Editorial: Reid squandered chance for filibuster reform

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Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid blew it. He had the votes for serious filibuster reform in the palm of his hand, and he chickened out.

Reid feared a day ahead when Democrats are no longer the majority party in the Senate. But his legacy will be that he abandoned desperately needed reform and chose more gridlock instead.

Every four years, following a presidential election, the Senate can review and revise its rules. Filibuster rules have strayed far from the tactic's purpose and now allow the minority party to block not only votes but even debate on issues of the day. Whether Democrats or Republicans are in the majority, that's just wrong.

Reid concocted a compromise with Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell that includes some limits on filibuster use, but it appears to put a lot of control in the hands of the minority and majority leaders, a plan ripe for abuse. In brief, the Senate will be able to avoid a filibuster if the majority leader, the minority leader and seven senators from each party agree.

But once the deal is sealed, what incentive does McConnell have to cooperate? By his own admission, he spent the last four years doing everything possible to block President Barack Obama from succeeding. And soon enough, the next presidential election will loom, giving GOP leaders an incentive to throw government back into gridlock and make Democrats look bad, regardless of what it does to the country.

Reid said Wednesday that he had the 51 votes to pass a "talking filibuster" rule, which would have required a senator to continuously hold the floor if he or she wants to hold up legislation. This is the filibuster famously depicted by Jimmy Stewart in "Mr. Smith Goes to Washington."

When the talking filibuster was in effect, it was rarely used. But McConnell and his Republican cohorts used today's "filibuster lite" rules – pretty much just lodging an objection – to block more than 130 bills in recent sessions. Often they prevented even discussing an issue.

Reid told the *Washington Post's* Ezra Klein that "I'm not personally, at this stage, ready to get rid (of the filibuster). With the history of the Senate, we have to understand the Senate isn't and shouldn't be like the House."

The Senate should indeed be the more deliberative body of Congress. The problem, as Reid well knows, is that the current filibuster rules prevent deliberation of some of the most pressing issues. If gridlock returns in the next four years, it will be on his head as well as Republicans'.