

## Reducing Excessive Partisanship

ONE OF THE MOST difficult, deep-seated problems facing Congress is the excessive partisanship that has plagued it in recent years. Yet it is hard to imagine that Congress will ever be able to strengthen itself as an institution without relieving it.

### Congress Depends on Civility

When he was just a sixteen-year-old schoolboy, George Washington sat down and copied out 110 “Rules of Civility & Decent Behavior,” based on a sixteenth-century set of French maxims. Many of these had to do with simple manners—“Cleanse not your teeth with the tablecloth, napkin, fork or knife,” reads Rule 100—but others formed a guide to civil and appropriate behavior in public that our first president followed the rest of his life.

I sometimes wish members of Congress today would adopt the approach taken by that sixteen-year-old. Civil behavior hasn’t disappeared from Capitol Hill, but it is far less in evidence than it once was. We are all the poorer as a result.

Why should the behavior of a relative handful of people affect the rest of us so thoroughly? To answer this question, let's start with what I mean by "civility." Simply put, it means that legislators respect the rights and dignity of others. It does not mean that they need to agree with one another—far from it. It is by treating one another civilly that people who *don't* agree still manage to weigh issues carefully and find common ground. We are well served by vigorous debate, but even if our political leaders are not all going to become friends, we can certainly expect them to listen to one another, to respect each other, and to acknowledge that in a nation as divided as we are politically, good governance entails finding solutions that all can live with.

All of this is hard to do these days. Because both houses of Congress were so evenly divided for so long, pretty much everything has come to be seen through a partisan lens, shadowed by the looming presence of the next election. At the same time, some would argue that Congress is also mirroring society as a whole, with its increased harshness and sharper divisions. The media bears some of the blame, since it likes to highlight conflict and political extremes, but in its own way it, too, is reflecting trends around it. Though there are hopeful signs that this may be changing, for a long time strident and even obnoxious behavior has been attracting listeners and viewers and generating respectful attention.

If Congress is merely reflecting the society around it, why should we worry that it has so much trouble making civility its norm? Because on Capitol Hill, the ability of members of Congress to work together directly affects both the quality and the quantity of the work that gets done. Incivility and outright rudeness make it virtually impossible to reconcile opposing views and thus to achieve legislative goals or produce good legislation. In an atmosphere rife with distrust and unpleasantness, it becomes all the more difficult to discuss complex issues, search for reasonable solutions, or build the consensus needed to pass them. If we expect Congress to provide the political leadership this country needs to resolve such difficult problems as the lack of affordable health care or how American workers will pay for retirement, then we must expect its members

to work together, regardless of partisan affiliation or ideological differences. In my early years in the House, the Speaker at the time, Carl Albert, drove this point home by telling new members always to remember that each of their colleagues was the duly elected representative of 500,000 Americans, so they owed every one of them the same respect they expected for themselves.

Members of Congress are politicians, and they are sensitive to the dislikes of their constituents. If they believe that they will pay a price for returning home empty-handed or displaying obstinate partisanship, they'll change their behavior. But this means that constituents must make it clear that they do not like divisive name-calling, constantly attacking an opponent's motivation, and blatant partisan calculation. All of us would do well to ponder George Washington's handwritten rules, particularly the first: "Every action done in company, ought to be with some sign of respect to those that are present."

## Why Is Congress So Partisan?

Early in my career in the U.S. House of Representatives, I trekked over to the Senate side one day to watch a debate between Hubert Humphrey and Barry Goldwater, two of the great ideological warriors of the era. I don't recall the issue, but I do remember the heat they generated as they went at each other with hammer and tongs—they were knowledgeable, passionate, and deeply committed to their vastly different points of view. I remember just as keenly what happened after they'd fought each other rhetorically: they joked together as they left the floor, heading off to have a drink.

I have a hard time imagining such a scene in today's Washington, where a moment of cross-party camaraderie might be viewed with deep suspicion, as though personal friendship somehow undercuts ideological integrity. In the intensely partisan atmosphere that has reigned on Capitol Hill, it is much less common for two legislators to pursue their divergent beliefs with such intensity of purpose, yet remain fast friends or work together when their interests coincide. This is not to say it doesn't happen; only that it's no longer the rule.



Americans of all stripes have noticed this, too, and they don't like it. The partisanship that divides Congress, along with its members' apparent inability to transcend their divisions, is one important reason the institution's public standing is at historic lows.<sup>1</sup> How did we get here?

In part, the answers lie in a series of long-term political trends that have converged to create this current unhappy mood. Computers, for instance, have enabled state legislators—or members of Congress eager to dictate to them—to draw with great precision congressional district lines that create safely Democratic or Republican districts. The result is that most politicians running for the U.S. House don't have to appeal to the political center to win, they just need to appeal to the core of their parties' supporters.

