

cabulary is limited to two words, 'Yes' and 'No.' This sovereign, moreover, can speak only when spoken to." Second, the Founders set our government up such that the people get to speak relatively frequently. In other words, it is often difficult to translate the verdict rendered by the people, and probably impossible to do so at a level that would allow us to determine a realignment is taking place. Perhaps more importantly, another election is always just twenty-two months away from the swearing in, so even if we could translate accurately what an election "means," the people can always decide they want something else in fairly short order. That they exercised that option so frequently between 2004 and 2012 should give pause to anyone seeking to give an upper hand to either party. That they have exercised it so frequently, so consistently, with such sensitivity to short-term forces across history probably means that we should not confine our caution to the present day.

## RONALD BROWNSTEIN

### From *The Second Civil War*

*Writing before President Barack Obama's 2008 election, journalist Ronald Brownstein described a political party system that is locked in nearly mortal combat, with no middle path possible. In his campaign, Obama suggested a post-partisan approach in which he would go beyond the two parties' clashing positions to find common ground. But Brownstein's view may prove to be the more valid one. He describes the loyalty that politicians owe to their "base," adding to the influence of the most extreme partisans in both parties. While clear-cut differences between the parties have been a mark of American politics at certain times in our history, the willingness to forge compromise solutions has been just as important. Those compromises are missing from Washington, D.C., today, Brownstein believes. Quoting several high-profile Democratic and Republican political figures, Brownstein makes the case that American government was not always so polarized. "Hyperpartisanship," as Brownstein terms it, does have positive byproducts, such as much more citizen participation. But at what price? Despite the fact that issues are no more divisive now than in the past, the cost of so much partisanship is paid by the American people. Perhaps the nation will find a post-partisan solution. Or perhaps there'll be a "second civil war."*

AMERICA IS THE RICHEST and most powerful country in the world. It may be the richest and most powerful country in the history of the world.

But it cannot agree on a plan to reduce its dependence on foreign oil. Nor can it balance its federal budget.

It can't provide health insurance for the nearly one in six Americans without it, either.

It can't agree on a plan to improve security at its borders and provide a humane way to deal with the estimated twelve million illegal immigrants working in its fields and factories and restaurants.

It can't align the promises it has made to seniors through Social Security and Medicare with the tax burdens that future generations realistically can bear.

It can't agree on the steps to rebuild economic security for middle-class Americans in the age of global economic competition. It can't for-

mulate a strategy for reducing the emissions of the gases that contribute to global warming and potentially disruptive changes in the climate.

It cannot agree on an approach to fight the threat of Islamic terrorism, at home and abroad, in a way that unites the country with shared purpose.

None of these problems are new. All have been discussed for years in the media. All are the subject of constant debate in Washington. In most cases the options for dealing with them are limited and familiar.

Why, then, has America failed to make more progress against these challenges?

The answer, above all, is that the day-to-day functioning of American politics now inhibits the constructive compromises between the parties required to confront these problems. The political system has evolved to a point where the vast majority of elected officials in each party feel comfortable only advancing ideas acceptable to their core supporters—their “base,” in the jargon of modern campaigns. But progress against these problems, and almost all other challenges facing America, requires comprehensive solutions that marry ideas favored by one party and opposed by the other. It’s implausible, for instance, to imagine that we can address the long-term challenge of Social Security and Medicare without both reducing benefits and increasing taxes. Or that we can regain control of our borders without significantly toughening enforcement and creating a legal framework for the millions of illegal immigrants already in the United States. Or that we can reduce our dependence on foreign oil without reducing consumption and increasing domestic production. Yet in each of those cases, and all the others listed above, most elected officials in one of the two major parties will not accept half of that solution. The result is to prevent us from using all of the tools available to attack our problems. One side proposes to control the deficit solely through spending cuts; the other side almost entirely through tax increases. One party proposes to produce more energy; the other to conserve more energy. In fact, to make meaningful progress against any of these problems, the answer is almost always that we will need to do both. Yet because each party seeks to impose its will on the other—and recoils from actions that might challenge its core supporters—it cannot propose comprehensive solutions. We are left with either-or alternatives—*increase production or reduce consumption, cut benefits or raise taxes—when the challenges demand that we apply solutions built on the principle of both-and.*

