The Senate’s filibuster rule appears nowhere in the US Constitution, but if it continues to be exercised in its current form, it will kill any hopes for the progressive agenda and reinforce the most destructive tendencies of the Republican Party. Under current Senate rules, it takes a supermajority of 60 votes for lawmakers to build something, but only 50 for them to tear it down. This baseline asymmetry allows the GOP to continue dismantling the government and leaves the Democratic Party unable to pass the bold plans necessary to build a progressive future.

The core Republican agenda has three crucial elements. The first is cutting taxes for the rich, because the GOP insists that low taxes drive growth and that progressive taxation unfairly punishes society’s winners. The second is disassembling the social safety net via privatization, vouchers, or block grants and starving the rest of the federal government of funds (except for the military). Republicans do this because they’re convinced that church groups and local communities can provide social insurance better than the federal government—an idea that was already anachronistic when it was tried during the Great Depression. The third is using the judiciary to tie reform efforts into knots, weakening or killing any regulations.

None of this requires a 60-vote supermajority in the Senate. A process called “reconciliation” allows budgeting and tax measures to pass with only 50 votes (and the vice president casting a tiebreaker). To choke off government services, Republicans need just 50 votes to constrict the budgeting and tax stream.

The entire Republican debate on repealing the Affordable Care Act took place within this 50-vote threshold. Whether it was turning health care over to the states entirely, phasing out the ACA’s expansion of Medicaid, defunding Planned Parenthood, or enacting a last-minute “skinny repeal” of small, targeted cuts, the Senate needed just 50 votes to accomplish any (or all) of this. It was very different from the passage of the ACA, which required 60 votes.

Keep in mind that the last time the filibuster posed a real obstacle to the GOP’s agenda—when it was blocking Neil Gorsuch from taking a stolen Supreme Court seat—Senate majority leader Mitch McConnell simply repealed the Voting Rights Act for them. They're convinced that church groups and local communities can provide social insurance better than the federal government—an idea that was already anachronistic when it was tried during the Great Depression. The third is using the judiciary to tie reform efforts into knots, weakening or killing any regulations.

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The filibuster requires: 60 votes

Even if Democrats win a majority, they need to get rid of the rule if they want big reforms:

- Green New Deal: To keep global warming from increasing more than 2.7 degrees F
- Automatic Voter Registration: To add 50 million voters to the rolls
- $15 minimum wage: To give $120 billion in higher wages to 40 million US workers

Sources: Green New Deal Resolution; Brennan Center for Justice; Economic Policy Institute

To get around the filibuster requires:

- To keep global warming from increasing more than 2.7 degrees F
- To add 50 million voters to the rolls
- To give $120 billion in higher wages to 40 million US workers

Mike Konczal
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