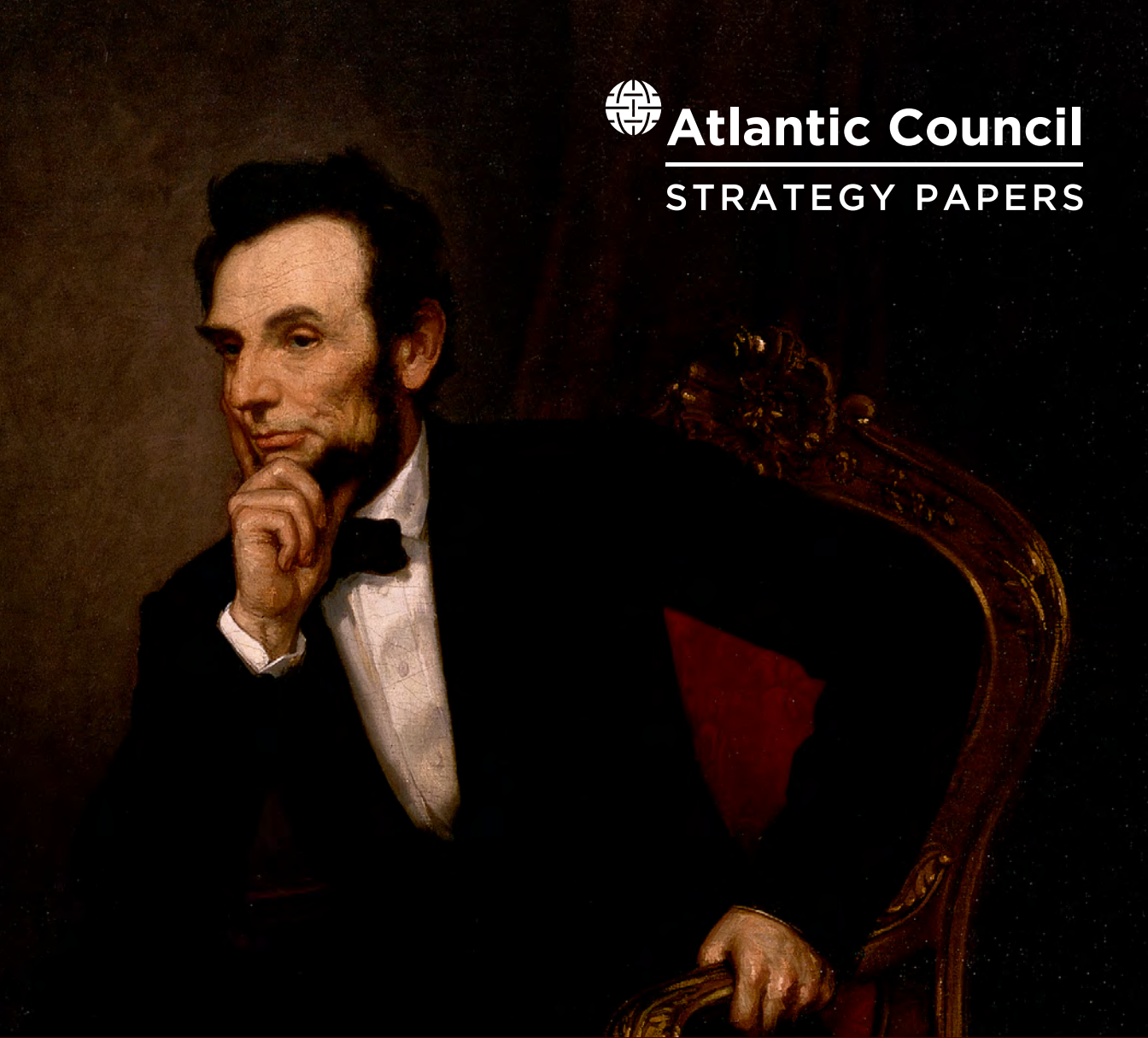




**Atlantic Council**

**STRATEGY PAPERS**



# **Whither America?**

## **A Strategy for Repairing America's Political Culture**

John Raidt  
Foreword by Ellen O. Tauscher

# Whither America?

## A Strategy for Repairing America's Political Culture

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**November 2017**

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## Foreword

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**T**he United States faces threats from outside its borders, but also from within. While domestic issues including healthcare, immigration, and tax reform occupy the media, a more sinister threat exists underfoot. The political system that once created a strong, prosperous, and united nation now sows division. Election campaigns are now a lucrative industry for the wealthy and well-connected, while the elections have lost substance in favor of showmanship. Politicians are more consumed with their own re-election rather than looking after the interests of their constituents. Media organizations have become both enablers and promoters of America's bad habit of treating politics as a reality show. Technology has created partisan echo chambers and undermined our ability to achieve political consensus. Without a United States strong to its core, its interests in the world will suffer. Our partners around the world see how America has lost its bearings within the changing world order.

In this *Atlantic Council Strategy Paper*, John Raidt diagnoses the myriad problems from the inside, having worked in the corridors of power on Capitol Hill and the executive branch. He highlights how difficult it is to reform the political system. His analogy—a system of gears grinding to crush the spirit of democracy—is a fitting visual for the complex interactions that benefit those at the center of power even while public regard for US institutions decline. Raidt indicts both Republicans and Democrats for failing to govern effectively and fairly. Dissecting the issues with personal anecdotes of government's dysfunction gathered during his extensive career, Raidt's paper provides decision makers with concrete proposals to rejuvenate our political system.

In supporting this paper, the Atlantic Council recognizes that a successful foreign policy requires a strong body politic inside the country. Today's dysfunction is not only reflected in increasing political logjams over domestic problems like healthcare, but also Congress' and the executive's inability to craft a cross-party consensus in key foreign policy areas. Often the United States forgets that one of the pillars of our legitimacy abroad is our ability to function as a healthy democratic system at home. As domestic dysfunction undermines our ability to operate properly, the United States loses legitimacy in the eyes of allies and, more alarmingly, adversaries.

## Whither America? A Strategy for Repairing America's Political Culture

This paper reminds us that democracy worldwide is being tested. If we fail at home, how can we call for other nations to become or remain democratic? Adhering to these principles through trying times is what has made America an unrivaled model and a formidable opponent in the past. Raidt reminds us that we need not accept the current political climate as is. Though it will take courage and the will to move beyond political expediency to rehabilitate the US political system, it is vital to persevere, bolstering the United States as it faces the growing uncertainties ahead. If not, we face the ultimate question: whither America?

A handwritten signature in cursive script, reading "Ellen O. Tauscher".

**The Hon. Ellen O. Tauscher**

*Vice Chair, Brent Scowcroft Center on International Security  
Atlantic Council;*

*Former Under Secretary of State for Arms Control and International Security Affairs;  
Former Member of the US House of Representatives from California's 10th District*

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## Executive Summary

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It would be comforting to dismiss last year's disturbing presidential contest and the chaotic start to the present administration as an anomalous episode in the nation's political life. In truth, however, the tumult and turmoil of the past two years are the product of alarming trends that have created a justified anxiety at home and abroad about the health and direction of the American political system.

