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The center sags, America groans



Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton. (Mary Altaffer And Chuck Burton/Associated Press)

by Robert J. Samuelson

On this Fourth of July, Americans are deeply disillusioned with politics and government. [A Pew poll late last year](#) found that only 19 percent of people trust the government all or most of the time. It was not always so. In 1964, fully 77 percent of Americans answered the question positively. Disenchantment extends to [Hillary Clinton](#) and [Donald Trump](#), their parties' presumptive nominees. Both have "unfavorable" ratings exceeding 50 percent, reports RealClearPolitics. For millions of Americans, the election is a choice between evils.

Politics and government seem broken. There is a palpable sense of betrayal. Voters are said to be angry. The sour climate suggests people believe the country isn't living up to its potential or, worse, the potential is declining. Despite many proposals from the presidential candidates, there is no real consensus about what to do. The contest for the White House is, so far, more about character than ideas.

The onset of this disillusion is usually attributed, in the 1960s and '70s, to the war in Vietnam, Watergate and double-digit inflation. All of these discredited national leaders. More recently, broad economic and social forces are blamed. A partial list would include: income inequality; globalization — trade and its impact on jobs and wages; resentment of “elites” in both parties; immigration and its alleged threat to traditional American values.

There is something to this standard indictment. No doubt, these economic discontents, amplified by the hangover from the Great Recession, have fueled fears that the country is dangerously adrift. Indeed, they may have spawned a populist uprising on a global scale. Witness Brexit — Britain's vote to leave the European Union. Still, this widespread view of the United States' political predicament is incomplete.

What's omitted is the capacity of government and the political system to deal with new conflicts. Remember: Politics is about conflict. If everyone agreed on everything, we wouldn't need politics or democracy. A “dictatorship of experts” would implement a universally accepted agenda. Obviously, this is not the case. The United States is awash in new conflicts that the political system has struggled to contain.

To see what has happened, go back to 1960. American society was then highly compartmentalized. Men and women had rigid gender roles: men as breadwinners, women as homemakers. African Americans were restricted by legal segregation (the South) and informal segregation (almost everywhere else). Homosexuality was not discussed. There was little environmental regulation. Immigration was not an issue. The federal government, despite the creation of Social Security (1935) and the [Interstate Highway program \(1956\)](#), was still dominated by defense. In 1960, it was [52 percent of government spending](#).

Although mostly undesirable, these compartments had one virtue: They suppressed conflict. Once the compartments began crumbling, conflicts multiplied. Women took paying jobs by the millions. Racial segregation was outlawed. Gay rights were established. Environmental regulation exploded. Immigration, legal and illegal, increased. Social spending soared; by 2015, defense was only 16 percent of the federal budget. The need was to come to grips with the resulting conflicts.

The trouble is that the country was less capable of dealing with them, because — for decades — we systematically weakened the political parties, a crucial mediating institution, writes [Jonathan Rauch in a powerful essay in the Atlantic](#). The stalemates on the budget, immigration and global warming exemplify the political deadlock.

Political leaders have less power “than ever before” to reward and protect party loyalists “who take a tough congressional vote . . . or who dare cross single-issue voters and interests,” writes Rauch. Once, those powers were considerable. Parties selected candidates for office and funded their campaigns. In Congress, committee chairmen could fashion controversial legislation behind closed doors.

All these powers have been curbed. Candidates nominate themselves by running in primaries; they become free agents. Contributions to candidates and parties are limited by law; this has inspired “independent” groups, outside the candidates’ and parties’ direct control, that provide substantial campaign funding. Committee meetings must generally be open.

The new political system favors ideological extremes. “Inside their gerrymandered districts,” Rauch argues, “incumbents are insulated from general-election challenges that might pull them toward the political center, but they are perpetually vulnerable to primary challenges from extremists who pull them toward the fringes.” Ideological “purity” trumps pragmatism. Technology reinforces the bias. In the Web and cable-news era, politicians constantly need to reassure their constituents that they haven’t sold out.

On this Fourth of July, American politics seem stuck. Too many conflicts collide with too little conciliation. Ironically, many “reforms” that aim to make the political system more accountable and responsive have had the opposite effect. There are centrist proposals to deal with our problems that would probably help and seem to enjoy majority support. But they’re doomed by opposition from the political extremes. The center sags and paralysis prevails.

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