There has also been a marked shift over the past generation in how we view the government. When I first entered national politics in the 1960s, the prevailing attitude toward the federal government was that it had its place in life, but that place was fairly limited. "Keep the government off my back" was the sentiment I heard most frequently. Over time, though, people began turning to Washington for help: a subsidy here, a tax break there, a program or a grant targeted to their needs. By the 1990s, they were streaming into the city to state their case. Since the end of 2008, of course, the federal government has come to be seen as an indispensable actor in rescuing the private economy. All of this is a huge attitudinal shift, and it has intensified our politics and raised the stakes in Congress.

For their part, many politicians and party leaders have over the last decade or so moved away from the old values of compromise, accommodation, and civility to reap whatever advantage they could from political division. This started at the very top. Presidents have typically believed in using their office to expand their political base; President George W. Bush, on the other hand, governed so as to appeal to his existing base, and that approach was largely echoed on both sides of the aisle in Congress. Legislative tactics leaned far more toward excluding the minority than toward seeking ways to work with all members. That made Congress an increasingly angry

place, as the minority chafed under its restrictions and the majority still saw red over slights it suffered when it was in the minority.

Parties have also been pushed to their ideological extremes by the interest groups that fund and try to influence them. Outside Washington, the constituencies that make up “we, the people” have become ever more sharply etched. Ethnic minorities are more of a presence in politics than they were a generation ago, as they scramble to move up the economic ladder and speak with a louder voice in the political arena. Special-interest voters—environmentalists, gun-rights backers, abortion-rights advocates, religious conservatives—have become more firmly self-identified and catered to by politicians. As members become spokesmen for particular points of view, their positions take on a harder edge, since they are playing to potential campaign funders or to an interest group whose supporters’ votes they need at election time.

The electorate, too, is politically divided, which often manifests itself in a Congress that is narrowly controlled by one party and faces a president of the other. In recent decades, each party has been struggling to become the majority party, and so every vote on Capitol Hill has taken on heavily partisan implications, since the leadership hopes that by taking the position it does—and forcefully encouraging rank-and-file members to go along—it will pick up a few extra seats at the next election. This invites partisan struggle.

These political trends have been reinforced by changes within Congress. If it is hard to find moderates there, it is even harder to find *institutionalists*, people who worry about the role of Congress as a separate and independent branch of government and who focus on strengthening Congress as an institution. Giving pride of place to partisanship and political calculation erodes Congress’s role as a deliberative body; “debate” these days is often two sets of talking points hammering at each other, rather than a genuine effort to reach consensus on the best course for the American people to follow. Members worry less about how Congress might carry out its constitutional responsibilities and more about what gives their party an edge.

Even something as mundane as the congressional schedule now encourages partisanship. As their time on Capitol Hill has come to focus on committee hearings, floor debate, and other opportunities for confrontation, and as their weekends now are often taken up with travel back to their states to meet with constituents, members of Congress in recent years have found far fewer opportunities to develop the kinds of friendships that cross party lines—and that produced such close friendships as Humphrey and Goldwater's. Too often, members today see those across the aisle not as colleagues but as adversaries.

These are all deep-seated trends, and they will not be easy to reverse, despite the respite from intense partisanship that took hold just after the 2008 presidential election. Yet I take great hope from the fact that the bulk of the electorate simply wants to see the challenges that confront them—and us, as a nation—addressed pragmatically. They want commonsense approaches, not ideologically driven ones. They want to see politicians striving to find common ground, not dwelling on their differences, and working for the common good, not promoting special interests. Eventually, if it's repeated often enough and firmly enough, that message will stick with our political leaders.

### Why Holding the Majority Matters

When you see news stories about which party is likely to emerge from the next election with a majority in Congress, keep one thing in mind: the basement. You might think that congressional leaders care most about the ability that majority status gives them to advance their legislative agenda, and you'd no doubt be correct; but rest assured that they're also thinking about the gloomy corridors underneath the various House office buildings on Capitol Hill.

This is where members of the minority party in the House often get relegated when they host a gathering for constituents or visitors, while members of the majority are meeting in rooms that showcase the grandeur of Congress—the elegant ones just off the



House floor in the Capitol, with high ceilings, plush carpets, and rich wood paneling.

I tell you this because it helps to illustrate why members of Congress behave as they do when control of their chamber is at stake. Being in the minority means major changes like losing the House or Senate leadership, committee chairmanships, and the opportunity to set and advance a party's agenda. But that's just the start of it. The difference between being the majority party and the minority party is so great that in many ways their respective members have two very different experiences of Congress. This is one reason the intense partisanship we've seen on Capitol Hill for well over a decade now has such a sharp edge to it.

Party status affects pretty much everything. The majority not only gets nicer spaces and meeting rooms, it also gets to determine which members and staff will go on overseas fact-finding trips, and much more. Members of the majority party enjoy all sorts of little perks that make life on Capitol Hill more pleasant. On congressional committees, the majority might take three-fourths of the budget and have three times the number of staff as the minority, so a shift in party control can be traumatic for those who find themselves suddenly in the minority.

