would make it difficult to form parties, or "factions" as they called them. Yet, no sooner was

the ink dry on the Constitution than the country fell into two camps, the Federalists who supported ratification of the new Constitution and the Anti-Federalists who opposed it. Thomas Jefferson humorously suggested that because the issue before the nation was ratification or not, the two parties should properly be called the "rats" and the "anti-rats."

In any event, the two-party system has governed the political life of this nation for most of its existence, and we have been well-served by it. Now, however, in the age of social media and special interest groups and dark money political contributions, to say nothing of the cultish devotion to Trump, the party system is threatened. A successful discharge petition to achieve passage of a bill that is clearly in the national interest would be an excellent thing.

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There is an episode in British history that illustrates the similarities and differences of our two countries' approaches to democratic governance, and between the mid-20th and early 21st centuries. In 1941, at the very end of the Blitz, the House of Commons was destroyed by a German bomb. Two years later, a suggestion that the new chamber be semi-circular in design, like the U.S. Congress, was rejected and the oblong design retained. Explaining his position, Winston Churchill said to the House:

> Here is a very potent factor in our political life. The semi-circular assembly, which appeals to political theorists, enables every individual or every group to move round the centre, adopting various shades of pink according as the weather changes. I am a convinced supporter of the party system in preference to the group system. ... The party system is much favoured by the oblong form of Chamber. It is easy for an individual to move through those insensible gradations from Left to Right but the act of crossing the Floor is one which requires serious consideration. I am well informed on this matter, for I have accomplished this difficult process, not only once but twice. Logic is a poor guide compared with custom.

Churchill got his wish and the oblong, adversarial style of chamber is the one in which the House of Commons still sits.

At this moment in our nation's history, however, encouraging a few Republicans to scoot over to the center in defiance of their party chiefs is a good thing. In our country at this moment, both logic and custom point to the need for doing the nation's business first, and the business of party politics second.