This book examines how we have reached this dangerous impasse. It rests on an unambiguous conclusion: The central obstacle to more effective action against our most pressing problems is an unrelenting polariza-

tion of American politics that has divided Washington and the country into hostile, even irreconcilable camps. Competition and even contention between rival parties has been part of American political life since its founding. That partisan rivalry most often has been a source of energy, innovation, and inspiration. But today the parties are losing the capacity to recognize their shared interest in placing boundaries on their competition—and in transcending it when the national interest demands. On some occasions—notably efforts to balance the federal budget and reform the welfare system under Bill Clinton, and an initiative to rethink federal education policy in George W. Bush’s first year—they have collaborated on reasonable compromises. But for most of the past two decades the two sides have collided with such persistent and unwavering disagreement on everything from taxes to Social Security to social and foreign policy that it sometimes seems they are organizing not only against each other, but against the idea of compromise itself.

Against this backdrop of perpetual conflict, America is living through a transformation of its political life. For most of our history American political parties have functioned as loose coalitions that lightly tether diverse ideological views. Because the parties were so diverse, they have usually operated as a force that synthesized the diverse interests in American society. As the great political historian Richard Hofstadter once wrote, “In our politics, each major party has become a compound, a hodgepodge, of various and conflicting interests; and the imperatives of party struggle, the quest for victory and for offices, have forced the parties to undertake the business of conciliation and compromise among such interests.”

That definition is obsolete. From Congress and the White House through the grassroots, the parties today are becoming less diverse, more ideologically homogeneous, and less inclined to pursue reasonable agreements. American government . . . usually has worked best when it is open to a broad array of views and perspectives, and seeks to harmonize a diverse range of interests. Today the dynamics of the political competition are narrowing the perspectives of each party in a manner that pushes them toward operating as the champion of one group of Americans against another—with dangerous results for all Americans. Reconfigured by the large forces we will explore . . . our politics today encourages confrontation over compromise. The political system now rewards ideology over pragmatism. It is designed to sharpen disagreements rather than construct consensus. It is built on exposing and inflaming the differences that separate Americans rather than the shared priorities and values that unite them. It produces too much animosity and too few solutions.

Political leaders on both sides now feel a relentless pressure for party discipline and intellectual conformity more common in parliamentary systems than through most of American history. Any politician who attempts to build alliances across party lines is more likely to provoke suspicion and criticism than praise. "People want you to choose sides so badly in modern politics, there is no ability to cross [party lines]," said Senator Lindsey Graham, a conservative but iconoclastic Republican from South Carolina. "You are one team versus the other and never shall the twain meet. If it's a Democratic idea, I have to be against it because it came from a Democrat. And vice versa."

Richard A. Gephardt of Missouri, the former Democratic leader in the House of Representatives, used almost the exact same terms to describe the changes he experienced during the twenty-eight years he served in the House before retiring after 2004. "There is no dialogue [between the parties]," he said. "You are either in the blue team or the red team, and you never wander off. It's like the British Parliament. And I never thought about it that much when I came, but it was very different then. It wasn't a parliamentary system, and people wandered off their side and voted in committee or on the floor with the other side. There was this understanding that we were there to solve problems."

The wars between the two parties that take place every day in Washington may seem to most Americans a form of distant posturing, like border clashes between two countries they could not find on the map. But this polarization of political life imposes a tangible cost on every American family—a failure to confront all of the problems listed above with sensible solutions that could improve life for average Americans. Less tangibly but as importantly, extreme partisanship has produced a toxic environment that empowers the most adversarial and shrill voices in each party and disenfranchises the millions of Americans more attracted to pragmatic compromise than to ideological crusades. The reflexive, even ritualized, combat of modern politics leaves fewer and fewer attractive choices for all Americans who don't want to be conscripted into a battle between feuding ideologues or forced to link arms with Michael Moore or Ann Coulter.\*

... [T]he trends in election results over the past several decades add to the portrait of a political system increasingly divided between stable, di-

\*Michael Moore and Ann Coulter—on the left and right, respectively—represent the more extreme sides of the political spectrum. Moore is a television and movie producer, famous for films such as *Bowling for Columbine* and *Capitalism: A Love Story*. Coulter, a prolific author, is known for her books including *Godless: The Church of Liberalism* and *Godly: Liberal "Yiftins" and Their Assault on America*—Eds.

vergent, and antagonistic camps. Ideologically, culturally, and geographically, the electoral coalitions of the two major parties have dispersed to the point where they now represent almost mirror images of each other. As this resorting has proceeded, each party has established powerful regional strongholds in which it dominates the presidential vote as well as House and Senate races. Each party, in other words, is consolidating its control over a formidable sphere of influence that provides it a stable foundation of support. The flip side is that each party is losing the ability to speak for the entire nation as it loses the capacity to effectively compete in large sections of the country...