Then, of course, there are the policy-making differences. In the House, for instance, the leadership of the majority party completely controls the legislative agenda. It decides not only which issues will be taken up, but how they can be debated, whether amendments will be allowed, and how the matter will be handled on the House floor. If it wished, it could—and on occasion does—prevent the minority party from offering any amendments at all to important bills brought up on the floor. The rules are somewhat less lopsided in the Senate, though even there it is easier for senators in the minority to obstruct legislation than it is to help shape it.

The result of all this is that in a closely divided Congress, the stakes in each election are enormous, in terms not only of which policies and philosophies will prevail, but of what legislative life will be like for members of each party; this in turn fosters an atmosphere of

partisanship and mistrust, and makes it harder to cooperate across the aisle, because neither party wants to give the other the slightest advantage. Americans may be tired of the partisanship they've seen on Capitol Hill, but it's worth knowing that there are some basic institutional forces at work that make it difficult to overcome.

None of this is to say that lessening partisanship is impossible—just that it won't happen unless the majority and the minority in both houses of Congress make a concerted effort to behave in ways that narrow the vast gulf in potential power and perquisites. How the majority treats the minority, and vice versa, is hugely important in terms of setting the atmosphere and tone on Capitol Hill.

For the majority's part, this means being aware that it sets the tone, and that consulting with members of the minority party—treating them fairly, as colleagues and not as enemies—should be a normal part of doing business. Equally important, the minority has a responsibility not to gum up the works by taking advantage of arcane rules of procedure or trying to turn every iota of legislative business to its political advantage. The tone overall ought to be one of mutual respect and fairness, ruled by a constant awareness that Congress is there to serve the American people and to make the country work, not to offer the two parties an arena in which to duke it out for political advantage. Only then can the people who serve in Congress free themselves from the institutional forces that of late have made it such an unpleasant place for many of them to serve.

### How Do We Reduce Partisanship?

I don't want to give the impression here that I'm starry-eyed about politics. It's a contact sport, and hard-hitting partisan competition is unavoidable, even desirable. It offers clear choices and different approaches to solving our problems, and it enhances the accountability of those in power when the other side is willing to point out weaknesses in their thinking or their performance.

Still, the country at large yearns for less polarization these days, and believes that partisan engagement has gone too far. Even



Washington insiders acknowledge that the extreme partisanship of recent years has made it more difficult to govern productively, leading more often to stalemate than to policy advances. They go to great oratorical lengths to deplore how partisan Congress has become. Acknowledging the problem, though, is easier than knowing what to do about it.

So what can we do? The first step must be taken by American voters. However slowly, Congress responds to what its members hear back home. A drumbeat of dislike for mean-spirited partisanship and insistence on working through differences will eventually get through. Members of Congress must be held responsible for the kind of institution they inhabit.

It was a very positive sign in the 2008 presidential campaign that when a candidate would go too far with negative, personal attacks, the voters made it clear that they just didn't want to see that, and the contest would become somewhat more civil. So the voice of the people does get through.

There's a tougher nut to crack, too: it has to do with rebuilding the strength of the dormant center in American politics. On this front, there are any number of steps that might make little difference alone, but together could add up to a sea change in how Washington operates.

One of them is already happening: the rise of the internet for fundraising. The ability to go over the heads of well-heeled special interests and fund a campaign through the small donations of ordinary Americans has the potential to rewrite political candidates' loyalties once they're in office. The less financial influence wielded by groups with a specific cause, the better the chance that our essential moderation as a nation will be reflected in Washington.

Equally important is a growing restlessness with how congressional districts get drawn. For the most part, district maps are designed by state legislatures, which often defer to the wishes of their congressional delegations. Somehow, these maps always produce safe districts for one party or the other, instead of competitive districts that would produce candidates adept at forging coalitions of

independents and moderates of both parties. Turning redistricting over to independent commissions charged with crafting districts based on commonality of interest and geographic compactness, rather than partisan affiliation, would make a significant difference.

There is work to be done on Capitol Hill, too, though it might not seem like work: legislators need to get to know one another. It is hard to attack someone you know well. Yet the congressional schedule—constant travel back home to meet with constituents, the need to raise money, the pressures of campaigning—keeps members of Congress and their families out of Washington, away from their colleagues, and far less likely to find time for forging friendships across partisan lines.

The congressional leadership bears a special responsibility for setting the overall tone of the institution. Party leaders on both sides of the aisle need to step up and make it clear to their members that a civil working environment is a top priority. A clear message from the top is one of the most important steps that could be taken to rein in the excessive partisanship plaguing the Congress.

It's also particularly important for members of Congress to look deliberately for issues that hold the hope of successful bipartisanship. Our nation's need for investment in its aging infrastructure—its roads, bridges, and transportation networks—offers one such possibility. It's not a partisan issue; it's a good governance issue.

Then, once Democrats and Republicans on Capitol Hill have come together to resolve a few problems like this, they may come to understand what ordinary Americans have known for some time: that the only way to solve our really tough problems—health care, energy independence, the rise of terrorism, the challenges posed by globalization—is to work together as a nation. In a nation as politically diverse as ours, leaders who know how to emphasize the common purpose—rather than their own party's monopoly on the truth—will ultimately be the ones to lead us from our current partisan morass.