The nation's policy debates and political campaigns grow more vacuous and degrading by the day. Many of the country's public institutions, most notably Congress, seem increasingly inept and dangerously dysfunctional. Permanent campaign mode is distracting the country's institutions from their responsibilities, alienating the public from civic processes, and leaving the country vulnerable to foreign interference.

In an era when national cohesion and exceptional leadership are essential, the US political system seems designed to widen and exploit divisions, rather than reconcile them. The country's sensible center is being overwhelmed by ideological fringes that crush its capacity for consensus and compromise. Serious thinkers, problem solvers, and leaders are disappearing from public office, leaving long-standing national challenges unaddressed. Fading with them are central institutions—such as powerful parties, party leaders, and committee chairmen—able to marshal governing coalitions to make decisions.

For all of these reasons, the question resonates across the watching world: *whither the indispensable nation?* This report analyzes this troubling question, and offers a strategy for correcting course.

The mechanics of the broken US political engine are complex, but relatively easy to depict. Its fuel is money; money flows to its various components the way gasoline drives pistons in a cylinder. At the axis is a mercenary election industry. Larger than the two political parties, their officeholders, and candidates, the election cartel encompasses an expanding corps of political, campaign, and special-interest functionaries on both sides of the aisle, whose livelihoods are co-invested in the business model of perpetual conflict centered on money and power. The partisan

### **Permanent campaign mode is distracting the country's institutions from their responsibilities, alienating the public from civic processes, and leaving the country vulnerable to foreign interference.**

divide is dangerously codependent; each side needs the other, demonizing it to energize its “base” and raise money.

The report unpacks how the fuel—money—drives the cartel's machinations as it interacts with and exploits amplifying forces—legal, structural, media, technological, and social. Some of these forces are devised by the election industry to advance its interests, while others are circumstances of modern life. Combined, they form a powerful, and accelerating, drivetrain of political division and dysfunction. The most disturbing aspect of this engine of division and dysfunction is what it discards as mere waste products: the very virtues necessary to sustain healthy and vibrant democracy.

One might sprint to the conclusion that this report is about the oft-cited boogeyman of partisanship. Partisanship, however, is too imprecise and distracting a diagnosis. American politics have always been contentious, per se “partisan.” Vigorous democracy and a truly open marketplace of ideas are meant to be pluralistic, competitive, and, at times, messy. Even organized partisanship in the form of political parties is no vice when exercised earnestly within the confines of the US constitutional system, which is designed to fairly and functionally reconcile diverse views and interests. At their best, parties bring organization and coherence to the democratic process—even if it is not always pretty or polite. All of that counts for little, though, if they are not—in practical ways—principled, responsible, and empowered.

When mercenary political aims subvert national interest, when an orderly marketplace of ideas for testing truth becomes a confusing riot of deception and spin, and when pursuing tribal political rivalry becomes more important than seeking the public good, something far deeper and more corrosive than partisanship is at work. The United States is drifting into a destabilizing Balkanism. Such a course can be reversed only by dismantling the bogus machinery driving division and dysfunction, and ending the toll it is taking on the national character

1. **Casualty of Virtues:** The political machinery's gears produce division and dysfunction. This paper will first look at how the dynamics are laying waste to



virtues that are fundamental to the long-term health and vibrancy of democracy—virtues that are the true source of American greatness.

2. **Never-Ending and Dirty Campaigns:** The election industry’s calculated demonization, fearmongering, and finger-pointing to win campaign donations and partisan edge have driven public cynicism to epic levels. Witness that Republicans make sport of demonizing government to their communities, while Democrats bash private enterprise to theirs. The notion that proficient government and business are co-ingredients of American success has been lost. In the precincts of power, ideas are no longer good or bad; they are Republican or Democratic. Their merit is calibrated based on partisan and incumbent advantage, rather than on genuine national interest. As the nation reaps the discord sown by interparty warfare, factional animosity grows, national problems worsen, the public becomes more alienated, and good people withdraw from the political process.
3. **Corrosive Big Money:** Partisan conflict and incumbency are institutionalized by campaign-finance laws and practices that perpetuate a distracted and money-obsessed pay-to-play political system, in which factional and special interests reign over the common good. Public trust has been poisoned by laws and judicial decisions that equate money with political speech, amplifying the influence of wealthy individuals, corporations, and unions above the American mainstream.
4. **Dysfunctional Structure:** The partisan battle lines are hardened by gerrymandering that artificially makes “Red America” redder and “Blue America” bluer. This populates the spectacularly inert Congress with a growing cadre of ideologues more interested in appeasing factions to gain reelection than in finding consensus. Tens of millions of voters, including many independents, are disenfranchised by laws excluding them from a say in the vital primary voting process, leaving the selection of candidates to increasingly polarized partisans. Also, winner-takes-all Electoral College votes encourage presidential candidates to chase their base, rather than appeal to a broader electorate. Upon attaining office, professional politicians operate under congressional rules and practices rigged to prosecute partisan conflict and promote incumbency, rather than to solve problems.

### 5. **Slanted and Self-Serving Media:**

The disappearance of the Fairness Doctrine from the public's airwaves in the early 1980s has ushered in an era of partisan "news." Party-organ media have abandoned their role as fact-finders and truth-tellers in the quest for partisan-based market share. For many media outlets, sensationalism and conflict are business essentials, creating a codependence with the perpetually warring political parties. The greater the conflict, the fatter the campaign war chests. The more political spending there is, the bigger the media bonanza. This is the calculus edging out traditional journalistic ethics of fairness and responsibility, and helping widen the political divide

**The adversaries of freedom are taking note and seeking to exploit internal US conflicts, in the hope of toppling the United States and the idea of democracy from the inside.**

6. **Technology's Role in Political Decay:** The Internet is transforming the practice of politics. While democratizing the public megaphone, and facilitating citizen activism and organization, the web has also proven to be a partisan snare. Technology has vested the campaign industry with more potent tools of manipulation and division. Big-data analytics are helping politicians micro-pander to donors and supporters, further Balkanizing the electorate and obscuring big-picture national requirements. Social media are driving people into cloistered communities of the like-minded, where confirmation bias thrives, reinforcing social divisions. The "Twitterization" of political discourse is trivializing complex issues with bumper-sticker messaging that plays on emotions, at the expense of facts and balance. The proliferation of broadcast, cable, and satellite media outlets means that politicians, issue advocates, and the press must speak louder, brasher, and more divisively to gain attention at scale.
7. **Cultural Degradation:** The foregoing dynamics are amplified by a host of social and cultural factors that create fertile ground for the campaign industry's most polarizing and manipulative practices. These include a national attention deficit and a debilitating short-termism that favors tactics over long-term strategy, yielding poor national outcomes. The raft of unmet economic, social, and

national security challenges reinforces the system's most destructive behaviors, creating an unbreakable circle of blame and gridlock.

