

Advance praise for
VOICE OF THE PEOPLE

“If the shrill partisan rhetoric of American politics has become poisonous, then this book is the best antidote. Read it and weep for what America has lost; then read it again and celebrate for what we can find – if only we heed this book’s timely advice.”

MARK GERZON, *Author*

“Leading Through Conflict: How Successful Leaders Transform Differences Into Opportunities”

“***Voice of the People*** is a pragmatic invitation to all Americans, regardless of political persuasion, to work together as citizens to solve the great challenges we face that transcend the current partisan divides. Turner and Chickering are essentially proposing that those of us who care about our country and the common good must see ourselves as the new transpartisans, beyond left and right, who can break this political stalemate.”

– **BOB EDGAR**

President, Common Cause

“The transpartisan movement has begun to move America beyond the stale partisan rhetoric and fixed bayonets of past arguments. There are ways to rephrase questions and look anew at old challenges that unite Americans more than they divide us. ***Voice of the People*** highlights many of these new ways of looking at old challenges.

– **GROVER NORQUIST**, *conservative activist and President, Americans for Tax Reform*

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 reviews starting on page 183.

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Part I

The Crisis in Our Politics: Partisan Fatigue

Today's politicians disgust Americans. Before the 2006 elections, *Time Magazine* reported that a mere thirty-nine percent of likely voters approved of the Republican Congress. Forty-nine percent disapproved. At the same time, Congressional Democrats hovered at a thirty-nine percent approval rating, with fifty-six percent believing Democrats offered no clear set of alternative policies. On April 2, 2007, the Associated Press reported approval ratings of the new Democratic Congress at forty percent, with disapproval at fifty-seven percent.¹ The same day President Bush fared worse, with a thirty-five percent approval and sixty-seven percent disapproval rating.² These numbers continue to drop.

Americans disdain partisanship, as evidenced by the examples below.

Judy at AOL urges a unity campaign to fight both major parties, so that everyday people have more influence "than rich lobbyists, the media, and a handful of voters in early primary states."³

A Bluefield, West Virginia, man joins Judy saying, "I believe the constant fighting, bickering, and personal vendettas by both parties in Washington are detrimental to the welfare and national security of this country. . . I don't think any of the incumbents deserve reelection. Let's clean house and get a fresh start."⁴

From Washington State Phil says, "People don't talk politics anymore, except with people they agree with. You don't talk about it in the café. There's just the hate letters in the papers. It wasn't

always that way. The language of the campaigns has escalated in a way that has sort of brought out the worst in people. It's really divided communities – and families.”⁵

Despite people's antagonism toward conflict and partisanship, many Americans feel caught in a political system overwhelmed by conflict. They respond to the picture painted by Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist David Broder after the 2000 presidential election. “The divide went deeper than politics. It reached into the nation's psyche. The election left exactly half the country excited and optimistic and the other half concerned or scared.”⁶ The electronic media drove this sense of divide home on election nights in 2000 and 2004 with powerful graphic statements showing national maps of the country divided into red states and blue states (“conservative” and “liberal”).⁷

Today, both left and right seize on the widespread conception of deep political and cultural conflict, pitting the majority of Americans against asserted elites who they describe as hostile to traditional American values. Conservatives say the left-leaning media, entertainment industry, celebrities and other cultural elites are undermining society's moral fiber by preaching “sex, drugs, rock and roll” and other such dead doctrines of the permissive 1960s. Liberals say financial elites manipulate government, the media and consumers so as to amass personal fortunes that they use to undermine middle class viability, destroy the economic well-being of families and communities, and cripple what is necessary to sustain traditional democratic values.

Despite widespread belief to the contrary, however, there is no evidence of any deep partisan divide poisoning American institutions and political discourse, neither in our past history nor in the present. The problem lies in the terms of the debate. We need to rethink multiple issues, discover new possibilities that will bring people together, and create new hope to solve issues that are now thought to be beyond solution.

