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Bridging the Political Divide

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The Bipartisan Bridge

Bipartisanship is necessary for our government to respond promptly and effectively to social and economic problems. It enables government to craft and implement a vision for long-term national success and is vital for strengthening our democracy.

Unfortunately, however, partisanship has become virulent in American politics. It gridlocks government and sets a tone of intransigence that aggravates cultural fragmentation and disenfranchises the electorate.

Whereas elections are designed to be combative, there is no need—or justification—for continuing that tenor once an election has determined the composition of our government. That is the time for bipartisanship, to enact sound policies, respect our elected leaders, reassert our nation’s moral high ground and reassert our global leadership. We do not need

to abandon our party affiliations or principles. Instead, we just need to commit to collaborate for effective government and relegate combative partisanship to the few months preceding the next general election.

There are many instances of bipartisanship in Washington. Although most attention is drawn to contentious issues that showcase partisan actions, many other issues are addressed by lawmakers of both parties working together. Though challenging, bipartisanship can be advanced through steps that facilitate collaboration between officials with diverse political views and philosophies.

What Is Bipartisanship?

Although there are no official benchmarks, basically, bipartisanship is the willingness of officials to communicate, collaborate, compromise and act across party lines in good faith for “win-win” policies and decisions, on the merits, on a sustained basis. Bipartisanship does not mean equality, and does not dictate relinquishment of power to achieve collaboration for its own sake. It should not confine progress to positions with near-unanimous support, as a “lowest common denominator” among all officials. It does not mean that the President or a majority in Congress should capitulate to ultimatums from legislators that would forestall progress on their principal initiatives.

In Congress, bipartisanship has taken many forms, from specific actions to ongoing processes including:

- **Joint Sponsorship of Bills:** Legislation often has both Democratic and Republican sponsors, as well as many cosponsors from both parties. Past examples include the Kennedy-Kassebaum Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (HIPAA), the McCain-Feingold Bipartisan Campaign Reform Act and the Sarbanes-Oxley Public Company Accounting Reform and Investor Protection Act. Recently, food safety legislation was jointly developed by Senators Harkin, Enzi, Durbin, Gregg, Dodd and Burr; child nutrition legislation was jointly developed by Representatives Miller (CA), Platts and McCarthy (NY); a tax fairness and simplification bill was drafted by Senators Wyden and Gregg; and other bills on technology and innovation, oil spill prevention and transportation issues also have bipartisan sponsors and cosponsors.

WHAT BIPARTISANSHIP IS:

The willingness of officials to **communicate, collaborate, compromise and act in good faith** on policies and decisions across party lines, on the merits, on a sustained basis.

Transcending the traditional dialectic between the parties by deliberating as **long-term vested partners** on creative, diverse options.



WHAT IT'S NOT:

- Relinquishing power** to achieve collaboration for its own sake.
- Confining progress** to positions with near-unanimous support, as a “lowest common denominator” among all officials.
- Capitulation** of the President or a majority in Congress to ultimatums from legislators that would **forestall progress** on their initiatives.



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During his campaign, President Obama expressed bipartisanship as an overarching tone based on mutual respect, receptivity to diverse opinions, openness to innovative yet practical solutions, debate that enhances understanding and decision-making based on facts rather than ideology.

Despite hurdles, he has crossed party lines and transcended partisan boundaries on many issues. For example, consensus building and compromise was evident in the president's deliberations over increasing the US troop presence in the Afghanistan War, his plan to increase teacher accountability in his education reform proposal, and the tax-cut extensions of December 2011, all of which appealed to Republicans. For the financial reform law of 2010, the President agreed to compromises that accommodated the views of both Republicans and Democrats. Even his healthcare reform proposals were initiated with a bipartisan approach, as President Obama convened

bipartisan "summits," met with Republican lawmakers to hear their views and continued to adjust his proposals during the legislative process to accommodate Republicans. Since a hand that is extended must be reciprocated if bipartisanship is to be achieved, the assessment of health reform's bipartisan nature should focus on the President's efforts and the compromises inherent in his proposals, rather than the final vote.