All of these forces contribute to a political ecosystem that nurtures and advances politicians skilled in the arts of campaigning, while marginalizing, or repulsing, true leaders—a big reason for a Congress and political leaders steeped in tactics, rather than strategies, and guided by interests, rather than principles.

How the United States navigates the modern challenges to self-government will greatly determine its fate, and the fate of democracy. The world has always looked to the United States as a model of what remains the best form of governance known to man. If not democracy, what? As it is, friends and admirers abroad puzzle at the political foundering and wonder whether the American model is truly worth emulating. Many have started to look elsewhere—like to China and Russia—for leadership. The adversaries of freedom are taking note and seeking to exploit internal US conflicts, in the hope of toppling the United States and the idea of democracy from the inside. For these reasons, domestic political reform has become an authentic national and international security imperative.

The campaign to fix this broken system draws on principles and lessons from the country's experience in four other historic reform movements. At the start of the twentieth century, the country busted business trusts to meet the nation's commercial and economic needs by promoting competition. It is time we use the same methods for fulfilling the country's governance needs by breaking the stale Republican and Democrat duopoly and making the parties more competitive and responsive to national demands.

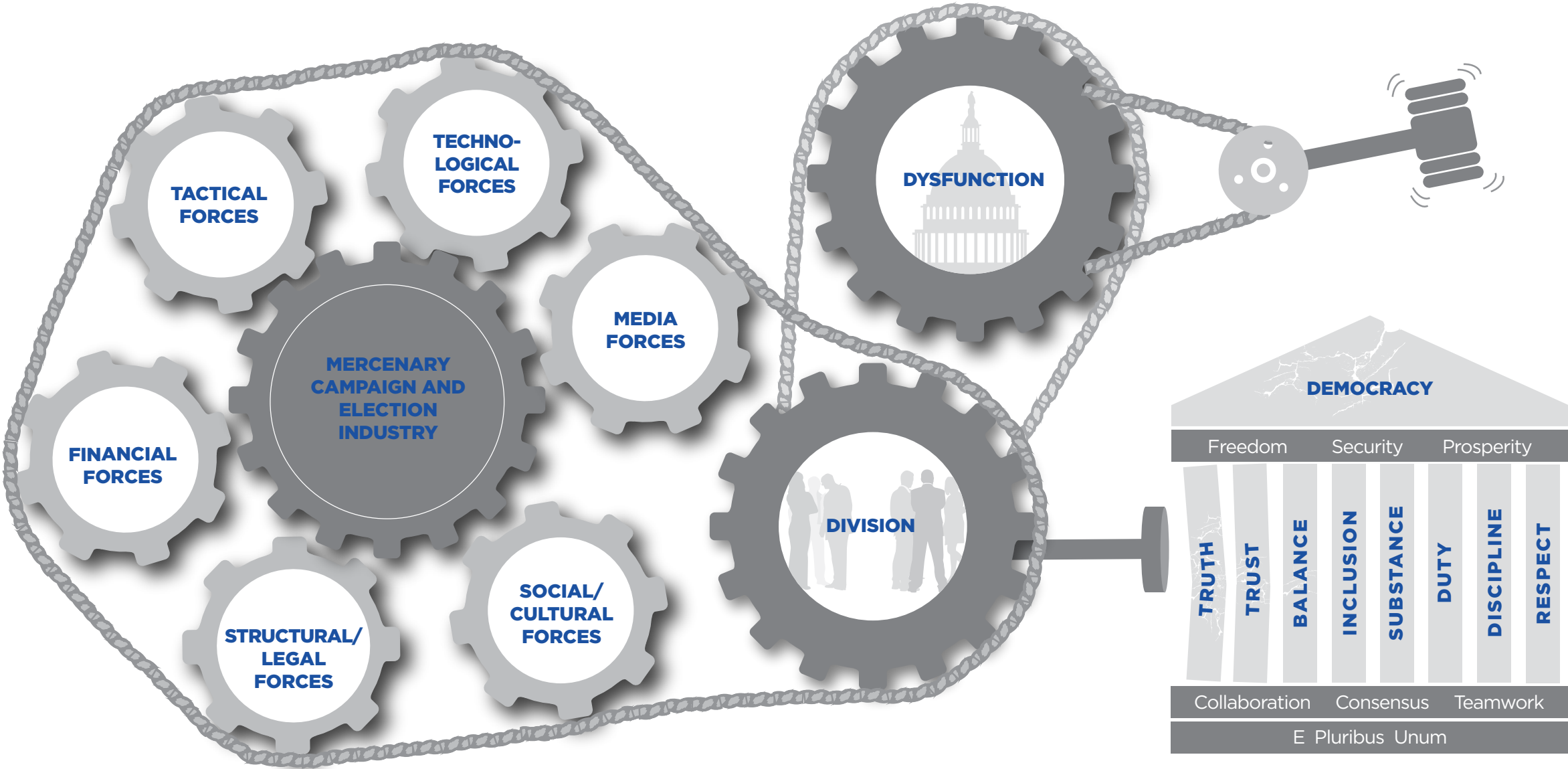
The country's stale political duopoly, Republican and Democratic, is failing to meet the demand for responsible political services and the production of good governance. It is time to apply to our polity, the sound market principles and tools that the nation has employed to build the most prosperous economy in history: vigorous and fair competition; market transparency and responsiveness to market signals; disruptive innovation; and, finally, tailored regulation where markets are failing. In 1986, Congress overhauled the nation's military to bring greater cohesion and unity of effort to the national security missions. It is time to flip the script and bring greater jointness and effectiveness to policymaking and governance. Understanding that Americans are entitled to know the provenance and content of their food supply, policymakers and business leaders instituted greater transparency. It is time for greater public insight into the origins and content of what the political and media industry seeks to put into the public mind. And, political reform must take its cue from the long struggle for civil rights. It is time to recognize that clean

## Whither America? A Strategy for Repairing America's Political Culture

politics and good government are fundamental civil rights, requiring an energetic national movement to compel the necessary changes in law, policy, practice, and ourselves to secure them. This report's cover depicts Abraham Lincoln, who delivered the Gettysburg Address on the field where so many Americans made the ultimate sacrifice. Lincoln's commission to the nation remains our own—to dedicate ourselves to the “unfinished work” of freedom “that government of the people, by the people, for the people shall not perish from the earth.” That, is whither America.

The national interest requires that Americans summon the nation's profound powers and courage once again to override a status quo that poses a clear and present danger to the country—indeed, to the very idea of democracy. Without authentic political reform, we cannot hope to meet the many challenges to the nation's prosperity and security. Failure would signal an American exit from global leadership, when the cause of freedom needs the country at its best.

Whither reform? What greater patriotic mission could exist in these turbulent times than to reset the steady course of freedom?



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# Whither America?