CHAPTER ONE

WHAT 'DIVIDE'? : OUR PHANTOM POLITICAL CONFLICTS

Although the evidence shows that our country does suffer deep political and cultural divisions, the conflicts are not among ordinary people; they are between ordinary people and political elites. In our highly stylized political structure, everyone, winners and opponents alike, play dehumanizing roles that cause the whole apparatus to resemble a cross between sumo wrestling and Kabuki theatre.

Elites, winners and opposition both, exaggerate and promote conflict primarily by focusing all their attention on governments for solutions. They ignore the powerful opportunities for citizens to play active, connected, and critical roles – roles that often require partnering with governments. Simultaneously, citizen constituents play the role of impotents, opting out of voting, disillusioned with governing elites, and drifting out of political activity. Nothing can be done, they seem to say; the system is stacked against us.

At the same time they feel alienated from the political system, ordinary citizens are increasingly empowered by affluence, technology, and other factors to play a more active role, and they are demanding it. This increases the conflict.

Our leaders appear at odds with the very people they claim to represent. Our citizens challenge them and our political institutions in ways for which neither is well prepared, for two reasons:

1) American culture in the twenty first century has grown big, varied, and vibrant, and

2) Citizens have become active and connected, primarily by technology, transportation, and affluence, as never before.

Demographic trends, the emerging information culture, and the power of historical American imperatives are creating a new political constituency, one that offers a powerful, new role for citizens in public spaces and a new hope for solving problems that in the past have seemed beyond solution. This powerful, new popular force explains, in part, the results of the presidential primary contests for both the Democratic and Republican Parties in 2008. As of this writing, the anti-establishment (though we would say not yet transpartisan) candidates, McCain and Obama, seem to have overcome the organizational and political pressures of the Establishment – represented by the Clintons for the Democrats and by the “conservatives” for the Republicans. This new, transpartisan force has been, until now, excluded from mainstream politics by a combination of economic, institutional, and philosophical factors that have promoted conflict while concealing opportunities for collaboration. But now the transpartisans are the majority of Americans; as this majority engages, things will change.

The Divided America Myth

Morris P. Fiorina, senior fellow at the Hoover Institution and professor of Political Science at Stanford, in a book called *Culture War: The Myth of a Polarized America*, states the reality: “[T]here is no culture war in the United States – no battle for the soul of America rages, at least none that most Americans are aware of.” “The myth of a culture war,” he writes,

rests on misinterpretation of election returns, a lack of comprehensive examination of public opinion data, systematic and self-serving misrepresentation by issue activists, and selective coverage by an uncritical media more concerned with news value than with getting the story right. There is little evidence that Americans’ ideological or policy positions are more polarized today than they were two or three decades ago, although their choices often seem to be.

Fiorina states the key distinction: “The explanation is that the political figures Americans evaluate are more polarized. A polarized political class makes the citizenry appear polarized, but is it largely that – an appearance.” On most issues, he writes, “America is not the fatally polarized nation we often imagine it to be. On most issues, the majority of red-staters and blue-staters are on the same side.” He includes the following examples:

Upward of 35 percent of gun owners voted for John Kerry in 2004, as did a similar proportion of born-again Christians. A narrow majority of red-state residents joined a larger majority of blue-state residents who favored making gun regulations stricter. Solid majorities of blue-state residents share red-state residents’ support for the death penalty and opposition to gay marriage. Political differences? Yes. A cultural chasm? No.

Fiorina cites research of political scientists Christopher R. Ellis and James A. Stimson “that only one-fifth of self-classified conservatives held consistently conservative views on both social and economic issues. About one-third were consistent social but not economic conservatives, and about one-sixth were consistent economic but not social conservatives. One-third of self-classified conservatives were neither consistent social nor economic conservatives on specific issues.”