The polarization of American politics is an enormously complex, interactive phenomenon. Its roots trace into factors far beyond the workings of the political system itself, into changes in social life, cultural attitudes, and America's place in the world. The tendency toward polarization has been fueled, on the one hand, by the rise of feminism and the gay rights movement, and on the other by the increasing popularity of fundamentalist and evangelical churches. It draws strength from the questions about America's international role opened by the end of the cold war. And it has been influenced by changes in residential patterns that appear to have increased the tendency of Americans to settle among neighbors who share their political views.

This book, though, will focus on the changes within the political system that have carried America into the age of hyperpartisanship: the changing nature of the party coalitions; the role of organized constituency groups in shaping the political debate; the shifts in the way the media interacts with political life; the changes in the rules and practices of Congress; and the strategies pursued by presidents and other political leaders. All of these changes are diminishing our capacity to resolve conflicts. Indeed, ... almost every major force in American political life now operates as an integrated machine to push the parties apart and to sharpen the disagreements in American life.

The consequences of hyperpartisanship are not all negative. The new alignment offers voters clear, stark choices. As recently as 1980 less than half of Americans told pollsters they saw important differences between the Republican and Democratic parties. Today, three fourths of Americans say they see important differences. With the choices so vividly clarified, more Americans are participating in the political system. Over 122 million people voted in 2004 [and over 130 million in 2008], nearly 17 million more than just four years earlier. The number of people who volunteered and contributed money to campaigns has soared too. One study found that the number of small donors to the presidential campaign increased at

least threefold, and perhaps even fourfold, from 2000 to 2004. Many of those small donors made their contributions through the Internet, which has demonstrated an extraordinary ability to connect ordinary citizens to politics. . . .

American politics isn't breaking down because the country's disagreements are inherently more difficult to bridge today. . . . It is breaking down because too few political leaders resist the rising pressures inside the parties for ideological and partisan conformity that make it more difficult to bridge our disagreements. Ideological voices are louder than perhaps ever before in all aspects of American politics, from Congress to the media, but that isn't because deeply ideological voters now dominate the American electorate. At its core, the problem isn't too many ideologues but too few conciliators willing to challenge the ideologues, and partisan warriors on each side demanding a polarized politics. The first step toward lowering the temperature in American politics is a political leadership that would rather douse fires than start them.

Today, though, the impulse to harmonize divergent interests has almost vanished from the capital. Rather than promoting consensus, Washington manufactures disagreement. In both parties, many politicians see it in their interests to widen, not narrow, the underlying divisions in society. Americans today are sincerely divided over the role of government in the economy, foreign policy (especially the Iraq War), and perhaps most intractably, cultural and social issues. But no one would say Americans are divided as violently and passionately as they were over civil rights and the Vietnam War in the 1960s, or the rise of the corporate economy in the 1890s, much less slavery in the 1850s. In each of those periods, the differences between Americans were so profound that they were expressed not just with words, but with fists, and clubs, and ultimately guns. (Think Kent State, the Homestead Steel strike, and John Brown, not to mention the Civil War.) Clearly the *country* has been more polarized than it is today. What's unusual now is that the *political system* is more polarized than the country. Rather than reducing the level of conflict, Washington increases it. That tendency, not the breadth of the underlying divisions itself, is the defining characteristic of our era and the principal cause of our impasse on so many problems.

The road to this point has been paved by the long list of factors. . . . It has been manifest in hundreds, even thousands, of discrete decisions, yet the overall direction has been unwavering. The center in American politics is eroding. Confrontation is rising. The parties are separating. And the conflict between them is widening.

With so many centrifugal forces at work, this era of hyperpartisanship

won't unwind easily or quickly. No one any time soon will confuse American politics with the era of good feeling that virtually eradicated partisan competition early in the nineteenth century. The forces encouraging polarization are now deeply entrenched, and they are unlikely to be entirely neutralized. Many of the most antagonistic features of American politics over the past fifteen years are likely to endure indefinitely. But that doesn't mean the country has to be as sharply and relentlessly divided as it is today. The parties have cooperated before to reach commonsense solutions that advance the national interest and could do so again. . . .