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**M**onumental challenges and opportunities go unattended as US political culture degrades, the nation becomes more divided, and government loses touch with the electorate. The fecklessness and folly of the nation's politics have driven public cynicism to epidemic levels. A strong majority of Americans believes the nation is headed in the wrong direction.<sup>1</sup> Recent polls show that fewer than one in five find that government can be relied upon to do the right thing most of the time, and most Americans do not believe political leaders can be trusted.<sup>2</sup> The world looks on the country's self-destructiveness and incapacity with growing alarm. US friends and admirers know that political dysfunction is not the hallmark of a sustainable superpower. Freedom's adversaries know it, too. Malefactors draw energy and seek advantage from what they perceive as US decline, aiming to advance and exploit it.

The nation has allowed internal political factions and a mercenary campaign industry to hack the machinery of American democracy, subverting the system's purposes and performance for self-gain. The industry—led by the Republican and Democratic Parties and their allied special interests, together with the growing mob of campaign careerists and a mushrooming media complex—fosters and feeds on division and discontent. Permanent campaign mode is generating strong centrifugal forces, driving the US electorate to ideological extremes. The political cartel's codependent rivalry and calculated polarization, amplified by social, structural, and technological forces, is overwhelming the center—whose disappearance leaves the nation's capacity for honest debate and political compromise, keystones of functional democracy, in tatters.

The problems facing the nation were anticipated by its founders. In *Federalist Paper No. 10*, James Madison cautioned against the rise of factions, considering them a cause of political instability and a danger to the national welfare.<sup>3</sup> George Washington highlighted the hazard in his 1796 farewell address, when he warned that while factions or parties “may now and then answer popular ends, they are likely in the course of time and things, to become potent engines, by which cunning, ambitious, and unprincipled men will be enabled to subvert the power of the people and to usurp for themselves the reins of government, destroying afterwards the very engines which have lifted them to unjust dominion.”<sup>4</sup> This is pre-

## Whither America? A Strategy for Repairing America's Political Culture

cisely what ails the United States. The reins of government have been usurped by a booming, party-centered electioneering industry that has polarized the country and commandeered civic processes and institutions for its own ends.

This is not to suggest there are not many virtuous and well-intentioned people in elective politics. There are, but the system itself has weakened their influence. The subtlety of the system's corruption escapes the grasp of practitioners caught up in the competitive day-to-day political fray. To another extent, ideologues rationalize that the importance of their ends—personal and political—justify attaining them, even sometimes by the most dishonest and discreditable means.

Image 1.2 depicts the dynamics driving political factionalism and division into national dysfunction. The chapters to follow unpack the mechanics in detail, and recommend what the country can do to recover.

Reform is necessary not just to bring greater unity and functionality to the nation's polity, but for a greater, perhaps existential, reason—to arrest the decay of democratic virtues: **truth, trust, balance, inclusion, substance, duty, discipline, and respect**. Their deterioration is what truly threatens the American experiment and the nation's special place in the world. Unabated, the casualty of virtues will undermine the nation's freedom and cohesiveness. Whether Americans can resuscitate them and restore the integrity and good order of their system of politics and government will ultimately answer the question: **whither America?**

If left to the status quo and the warring political parties, the answer will not be a desirable one. For the parties, their special-interest patrons, and their acolytes, the divisive and discordant status quo is big business. The perpetuation of native enemies and internal threats is an asset, even if these threats must be manufactured or exaggerated; nothing lures supporters and campaign donations more effectively than building up foes and fear. Therefore, the supercharged rhetoric and the demonization of the opposition permeate a debilitating interparty rivalry. Its circus of half-truths and conflict is abetted and exploited by mushrooming media competing desperately to attract ears and eyeballs that translate into advertising revenue. It is little wonder that—amid the constant, withering ideological crossfire—public faith and confidence in the nation's institutions are shot.

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# Casualty of Virtues

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## ***The casualty of truth***

Continuously bombarded by political, media-exploited conflict, hyperbole and spin, most Americans hardly know who or what to believe anymore. In a recent Pew Research Center survey, 81 percent of respondents said that partisans not only differed about policies, but also about “basic facts.”<sup>5</sup> Truth is disposable for the election industry, whose interests are served by generating fear and antipathy, often by using loose facts or, sometimes, outright lies. And, it has become a spectacularly lucrative industry. Since 1984, campaign spending has grown more than 500 percent—almost five times the growth in personal income, and twice the growth rate of the gross domestic product (GDP) over the same period, making politics (elections and issue advocacy) the fastest-growing sector of the US economy.<sup>6</sup> But, if electioneering, politicking, and political fundraising were treated as commercial enterprises, regulators would have a full caseload of false advertising, deceptive practices, and market manipulation. It is not only parties, politicians, and partisans that are fact challenged. Issue-advocacy organizations, which heavily influence public opinion and national policy debates, often find facts and fairness unsuitable to their pursuit of members and dues. Ditto for the ratings-obsessed media, for whom speed and attention are more important than truth and accuracy.

## ***The casualty of trust***

The country is reaping the intense discord and mistrust long sown by the parties. Both sides fan partisan passions with divisive “us against them” appeals necessary to win attention, money, and votes. Every fact-starved insult to another’s motives, ethics, competence, and constituencies weakens interparty trust and further divides the country, undermining consensus-based policymaking. Obsessed with blaming one another, the parties do not perceive how damaged they both are in the public eye. Neither do they seem discouraged by the injury they inflict on the country by their withering partisan crossfire, or by the disgraces of a corrupt “pay-to-play” political system. Declining public trust in the country’s political institutions is the ransom paid for permanently campaigning political parties, financed by



their respective special interests, fighting one another to a standstill as national problems worsen.

### ***The casualty of balance***

Democracy is further injured by the decimation of balance and objectivity, as partisan politicians and the fractious electorate huddle in cloistered communities of the like-minded, feeding on news and information aligned with their political views and biases. Imbalance is being institutionalized by partisan state legislatures that contrive thoroughly gerrymandered congressional districts to secure decisive majorities for one party over the other. As Americans consume partisan news and slanted information, and fewer representatives are elected to Congress by a politically diverse electorate, policy debates become intensely ideological, producing stalemate in a fast-changing world that requires speed and agility. The scales are tilted even further by the practice of “winner-takes-all” electoral votes for President of the United States in all but two states, disenfranchising large segments of the population and throwing electoral decisions to perennial swing states. The sweepstakes approach bleeds over to newly elected administrations and Congressional majorities who presume popular mandates that excuse them from bipartisan collaboration. While Congress ties itself in factional knots, power flows from the incapacitated “people’s branch” of government to the executive and judicial branches, upsetting the Constitution’s tripartite system of checks and balances. Accordingly, the parties alternately yank at the reins of government, left and right, eschewing the consensus and balance necessary to move the country forward. Through it all, the parties and politicians continue deceiving the country and their constituencies with policies and promises based on the alluring, but unsustainable, asymmetry of something for nothing. Each of the foregoing imbalances contribute to destructive national disparities in our federal budget, national income, burdens of military service, mix of public entitlements versus personal responsibilities, and in the gap between the nation’s aspirations and the capacities of a system at risk.