On abortion he reports that about thirty percent of self-identified Democrats believe that abortion should be “legal under all circumstances” and only about thirty percent of Republicans believe abortion should be “illegal in all circumstances.” Large pluralities of both parties prefer “legal only under certain circumstances.” He reports the 2004 National Election Study, finding that twenty-three percent of Americans who classified themselves as strong Republicans said that abortion should always be legal, compared to twenty-two percent who said that it should never be legal.

In 2005 Jonathan Rauch, writer-in-residence at The Brookings Institution, elaborated on these themes, after surveying polling and research data on the American electorate:

In a two-party universe, things indeed now look impassionedly divided and inflamed. But, we do not live in a two-party universe. The fastest-growing group in American politics is independents, many of them centrists who identify with neither party and can tip the balance in close elections. According to the Pew Research Center for the People and the Press, since the Iraq War thirty percent of Americans have identified themselves as Republicans, thirty-one percent as Democrats, and thirty-nine percent as independents (or “other”). Registered voters split into even thirds.²

The 2005 Pew study elaborates:

The typology study’s finding of significant cleavages within parties not only runs counter to the widespread impression of a nation increasingly divided into two unified camps, but also raises questions about political alignments in the future. In particular, the study suggests that if the political agenda turns away from issues of defense and security, prospects for party unity could weaken significantly. . . . [N]umerous opportunities exist for building coalitions across party lines on many issues currently facing the nation . . . coalitions that, in many cases, include some strange political bedfellows. Overall, there are many more shades to the American political landscape than just the red and blue dividing the Electoral College maps last November 2nd.³

The Pew data showed that on issues of the environment, immigration, government regulation, and isolationism versus global activism, major fissures exist in one or both political parties. (The contentious immigration debate within the Republican Party may be merely a precursor of more contention to come on more issues within both parties.)

The Pew data also showed divides both between and within the major parties on six issues – religion and moral values, welfare,

cooperation with allies, business and free markets, cynicism about politics, and individualism versus federalism. Today, three years after the Pew study, even “national security” no longer serves as a clear demarcation between “conservatives” and “liberals.”

On real issues, “red” and “blue” partisan posturing fails to define the multihued civic discourse underway across the country. Pew drew its data from voters identified as major party partisans – the party stalwarts. It addressed only tangentially the Americans who fail to identify with either of the two major parties. When the values and views of these unaffiliated Americans are considered, there is even more American unity than the Pew study found.

Even on an ostensibly contentious issue like immigration majorities, more than sixty percent – including sixty-six percent of Republicans and seventy-two percent of Democrats – who support creation of a guest-worker program also support broad provisions of the immigration bill that failed the US Senate amidst partisan bickering.⁴ Sixty-one percent believe that we should have stayed out of Iraq, and sixty-three percent believe we should withdraw by 2008. Today, seventy-two percent of Americans – more than at any other time since the *Times/CBS News* poll began asking the question in 1983, agree that “generally things in the country are seriously off on the wrong track”.⁵

While partisans may populate the extremes, ordinary people mix and match values from allegedly competing menus. Rauch quoted sociologist and opinion researcher Alan Wolfe, saying he “found his subjects to be ‘above all moderate,’ ‘reluctant to pass judgment,’ and ‘tolerant to a fault.’ Because opinion polls are designed to elicit and categorize disagreements, he concluded, they tend to obscure and even distort the reality of agreement.”⁶

Rauch puts all the data together to answer the core question he poses: is there a chasm dividing America? “In the fifty-fifty nation,” he asks, “does the distribution of opinion look like a football, with Americans divided but clustered around the mid-

dle? Or has it come to look like a dumbbell, with more people at the extremes and fewer in the center?” He cites sociologists Paul DiMaggio, John Evans, and Bethany Bryson, who answer that question based on twenty years’ worth of data from two periodic surveys of public opinion. “They found no change in the ‘bimodality’ of public opinion over the two decades. The football was not becoming a dumbbell.”⁷

The Transpartisan Majority: A Different America

If voters are not as conflicted as their leaders, how large is the potential transpartisan political constituency?

