How to Turn Democrats and Republicans into Americans

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One

Here’s an interesting puzzle: We Americans are divided over a good many important political questions (no matter how much we may wish to deny it, there really is a red-state/blue-state split on a very wide range of issues), but on most of those issues, we nonetheless tend to be clustered within a fairly narrow range of opinions from “slightly-right-of-center” to “slightly-left-of-center.” Political candidates and pollsters routinely seek information not only about our opinions but also about the degree of intensity with which we hold those views because in most cases while we may favor one position over another, we are hardly feverish about it. In most cases, our preferences are merely that, not reasons, to draw lines in the sand and go to battle. So why do our elected officials—chosen by us and presumably representative of our preferences—so often end up in bitter and uncompromising conflict between opposing poles? If they truly represent us, why are not they more like us?

I have defined this question as a “puzzle,” not a dilemma. And that’s because, as frustrating as it is, this apparent contradiction has a pretty simple answer. Our elected officials do not accurately represent us because the system we have created to elect them, and the system in which they subsequently govern, rewards them not for representing the majority of us but for acting as warriors for the most extreme minorities among us. This book’s theme is about “politics to the extreme” and the forces that are driving American politics toward rival extremes are the very systems we ourselves have developed.

America’s Founders had something very different in mind. In fact, they wanted something that was quite the opposite. For example, because almost
every major power of the federal government was put in the hands of the people themselves (in other words, in the Congress of the United States, made up of the peoples’ representatives), it was assumed that the preferences of the nation’s citizens would prevail. The right to vote was originally embarrassingly limited (few blacks and no women were allowed to cast ballots) but the precedent was nonetheless set that it was in the hands of voters that power rested. Because the Constitution specifically required all US senators and representatives to be actual inhabitants of the states from which they were elected, it was therefore assumed that they would be familiar with the concerns and the economic interests of the communities they served, even if (as was originally the case with members of the Senate) their election was determined by local state legislators.

Unfortunately, the electoral system that governs American politics today produces the exact opposite result.

Two

Consider two principal reasons for this undermining of American elections. Until the beginning of the twentieth century, it was common for small and distinctly unrepresentative groups of power brokers (basically, older white men who represented the wealthy power elites of a community) to gather together in the proverbial smoke-filled rooms of the past to “choose” who would be put forth as their party’s candidates for Congress (and for other major offices as well, but it is the dysfunction of the modern Congress that causes us to look at how far we have strayed from the constitutional model). That, of course, was a model with little to recommend it other, perhaps, than the ability of such insiders to gauge the relative intellectual or other merits of the various white men they would be considering for those offices—if indeed it was merit they were looking for.

The reformers of the day (members of the “Progressive” movement) rightly abhorred this “boss-centric” system and instead launched the modern political primary regime in which, presumably, all the people would be allowed to choose among all the eligible candidates and vote for the one candidate who most closely aligned with their interests. This reform was intended to restore—or introduce—democracy to what had clearly been until then a very undemocratic system. However, the laws of unintended consequences are not easily set aside and the primaries became, over time, the closed primary system of today in which relatively small and unrepresentative numbers of the most partisan, intransigent, and ideological citizens dictate election outcomes.

Consider Just Two Examples

In the US Senate race in Delaware to select a successor to the incumbent, Joe Biden, who had been elected vice president of the United States, the prohibitive favorite, a Republican named Mike Castle, a former governor and