

Can California Save Congress?



Photo courtesy of Gloria Duffy

The partisan divide in Congress is widely noted and is measured in different ways. One way of gauging the trend toward extremism is tracking the lack of ideological overlap between Republican and Democratic members of Congress. A few decades ago, according to Brookings Institution data, some Democrats in Congress were more conservative than some Republicans, and vice versa. Today, there is zero ideological overlap. As *The Washington Post* announced last

year, “the ideological middle is dead in Congress.”

As Congress fights over the budget, factions attempt to undo prior legislation, and other bickering continues, the danger is that congressional paralysis prevents the United States from coping effectively in a world of dramatic challenges. From adoption of new technology to confronting terrorism and climate change, we face a competitive and demanding global milieu. The U.S. needs to be at the top of its game in the effectiveness of our political process, to meet the challenges.

Obviously, consensus and cooperation in our political structures are needed for our nation to be effective, just as they are essential in business or any other institution. Without the ability to compromise and make decisions, we face squabbling, backtracking and paralysis. And the dysfunction in Congress has begun to take a serious toll.

Over the past few decades, by many measures the United States has declined from being the world’s leader. Currently we are 10th worldwide in home ownership. The gap between rich and poor has widened, we are 13th in the quality of life index, and we are one of the last developed countries to put in place a modern health insurance system. We are 17th among industrialized countries in educational testing results overall and 23rd in math, and ninth in per-capita GDP. The World Economic Forum has pegged the state of U.S. infrastructure as 25th in the world. Some if not all of these declines can be traced to national policy paralysis.

But how can this now deeply rooted problem of congressional super-partisanship be addressed? Determining the possible solutions depends on an analysis of the cause. Many sources of congressional polarization have been identified. The lack of an engaged voting citizenry, the influence of lobbies and staff, the size and ungovernability

of our states and the nation, the dramatic nature of the challenges, the disincentives for moderates to run for office, ideological divisions in the electorate – all have been identified as causes.

Lee Hamilton, the veteran Indiana congressman, now retired, put his finger on the most direct cause when he said, “... computers have enabled state legislators – or members of Congress eager to dictate to them – to draw congressional district lines that create safely Democratic or Republican districts. The result is that politicians running for the U.S. House don’t have to appeal to the center to win, they need to appeal to the core of their parties’ supporters.” Those elected to Congress win by appealing to the extremes of their parties, and when they arrive in Washington, they are tethered to those ideological outposts.

In 2008, California took a bold step to replace the system of gerrymandering that was polarizing its state political process. Through ballot Proposition 11, California removed the drawing of state legislative districts from the hands of the state legislature, which had been following the pattern Hamilton described, and placed it in the hands

of the non-partisan Citizen’s Commission on Redistricting. Following a second ballot proposition in 2010, the Citizen’s Commission also draws California’s Congressional districts.

Early studies of this system indicate that it has produced some of the most competitive political races in the nation, including intra-party races in some California districts, and has led to the election of more moderate state and federal representatives for California. Twelve other states – Arizona, Hawaii, Idaho, Montana, New Jersey, Washington, Alaska,

Arkansas, Colorado, Missouri, Ohio and Pennsylvania – now have some form of non-partisan commissions, with varying but consistent results.

The concern about ultra-partisanship in Congress is growing, and one of the institutions that has decided to do something about it is the California-based Hewlett Foundation. The foundation has initiated a democracy initiative, the Madison Project, to “restore pragmatism and the spirit of compromise in Congress; to reform campaigns and elections so they set the stage for problem solving; and to promote an informed and active citizenry.”

Solving the national problem of partisan paralysis will take more than study, analysis and good will. It will take concrete changes to the political process, like changing the redistricting system in a majority of states. California can lead the way, through the example of its own reforms and the leadership of its institutions like the Hewlett Foundation. The Commonwealth Club has always given voice to and encouraged those dedicated to improving our political process, and we look forward to doing so as Californians tackle this fundamental problem. 🍷

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