The transpartisan constituency begins with thirty-nine percent of registered independents. We should add to this group most of the thirty-four percent of Americans over eighteen who have not registered to vote. These figures total fifty-eight million independents and seventy-three million unregistered, equaling 131 million people disassociated from the major parties in a country where 125 million voted for president in 2004.⁸

This majority of constitutionally eligible voters not affiliated with the major parties is broadened by the thousands of Republican and Democratic Party members who are as disgusted by ugly partisanship as are the citizen critics who turn away from party affiliations and even from politics itself.

The data reviews by Rauch and Fiorina make it clear that Americans occupy a political world larger and more diverse than that allowed by the two-party system entrusted with representing them. Neither partisan attitudes nor partisan voting accurately speaks for this powerful transpartisan impulse at a time of profound political transformation. Our political institutions and the media, armed with agendas that artificially encourage, magnify and highlight conflict, systematically conceal agreement and discourage cooperation across current ideologically-proclaimed party lines. Although there are powerful indications of a desire to cooperate, political leaders systematically ignore, and even suppress, attempts to promote cooperation.

Faced with great voter dissatisfaction and with a large, untapped political constituency waiting to be discovered, why have more collaborative political leaders not appeared to appeal to them? Why are our political leaders (with some conspicuous exceptions) so doggedly wedded to conflict?

One of the most important reasons is that conflict produces rewards. While many political partisans believe they are serving the public interest, others have substantial, vested interests in conflict. Their interest comes from dividing spoils created by a system that focuses all attention on government and the favors it can dispense. Even, or perhaps especially, when an issue is principled, the partisans administering closely-divided governments make every issue a cliffhanger and every action wrenching. Thus, partisan bickering, wheeling, dealing, and playing to partisan crowds often ends in great personal gain for its practitioners, while often (if not usually) ignoring the values of real Americans and their desire to share responsibility for solving problems in public spaces.

Morris Fiorina reaches similar conclusions. Politics is out of touch with Americans, Fiorina says, because it “usually reflects an unrepresentative political class of . . . officeholders, interest-group leaders, political info-tainers, and issue activists – people in these roles constitute a political class that often represents the public face of politics in America.” This is the fiercely partisan political power elite that is profoundly out of touch with the American people.

Language: Partly a Problem of Words

The problem, we believe, begins with language. We believe that the American political vocabulary and its governing concepts – “conservative right” and “liberal left” – have neither conceptual clarity nor practical relevance since each concept contains contradictory meanings, and neither represents real people, individually or collectively.

We suggest replacing the simple left-right spectrum with the matrix described by A. Lawrence Chickering, co-author of this essay, in his 1993 book *Beyond Left and Right*.⁹ Chickering argued that not two but four positions – a “freedom” position and an “order” position on both the left and the right – compete for political allegiance in our system.

The freedom right tends to focus on reason – the order right on tradition and faith. The freedom right are the free market, libertarian conservatives, who embrace the modernist values of individualism, freedom, reason, progress and rights. Examples would begin with the late economist Milton Friedman and, in fact, with economists as a group. The order right are traditional, often religious, conservatives – and on many issues neo-conservatives – who believe that modern problems result from the assault on traditional virtues by the very modernist values embraced by “conservatives” on the freedom right. They would include religious leaders like the late Jerry Falwell (the Moral Majority) and many neoconservatives (Irving Kristol, Seymour Martin Lipset, and many others).

A similar conflict may be found on the left between the order (or social democratic) left and the freedom (or civil libertarian) left. The freedom left includes both advocacy groups for individual rights such as the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) and anti-government counter-culturists, some of whom identify themselves as “left-libertarians.” Both of these freedom left groups are radical decentralizers suspicious of large organizations, both public and private, and opposing the mechanistic, material ambitions of the order left as well as those of the order right. The order left, for example, leans toward national plans such as requirements to buy health insurance while the free left is more inclined to a national health plan that allows choice.