### ***The casualty of inclusion***

Public cynicism about the system manifests itself in embarrassingly anemic political participation and voter turnout. Barely half of the eligible US population votes in federal elections—among the worst rates in the developed world.<sup>7</sup> Just ten donors accounted for 20 percent of the \$1.1 billion spent by Super PACs in the 2016 election.<sup>8</sup> Less than 1 percent of the population contributed more than \$200—a slim minority dominated by organized special interests seeking special treatment. Increasingly, the parties seek out candidates who can supply their own financ-

ing, favoring the most privileged echelons of society. Primary races exclude the majority of voters, and most party registrants—particularly moderate members—do not take part.<sup>9</sup> The Pew Research Center found that, in the first dozen presidential-primary elections of 2016, “only 17 percent of eligible voters participated in Republican primaries, and only 12 percent in Democratic primaries.”<sup>10</sup> Among Americans who do register to vote, more than 40 percent are recorded as independents.<sup>11</sup> Yet, the United States Congress and state legislatures are occupied almost exclusively by Republicans and Democrats, who are organized to facilitate the duopoly’s partisan quarrels. Each of these dynamics contributes to political non-participation and unrepresentative representation.

### ***The casualty of substance***

The world has never been more complex, yet political discourse subsists on simplistic eight-second sound-bites and 140-character tweets, where sloganeering and emotional appeals reign supreme. Appearance has become more important than reality to attention-challenged, short-term-focused national institutions that are increasingly incapable of thinking and acting strategically. Our debates are often shameful scrums of pre-fabricated slogans and ad-hominem insults. The world groaned last year when a primary debate devolved into a school-yard dispute over candidates’ body parts.

Substance suffers when parties micro-target voters, appealing to narrow interests with hollow buzzwords and scare tactics. It is mortally wounded when national legislation is deemed meritorious because of its title rather than its results or by political advantage it secures for electioneers rather than what they might contribute to the national interest. Congress used to conduct its business part-time but intensively and face-to-face. It is now a full-time, low-intensity operation—a political reality TV show produced for electoral special effects rather than the conduct of serious business. Members watch proceedings on television and operate on the telephone and email, and through staff surrogates. The world, including politics, may increasingly operate in the virtual domain, but human understanding and compromise—the lifeblood of democratic governance—remains an eye-to-eye, flesh and blood enterprise that is fast disappearing.

### ***The casualty of duty***

National politicians are not leaders and legislators as much as they are fundraisers. By some accounts, members of Congress spend up to one-third of their official working time dialing for dollars or attending fundraising events. Former Congress-

man David Jolly told *60 Minutes* about his orientation at his party's headquarters: "We sat behind closed doors at one of the party headquarter back rooms in front of a white board where the equation was drawn out. You have six months until the election. Break that down to having to raise \$2 million in the next six months. And your job, new member of Congress, is to raise \$18,000 a day. Your first responsibility is to make sure you hit \$18,000 a day."<sup>12</sup> That preoccupation steals time from core functions, like learning issues, understanding legislation, and collaborating with colleagues to solve problems. It is among the reasons why Congress must pass legislation before it knows what's in it. Journalism is now populated by a growing cadre of opinionated former or would-be politicians. Judges function as legislators. Lobbyists serve as campaign financiers. This erosion in the integrity of prescribed roles and missions damages the effectiveness of the country's institutions, which were created to serve discrete purposes.

### ***The casualty of discipline***

The fractious parties in Congress can no longer command a disciplined, reliable bloc (interparty or intraparty) to deliver policy decisions. The Internet age has brought the exercise of vast new freedoms, but without commensurate responsibility and accountability. Norms of behavior are being erased, and professional ethics are flying out the window. Nearly every societal institution has been shaken by scandal—not just government, but also religion, sports, entertainment, and business. The country has lost its sense of shock and shame, and the discipline to discern fact from fiction, truth from fantasy, and right from wrong.

### ***The casualty of respect***

The no-holds-barred nature of political competition has poisoned the conduct of politics and public affairs. No rhetorical low blow or innuendo is considered too indecent for parties hotly pursuing power. Opponents are no longer just misguided or wrong; they are miscreant "losers" versus "deplorables." After all, votes and campaign cash would be harder to come by without a virtuous "we" that requires a sinister and dangerous "they" who must be stopped. In that regard, the parties are codependent enablers. Rather than tout their own qualifications, vision, and agenda, many candidates' ads focus on the shortcomings of opponents, using provocative labels. The intense negativity flows in torrents from ads funded by Super PACs with unlimited donations from a small cadre of wealthy donors. The electorate might claim not to like negative ads, but the data show they work. To see the four-step process for making a political ad, please see the Appendix. Congress and the courts have enabled candidates to outsource their mudslinging

to Super PACs and other forms of outside political expenditures—with a wink and grateful nod to their useful, dark surrogates—while the political rhetoric grows more acidic and hateful. Partisans whose strategic priority is to please their base have little incentive to be genuinely respectful to the electorate at large by acting with simple honesty and dignity.

### ***The casualty of functionality***

Each of the foregoing forces contributes to the debilitation of national political processes and public institutions. Nowhere is this more evident than with the first institution created by the country's founders—the United States Congress, which today carries public approval ratings a little better than food poisoning, yet enjoys record rates of incumbency. Members come to Congress through a broken election system that rewards inflammatory rhetoric and fundraising prowess, more than the qualities of leadership. No longer arenas for collaborative decision-making, the Senate and House chambers have become running televised campaign commercials. In the absence of congressional functionality, the executive and judicial branches fill the power void, exciting partisan passions over imperial presidents and legislative judges, creating a feedback loop of institutional animus and rivalry. The infighting creates more grist for Washington's partisan money mill. What the public does not see, through all the bluff and blabber, is coherent national strategy, or any semblance of bipartisan teamwork to lead the country responsibly into the future. As the nation's political process is stripped of dignity, good people are repelled by political service, yielding power to ideologues, egoists, and professional politicians. Such a dynamic is institutionalizing poor leadership and bad policy outcomes that cannot possibly sustain national greatness. The country's internal divisions, deep political dysfunction, and abandonment of essential virtues pose a clearer and more present danger than any marshal threat from abroad. The threat is driven by the mechanics of a system in crisis.

