

Is there room for political compromise in an era of permanent campaigning?

As the 112th Congress convenes, it must work to preserve one of America's greatest and most threatened national resources – compromise. To do this, it must rein in the mindset of constant campaigning that isn't fit for the reality of governing.

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If politics is the art of the possible, then compromise is the soul of democracy. In the deal he proposed to extend the Bush-era tax cuts (now signed into law), President Obama reminded his critics on both sides of the aisle that the refusal to compromise can make everyone worse off. It privileges the status quo – in this case an earlier status quo that virtually no one wanted.

Why is compromise so hard? Obama was in a difficult position because in the 2008 campaign he had promised to reject tax cuts for the wealthiest Americans. Now he was proposing to accept them. His Democratic critics cried betrayal: We are not against compromise, they said, only this compromise, at least so soon. Stick to the principles you championed in the campaign. Hold out for more.

The Republicans were suddenly seized with the virtues of compromise, but only for this compromise, and only after their electoral success. If the Democratic critics are looking to the promises made in the last campaign, the Republicans are looking to the promise the next campaign holds for them.

The critics on both sides misunderstand what compromise in a democracy really requires: a different mindset than what they are currently displaying. But achieving this crucial mindset is becoming increasingly difficult – because of the rise of the never-ending campaign.

Campaigning vs. governing

Compromise requires a shift from the postures of campaigning to the positions of governing. The president's critics miss the depth of the problem when they focus on how the specific gains and concessions in the proposed compromise match their campaign platforms. They are still in campaign mode, operating with a mindset that is perfectly appropriate for running for office, but counterproductive for running a government.

This uncompromising mindset stands tenaciously on principle and mistrusts opponents. In that frame of mind, you can always believe that your side could have won more if only you had pressed harder or the other side had been more reasonable. When the uncompromising mindset prevails, desirable legislation founders.

The mindset that promotes compromise – which favors adapting one's principles and respecting one's opponents– used to be more robust than it is today. The most comprehensive tax reform legislation in modern American history, the Tax Reform Act of 1986, was forged with the support of a bipartisan group that included President Ronald Reagan, Democrats Dan Rostenkowski and Bill Bradley, and Republican Bob Packwood. They were partisans – by no means oblivious to electoral pressures, but prepared to take responsibility for governing, and adopt the attitudes required to fulfill it.

The incursion of campaigning into governing is increasing because campaigns have become, in effect, permanent. Campaigning is an essential part of the democratic process, but when it spreads out of its natural environment

and threatens the process of governance, it needs to be pruned back. The mindset it breeds is hostile to governing.

To govern, politicians need to look beyond how a particular compromise matches their campaign principles or how it affects their opponents' fortunes. While the compromising mindset attends to political realities, it also focuses on the most critical question for governing: Compared to the realistic alternatives, does this compromise promote the principles of both sides better than the status quo?

Shifting the balance

The influence of campaigning is not necessarily greater than other factors that make compromise difficult. Increased polarization in Congress and the parties certainly does not help. But the mindset associated with campaigning – with its overriding goal of producing a winner and a loser – reinforces and exacerbates all of the other factors. Sharp ideological differences would present less of an obstacle to compromise in the absence of the continual pressures of campaigning, and the mindset on which it thrives. Despite standing toward the right and left wings of their parties, respectively, Senators Orrin Hatch (R) and Ted Kennedy (D) managed (according to Hatch) “to come together in a bipartisan fashion to craft some of this nation’s most important health legislation,” among other legislative achievements.

We need to shift the balance in our democratic process more toward the compromising mindset and the promotion of political compromises it makes possible. This shift requires less governing by campaigning, and more respect for the virtue of compromise in its place.

This shift also requires some fundamental changes in our electoral and governing processes – changes that many observers believe desirable anyhow. We must regulate fundraising and provide public financing so that the pressures of campaigning are not so dominant in governing. We must prevent the abuse of congressional investigations for partisan purposes to make campaign points. We must design open government initiatives so that they engage moderate citizens and inform rather than manipulate, simply to mobilize. We must also regularly raise questions during the campaign about how candidates will govern.

The capacity for compromise has long been one of American democracy’s greatest natural resources, which we are now squandering. As the 112th Congress convenes, its conservation has never been more needed.

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