Advancing Bipartisan/ Post-Partisan Collaboration

There is no definitive methodology to promote bipartisanship/post-partisanship, since it is a good faith process rather than a singular product or outcome. Although there is some bipartisanship even in today's charged political atmosphere, more must be done. The following ideas could further stimulate a bipartisan/post-partisan spirit and materialize into constructive outcomes:

- **Discussion and Relationships:** Congress should establish informal working groups for legislators with different philosophies to meet weekly to discuss and collaborate on issues of the day. The groups would

- **Coalitions:** Occasionally, bipartisan groups form to address ongoing concerns. One case was the heralded Gang of 14, seven Republican and seven Democratic senators who collaborated to resolve differences on judicial appointments.

- **Working Groups:** Some issues are negotiated by small groups of legislators and can include packaging of provisions that appeal to legislators with diverse priorities. A high-profile example occurred during 2009 when a subgroup of senators from the Finance Committee (three Republicans and three Democrats) tried to resolve issues on healthcare reform. Although it was ultimately ill-fated, it did reach some points of agreement and refine the legislation for committee consideration. More recently, a "Gang of 6" senators, three Democratic and three Republican, began meeting in March 2011 to develop solutions to our nation's debt and deficit crises.

- **Votes:** In its most basic form, bipartisanship is exhibited by votes across party lines. Recently, Senators Snowe, Collins and Brown and the House Blue Dog Democrats have voted across party lines on prominent legislation, and many bills such as the Serve America Act receive broad bipartisan support.

To promote transparency and accountability, each bill that comes to the House or Senate floor for a vote should be accompanied by an analysis prepared by a non-partisan, objective office.

convene senators and representatives who don't already spend time with each other and might not otherwise have reason to do so, to foster cross-party relationships and increase understanding of each other's positions. Discussions should seek diversity of opinions, honest critiques of one's own positions, innovative solutions that transcend entrenched party positions and consensus on specific issues that are delegated to them by the leadership.

- **District Tours:** To foster understanding of the conditions, concerns and needs of each other's districts that impact decision-making, legislators from opposite parties should pair up for reciprocal tours of each other's districts. By proverbially "walking a mile in each others' shoes," they could better appreciate the concerns that their colleagues address.

- **Objective Analyses:** To promote transparency and accountability, each bill that comes to the House or Senate floor for a vote should be accompanied by an analysis from a non-partisan, objective office, e.g., Congressional Research Service. The analyses would include the qualitative impacts on various demographic groups (i.e., by income, geographic region and other factors where relevant, such as age, race/ethnicity, gender). Analyses should state the bills' fiscal impact and evaluate its short-term and long-term effects to encourage focus on long-term policy, which tends to deflate hot-button political issues.

- **Lobbying Reform:** Lobbyists should not be allowed to deliver a check one day and deliver views on legislation the next day. This nexus of money and policy, or campaign fundraising and legislation, is where many

For many years, Democratic Senator Ted Kennedy and Republican Senator Orrin Hatch were close friends, despite representing opposing parties. Their relationship can serve as a model to partisans into the future: that despite differing opinions and ideologies, it is possible to meet somewhere in the middle and forge lifelong friendships.