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## Mercenary Election Industry

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### *The (R) and (D) Cartel*

The election industry is much more extensive than the two main parties, their candidates, and elected officials. It encompasses the vast network of fundraisers and donors seeking to influence the election process, including lobbyists who use campaign cash to curry favor (or fend disfavor) with lawmakers, as well as special-interest groups building up their membership lists and dues. Nevertheless, the system revolves around Republicans and Democrats. Although the United States has usually operated under a two-party system since the 1796 election of John Adams, it was not until the end of the Civil War that the Democratic and Republican Parties emerged as the main contestants. Each of the country's twenty-nine presidents since that time has hailed from one of the two parties (eighteen Republicans and eleven Democrats). Of the literally thousands of Americans elected to serve in the legislative branch since 1900, only eighteen senators and forty-nine representatives have been aligned with third parties. The trend holds forth in the present 115th Congress. Only two of the 535 senators and house members who took the oath of office in January are neither a Republican nor a Democrat. Both serve in the Senate—Angus King of Maine and Bernie Sanders of Vermont.

The parties' duopoly on political power holds forth at the state level as well. Per the National Conference of State Legislators, only sixteen of the 7,382 state legislative seats across the country are held by independents or third parties. (This does not include the forty-nine members of the Nebraska legislature, which, per the state's constitution, is unicameral and nonpartisan.)<sup>13</sup> The electorate, however, is not nearly so binary. Of the two hundred million Americans registered to vote as of January 2017, 28 percent identify with the Republican Party, 25 percent identify with the Democratic Party, and 44 percent register as independents. The percentage of independents is at an all-time high.<sup>14</sup> A poll by the Pew Research Center, conducted after the 2014 midterm elections, found that both parties have an approval rating below 35 percent, while 60 percent of respondents wanted a third party to choose from.<sup>15</sup>

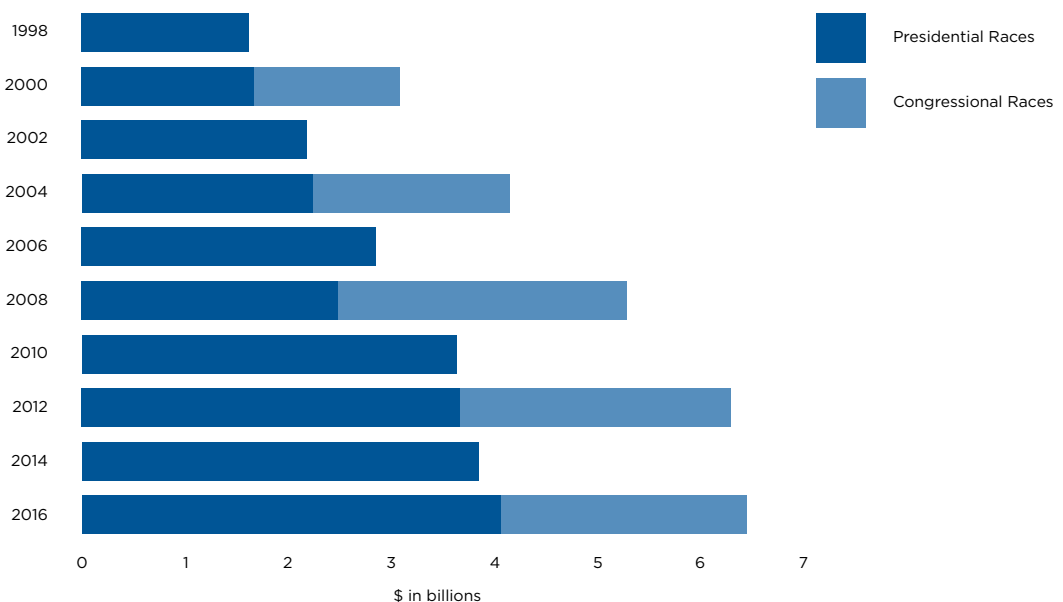
The problem is that competitive politicians connect with party brands to access voters and donors, when what the country needs is for voters to connect with sub-

stantively competitive parties for access to politicians capable of meeting national needs. Why, then, does party hegemony over politics persist? Because the parties have harnessed the machinery of government to perpetuate their power. The duopoly's success is enabled by the many livelihoods heavily vested in preserving party brands and interparty conflict.

### ***Campaigns Incorporated***

While money is supposed to be a means to help conduct politics, the appearance is that politics have become the means to money. Many livelihoods depend on enormous and growing piles of campaign cash. Pollsters, strategists, fundraisers, consultants, media experts, direct-mail services, digital services, and many other professions have a huge financial stake in campaign treasure and, therefore, in the inflated conflict and division needed to pry it loose from donors. This includes the media, which benefit enormously from political fundraising and spending. Meredith McGehee, a campaign finance lawyer, says, "It's a great time to be a political consultant in Washington, DC."<sup>16</sup> By and large, this is true not because their services are needed to help find solutions to problems, but because of the money that can be earned helping members and candidates win elections aided by never-ending

## **Total Cost of Elections 1998-2016**



Source: OpenSecrets.

campaigns, full-time fundraising, and unlimited money. These charts shows the skyrocketing amount of money up for grabs in federal campaigns. As Adam Sheingate states in an op-ed, "The result is a system of big money donors, expensive campaigns and incessant political ads. Free speech is not really free. Money talks in American politics, and the political consulting industry is the main beneficiary—no matter which candidate eventually wins."<sup>17</sup>

### ***Special Interests, Unlimited***

Another major element of the election industry is organized special interests that heavily influence campaigns with their advocacy and money. It is important to state that special interests are not inherently evil; on the contrary, each person is a unique agglomeration of them. A free society devoted to the sanctity of human rights has a sacred obligation to protect the ability for people of like mind and purpose to organize and politically advocate, peacefully and constructively, including with their financial resources. To be sure, certain large special interests and demographic slices of the United States tend to align with a particular party. There is nothing wrong with that. Republicans are favored by businesspeople, sportsmen, rural citizens, and conservatives. Democrats are favored by unions, environmentalists, urbanites, and liberals. Each is part of the raucous but beautiful symphony of democracy that, when conducted well, is unmatched in the quality of its anthems. Countless special interests are active in the political process and pursue their agendas through a wide gamut of means: lobbying, campaign contributions, express advocacy for partisan purposes, and issue advocacy. Lobbying and lobbyists are favored boogeymen for what ails the body politic. The fact is that there is nothing wrong with lobbying. The Constitution grants the right to petition government. The political process needs lobbyists to help represent people and groups affected by legislation, and to inform legislators about impacts and consequences of actions they could not possibly perceive independently. What the system does not need—and where special interests become corrosive—is when their advocacy is deceptive, when favor-seeking campaign contributions confer undue influence overriding other legitimate interests, or when organized partisan and issue-advocacy operations become mercenary. In this way, special interests, like partisan campaigns, are incentivized to manufacture and exaggerate crisis and conflict as a business model. The growing rivalry for money and members among blaring and rivalrous sections of the American orchestra is making the music of respectful and responsible compromise impossible.

