

The Democrats Take a Dive

By E. J. Dionne Jr.

The battle over a Medicare prescription drug benefit proves that Republicans are ruthless and determined and that Democrats are divided and hapless. Republicans have changed the rules in Washington, but some Democrats still pretend to be living in the good old days.

And so there was much bitterness among Democrats as the Republicans' Medicare drug bulldozer rolled inexorably forward with critical help from two Democratic senators. A majority of Democrats believe the bill was a bad deal—it gave President Bush a political victory without demanding enough in return. “It’s a combination of political stupidity and substantive gutlessness,” said one influential Democratic congressional aide.

What Democrats failed to understand, Sen. Hillary Rodham Clinton (D-N.Y.) said in an interview yesterday morning, is that Republicans “are on an ideological march. They have no intention of playing fair. They want what they want when they want it.” And they get it.

If anyone doubted the rules had changed, House Republican leaders ended all illusions in the early hours of Saturday morning by holding open a 15-minute roll call vote for an unprecedented two hours and 51 minutes. At the end of the normal time for voting, Republican leaders faced defeat on the drug bill by a two-vote margin. Eventually, two Republicans were hammered into switching their votes.

“I don’t mean to be alarmist, but this is the end of parliamentary democracy as we have known it,” said Rep. Barney Frank of Massachusetts. The new system amounted to “plebiscitary democracy” in which leaders of the House have imposed such a strong sense of party discipline that they will ultimately pass whatever legislation they bring to the floor. “The Republican Party in the House is the most ideologically cohesive and disciplined party in the democratic world,” Frank said. In response, House Democrats were more united in opposition to the bill than Democratic senators, who are operating as if the older system of give-and-take were still in force.

Edward M. Kennedy was one senator who believed the old system could still work. He had urged his colleagues to pass an earlier version of the drug bill on the assumption that Republicans would agree to a compromise acceptable to Democrats.

Instead, House and Senate negotiators pushed the Senate bill to the right by adding in Medicare privatization experiments, big HMO subsidies and medical savings accounts. These and other changes pushed Kennedy to lead the last-ditch fight against the final version of the bill.

While Clinton and Frank admire Kennedy, both think he “made a mistake,” as Frank put it, in thinking a real compromise would emerge from the current system. “I think we started down this slope in June,” Clinton said, referring to the vote on the earlier bill, which she opposed and Kennedy favored. Clinton had predicted that the already inadequate drug benefit in that bill would be weakened by Republicans in subsequent negotiations.

Kennedy said in an interview that he had no regrets about trying to get the earlier bill passed. But he acknowledged that Republicans had shown far more discipline than Democrats have ever mustered. Kennedy recalled a conversation he had with then-Sen. Phil Gramm of Texas in the early 1990s about the wall of Republican opposition to President Clinton’s health care bill. Gramm, he said, explained that Republicans were determined not to let Clinton and a Democratic Congress prove they were capable of “performing.”

Bush is dealing with a more pliable opposition. Whatever discontent liberals expressed toward Kennedy was mild compared with their irritation toward Sens. John

Breaux of Louisiana and Max Baucus of Montana.

Breaux and Baucus were the only two Democrats allowed to negotiate the Medicare bill with the Republicans, House Democrats having been totally excluded. Would Republicans have put up with such an arrangement?

Over the weekend, several Democrats complained that Breaux and Baucus promised to report back to their colleagues before reaching a deal. Instead, they announced their support for the Republican bill, setting in motion its rush to passage. And Baucus poured salt into his party's wounds when he opened his speech in defense of the bill on Sunday by taking issue with how House Democratic leaders had described his legislation. Bush must have been laughing as Baucus drove a wedge through the Democratic Party.

If Democrats wanted to give Bush a political victory, they could have insisted on a much better deal. Instead, their negotiators sold out for a bill full of subsidies to the HMOs that will make it harder to control drug costs. The moral, yet again, is that Republicans are much tougher than Democrats and fight much harder to win.