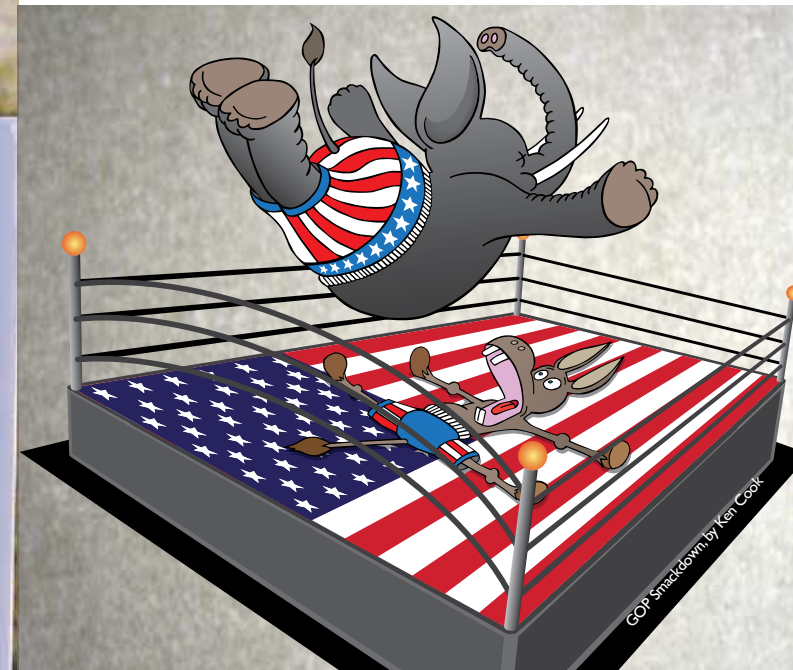


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Photo by Jeff Snyder/PictureGroup via AP IMAGES

Jon Stewart and Steven Colbert's Rally to Restore Sanity and/or Fear brought together hundreds of thousands of people at the National Mall in Washington D.C. Its intent was to encourage and promote reasoned discussion in our country.



A staple in most newspapers, political comics show how embedded partisan bickering is in our political system.

abuses occur, both subtly and overtly. The efforts to ban veiled earmarks responded to this but did not go far enough. Although lobbyists who provide campaign donations should be prohibited from directly discussing legislative matters with members, they are still entitled to communicate their views. To provide an appropriate channel, Congress should create a system of Congressional Interest Group Offices (CIGOs) that lobbyists could contact to offer their input. CIGOs would produce briefing materials on issues coming to a vote in committee or on the floor, and on other issues requested by a legislator. Members would receive objective information that includes the views of lobbyists and others, and a critique of them, without the foul play or undue influence of lobbyists who argue for their clients irrespective of the public interest. CIGOs would be non-partisan, with staff that is hired for objective analytical abilities and expertise, rather than political ties.

Bradford Kane created and leads The Bipartisan Bridge (www.bipartisanbridge.org), which advances bipartisanship and post-partisanship for effective government through ideas and solutions on which Americans with diverse political philosophies can collaborate. Kane served as legislative counsel to a member, counsel to a House subcommittee and both deputy controller and a deputy secretary in the state of California government. Kane also was the CEO of a non-profit that provides job skills training via e-learning, was a member of a nationwide task force on media issues and worked for organizations that advance effective use of technology solutions.



- **Win-Win Accommodation:** At the start of each Congress, lawmakers could be asked to take a seminar on mediation and dispute resolution, for use in resolving legislative disputes. The seminars can set a tone of cooperation and collaboration. Topics would include “benevolent negotiations” to build trusted, reliable, long-term partnerships for sustained bipartisanship. Through “benevolent negotiations,” legislators would be encouraged to make good faith offers that address each others’ main needs, rather than staking out hard-line positions and then nickel-and-diming each other toward a middle-ground settlement. It advances a climate of respect, trust and accommodation, like mediation without a mediator, nurturing long-term relationships while hurdling an impasse.

Bipartisanship Is Pragmatic and Is Rewarded by Voters

Some partisans may assail bipartisanship as being impossible, impractical or simply naive. Yet, such assertions are usually made out of a lack of effort, creativity or willingness to abandon cynical and malevolent perceptions of political advantage. Bipartisan/post-partisan action is distinct from naive notions of harmony because it enables pragmatic progress.

As polls about Congress indicate, those who step up and lead the healing process are the ones more likely to be rewarded by the electorate. To those who are bold enough to collaborate across traditional barriers to govern effectively and achieve results, the aura of leadership will be bestowed. Voters hunger for leaders who recognize that, despite their differences, all lawmakers can, should and must work together toward mutually agreeable policies that benefit the American people.

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