Much ink has been spilled on the misdeeds of corporate and union special interests in the public square, but the mania extends into every corner of the American

polity. As a case in point, while serving as a Senate staffer, a friend of the author—who ran a very effective environmental organization—stormed into the office carrying a stack of letters. We had worked very hard together, over a long time, to improve visibility and air quality at the crown jewel of the US National Park Service, Grand Canyon National Park. The endeavor had yielded results—including the cleanup of a nearby power plant. What he slammed on my desk was a stack of letters from environmental organizations. The correspondence had several interesting elements in common. Each was authored by an organization of which I had never heard. They all grossly exaggerated the extent of the problem, in some cases depicting the canyon shrouded in a dark cloud of industrial smog. Each one erroneously claimed to be working closely with our office and others in Congress to solve the problem. And, of course, they appealed for a desperately needed donation to save the Grand Canyon. What should have been an exercise in civil engagement and activism suddenly seemed like a racket, with no greater moral authority than a garden-variety commercial scam. Such appeals take place every day from special-interest, issue-advocacy associations and organizations hailing from all sectors of society—most with a partisan bent.

### Strategic objective:

Break the political duopoly and cultivate political institutions that are responsive, representative, and focused on national interest.

#### Key Reforms

- **Gerrymandering reform** to make congressional races more competitive and responsive to the broader electorate.
  - 🔑 Use of nonpartisan criteria and processes to set congressional boundaries.
- **Campaign finance reform** to focus campaigns on ideas and incumbent officials on their duties.
  - 🔑 Donation limits, donor disclosure, and democratization of political finance.
- **Open primaries** to enable independents, who comprise most of the electorate, to take part in the process of selecting candidates.
  - 🔑 Expand the practice of open primaries to all states.
- **Eliminate barriers to third parties** to broaden voter choice and make the two major parties more responsive to the broader electorate.
  - 🔑 Greater ballot access. Expansion of ranked-choice voting and fusion and fusion voting.



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## Never-Ending and Dirty Campaigns

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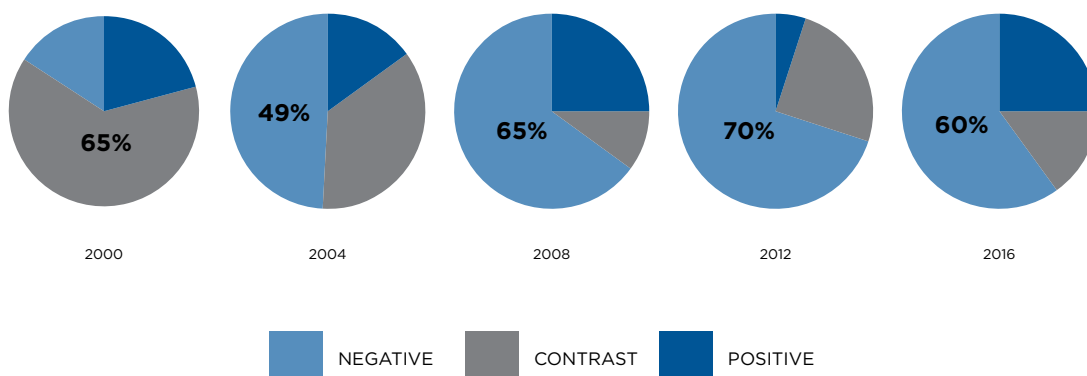
Foul and divisive campaign tactics are almost as old as the corrosive admixture of money, special-interests, and politics. In 1840, Thomas Elder, a mid-nineteenth-century American politician, candidly observed, “Passion and prejudice properly aroused and directed do about as well as principle and reason in any party contest.”<sup>18</sup> Today, however, the ability to stir emotion at scale—often with nasty and polarizing rhetoric and tactics—is a principal force in the deterioration of US politics and governance.

### ***Degrading Political Discourse***

Four aspects of political campaigns and culture make partisan flame throwing exceptionally impactful and disruptive today. One is time. A full-time, professionalized Congress and perpetual campaign mode mean that the partisan tension and gamesmanship are nonstop.<sup>19</sup> President Bill Clinton described never-ending presidential campaigns as a “constant four-year, peripatetic campaign” that damages the country by keeping its leaders from attending to the nation’s business.<sup>20</sup> In a 2012 piece for *Foreign Policy*, commentator Stephen Walt noted that the longer campaigns go, the more that policy is eclipsed by politics, providing more time for foreign leaders to take advantage of a distracted US leadership.<sup>21</sup> The second is money. Prolonged presidential and congressional primary and general campaigns require greater sums of campaign cash. The torrid, full-time enterprise of building campaign war chests stimulates the heated rhetoric that keeps intraparty factionalism and interparty conflict at high boil. Among the latest fundraising tools is what the campaign industry calls “money bombs.” Typically, these are intense periods of fundraising through social media, which harness a campaign controversy to drive cash.<sup>22</sup> More controversy means more cash. The third is intensity. The growth of campaign spending raises the frequency of the public’s exposure to predominantly negative political communications. The charts below show the growth of negative ads as a percentage of political messages, particularly those run by outside groups and parties.

Political scientist Michael Franz has studied the tendency of campaigns to go negative while “outshout(ing) the others by buying more airtime.” Franz stated, “It

## Tone of the Coverage of Presidential Races Over Time



Source: Kantar Media/CMAG with analysis by the Wesleyan Media Project.

Notes: Figures are from September 16 to October 13 for each cycle. Numbers include broadcast television, national network, and national cable.

becomes an arms race, and it can have a significant effect on the final results.”<sup>23</sup> It also sharpens the electorate’s sense of disgust, as political combatants race to outraise, outspend, and outshout the opponent, focusing on one another’s vices rather than their own vision. The effect is intensified by the meteoric growth of media outlets, particularly online sources from which a growing share of the electorate—particularly the young—accesses political and public-affairs news and commentary. The fourth is the level of animosity created by the new emphasis on “firing up the base,” rather than appealing to independents and centrists as a path to electoral success. Political scientist Lee Drutman observes, “Since partisans of each side are uninterested in compromise, each party’s ability to win depends on casting the *other* party as too extreme, too terrible, too corrupt, too evil, too un-American—whatever parade of horrors resonates. This is why so much political communication is devoted to playing upon fear and anger. How better to divide? As a result, ‘negative partisanship’—partisans hating the *other* party—is now the most consequential force in American politics.”<sup>24</sup> Studying this phenomenon, Emory University political scientists Alan Abramowitz and Steven Webster found that Americans’ increasingly negative view of members of the opposing party, “reinforced by exposure to partisan news sources...encourage(s) political elites to

adopt a confrontational approach to governing.”<sup>25</sup>

The country's virtual and physical spaces for political discourse are overrun by spiteful scuffling between over-opinionated, point-seeking partisans. One sees it on the television talk shows every day. The rude and hateful volleys between the opposing political tribes pay off in priceless attention and the churn of donations, but contribute mightily to national policy gridlock and to the growing register of unaddressed US challenges. Micro-pandering also allows political groups to identify individuals who like their message, and to feed them exactly what they want to hear. Social media's role in micro-pandering will be discussed further in a later chapter.