Rauch reached a similar conclusion about conflict, both between the parties and within them. He also notes that the struggle about values is going on within individuals. He writes:

By no means, then does partisan parity necessarily imply a deeply divided citizenry. People who talk about culture wars usually have in mind not merely a close division (50/50) but a wide or deep division – two populations with distinct and incompatible world views. ...One ‘orthodox,’ the other ‘progressive’. ... One faction emphasizes duty and morality; another stresses individual rights and self-fulfillment...the result is a ‘values divide’ – indeed, a ‘chasm’. ... [He quotes sociologist Alan Wolfe as saying] ‘The two sides presumed to be fighting the culture war do not so much represent a divide between one group of Americans and another as a divide between sets of values important to everyone.’

These conflicts within both left and right explain why “conservatives” and “liberals” can be found on all sides of almost every major issue, as both the Fiorina and Rauch data indicate. “Conservatives” can be found both passionately for and passionately against the Iraq War, gay marriage, increasing international trade, and countless other issues. Libertarians like the late Milton Friedman and the Cato Institute opposed the war from the beginning.¹⁰ Part of the order right, including neoconservatives, have generally supported the war, while an isolationist strain leads traditional conservatives like Pat Buchanan to oppose the war. The freedom right likes the fact that markets operating efficiently tend to be “value neutral,” while the order right often sees markets eroding traditional values.

“Liberals” can also be found voting for and against the resolution authorizing the Iraq war,¹¹ gay marriage,¹² globalization,¹³ and countless other issues.

These conflicts within both the left and right cause theoretical as well as practical difficulties for both. The theoretical problems are obvious. They arise when it becomes difficult to say what a “conservative” or “liberal” believes. But beyond theory and language, large practical problems arise for both when they try to govern.

The most obvious tension disturbing the current, “conservative” administration relates to its prosecution of the war in Iraq. It is a project most supported by the order right, a project which has greatly increased the size and power of government. Still, following the freedom right, the administration continues to encourage people to distrust the government, a stance that weakens its authority in prosecuting its war policy. The president does this almost every time he advocates lower taxes and reduced spending.

The greatest practical problem facing Democrats and the left when they are in power arises when the order left tries to sell government as the instrument for promoting social justice against the freedom left’s unrelenting commitment, like libertarians of the freedom right, to encourage people to distrust the government. Anti-government agitation by the freedom wings of both the left and right thus complicates important priorities in the policy agendas of the order wings of both.

A classic example of conflict between order and freedom impulses on the left occurred when the Clinton Administration embraced welfare reform. *The Washington Post* called this initiative a dramatic “devolution” of responsibility – turning what used to be a federal, centralized system over to the states. Clinton himself, on its tenth anniversary, hailed his welfare reform as a bipartisan achievement that shrank welfare rolls and put single mothers to work. Nevertheless, many liberals attacked the new law as draconian, and several key “liberal” Clinton supporters quit high-level government posts in protest.

When one side or the other is in power, strong incentives exist for their freedom and order wings to paper over their differences and even deny them. That describes how George W. Bush, directed by his political advisor Karl Rove, has, until recently, been able to hold in lock-step – under one “conservative” banner – such diverse, often contradictory, beliefs. But

when the contradictions start to weaken the coherence of the party's program – as is happening now to the Republicans and (to pick a striking example from the past) as happened to the Democrats at the end of the 1960s – the contradictions tend to erupt into open conflict.

What forces drive the conflict between freedom and order? Chickering argued that the conflict serves both left and right in their search for integration of the two sets of values that are centrally important to both all modern societies and to all modern people.

The integration of rights and responsibilities – or freedom and order – presents the great challenge to, and opportunity for, the emergence of a new transpartisan politics.