### *Shooting the Messenger*

Blaming the media is another tactic with deep roots in US politics. No doubt, criticism is often well-earned by poor journalistic ethics and practices. However, the bipartisan practice of shooting the messenger enables parties and politicians to shift responsibility and accountability. The tactic is flourishing in an environment where major media play the role of partisan mouthpieces. In a *Newsweek* column on the media's relationship with politicians, media critic and as an Obama White House staffer told CNN about a major media network: “We're going to treat them the way we would treat an opponent. We don't need to pretend that this is the way that legitimate news organizations behave.” While these words came from a staffer in the Barack Obama White House about Fox, it is not unimaginable for a Donald Trump aide to say the same of any number of nonpartisan media outlets. Healthy democracy relies on a free and respectable press, as it does an honest and responsible officialdom. When the media delegitimize themselves with biased opinion or sensationalism masquerading as news, or are delegitimized by politicians for personal or partisan advantage, public trust in the US system atrophies, doing damage to all.

### Strategic objective:

Campaigning and politicking that is principled, veracious, and substantive.

#### Key Reforms

- **Public information** to make the electorate better aware of political communication and campaign tactics.  
 Major public-service campaign on judicious consumption of political deceptions and campaign tactics.
- **Tracking and reporting** of campaign dirty tricks and tactics to disinfect wrongful practices through greater public sunlight.  
 Trusted third-party truth squads and web-based exposure of deceitful and dirty campaign actions and activities.
- **Campaign communications transparency** to ensure the public is fully informed of campaign positions.  
 Providing public access to all official campaign mass communications.

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## Corrosive Big Money

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At the outset, it is important to note that there is nothing intrinsically wrong with raising or donating money for political campaigns or policy advocacy. Operating a campaign for public office requires financial resources, and Americans have every right to support candidates they believe in, including with their time and funds. The principal corrupting factor is not the fact of money in campaigns, but, rather, how much must be raised, from whom, how it is raised, and to what effect. The fact is that most candidates and incumbent members of Congress detest the rigors and indignity of shaking down people for money, and are embarrassed by the perception, if not the reality, that they are beholden to those who give. Businesses, unions, and other interest groups are weary of being dunned. Lobbyists of every stripe disdain the feeling that they must pony up or be ignored, and the public grows disgusted by the appearance of a democracy-warping system of bad laws and corrupt practices.

Summing up the paradox of the current system, Barney Frank, a thirty-two-year Democratic member of Congress, said, “We are the only people in the world required by law to take large amounts of money from strangers and then act as if it has no effect on our behavior.”<sup>26</sup> In 1994, during his Senate run against Ted Kennedy and his enormous campaign war chest, Mitt Romney observed “...money plays a much more important role in what is done in Washington than we believe... You’ve got to cozy up, as an incumbent, to all the special interest groups who can go out and raise money for you from their members, and that kind of a relationship has an influence on the way you’re gonna vote.”<sup>27</sup>

Some might argue that the system has always been this way. Not quite. When Ronald Reagan and Jimmy Carter faced off in the 1980 presidential race, the campaign expenditures were a little more than \$172 million (in 2008 dollars). Almost every election cycle since has set new spending records. Last year’s presidential campaign expenditures topped a whopping \$2.28 billion (in 2008 dollars).<sup>28</sup> Adding in the congressional races, spending for the 2016 federal elections exceeded \$6.8 billion.

The Supreme Court’s 2010 *Citizens United v. FCC* decision opened the floodgates for huge amounts of unlimited—and, in some cases, undisclosed—contributions.

## Whither America? A Strategy for Repairing America's Political Culture


The ruling gave license to so-called Super PACs (also known as independent-expenditure-only committees, or 527s). Unlike the donor spending limits on direct campaign giving, a Super PAC can collect large amounts of money from corporations, unions, associations, and individual donors to assist a candidate, often by paying for ads that attack his or her opponent. The lone legal stipulation is that the PAC's activities must not be coordinated with the candidate's campaign or political party. The ruling not only affected federal elections, but invalidated numerous state laws limiting independent expenditures. The court based its decision on the idea that, if the PAC is not coordinating with a campaign, there can be no "exchange of favors" between Super PAC donors and the candidate (often an incumbent) it supports, and there is therefore no corruption. Yet, the practical reality is that the legal separation is fictitious. The benefiting candidate is quite aware, with a wink and a grateful nod to the Super PAC's contributors. Republican Senator John McCain called the fictional separation "the worst joke in Washington," saying, "It's an insult to anyone's intelligence to say they're not connected."



*Next! N.Y. : J. Ottmann Lith, Co., 1904 Sept. 7. Artist: Udo J. Keppler (1872-1956).*

Since their inception, the number of Super PACs, and the expenditures they make to influence elections, has shot through the roof. Neither their growth nor outsized impact on the election process shows any sign of slowing. Among their corrupting effects—as Super PACs empower the super-wealthy who fund them—they continue to disempower the national and state parties, which were traditionally responsible for mass messaging and responsible to a broader spectrum of party members. In a report for the *Atlantic*, author Jonathan Rauch cited the anxiety of both parties over their impact: “...the director of a mountain-state Democratic Party organization told me and Raymond J. La Raja recently for a Brookings Institution report. Republicans told us the same story. ‘We believe we are fighting for our lives in the current legal and judicial framework, and the Super PACs and (c)(4)s really present a direct threat to the state parties’ existence.’”<sup>29</sup> At the same time, there is burgeoning public disgust with the vanishingly small number of megadonors’ disproportionate influence on elections. In 2015, the *New York Times* reported that more than half of the early money poured into the campaign came from donations of more than \$250,000 from 158 families, and an additional two hundred families who gave more than \$100,000.<sup>30</sup> These two tiers represent .02 percent of the households in the United States. Even at much smaller levels of giving—including direct contributions to candidates (capped at \$2,700 per election, primary and general) or to regular political action committees (capped at \$5,000 per year)—the number of campaign donors in federal elections as a percentage of the electorate is microscopic. In the 2014 election cycle, less than one quarter of 1 percent of the American population donated \$200 or more to any federal campaign, party, or PAC.<sup>31</sup> About the same percentage made a financial contribution of any size during the Donald Trump-Hillary Clinton race, despite the fact that it was the most expensive presidential election in history.<sup>32</sup> Elections are supposed to be a tilt between differing visions and ideas, not a spending war between George Soros and the Koch brothers.

The dominant role of wealthy and large special-interest contributors to campaign coffers, and the vanishingly small share of the country that participates, is why nearly four out of five Americans think that government is “run by a few big interests looking out for themselves.”<sup>33</sup> Contrary to what one might expect, the electorate’s cynical outlook is not a longstanding phenomenon. As Trevor Potter, president of the Campaign Legal Center, noted, “This question has been asked for decades in a national political science survey. By comparison, in 1964, only 29% of us felt that way.”<sup>34</sup> Mainstream Americans see a system in which those who have large amounts of money can amplify their own speech and, in the process, make politicians dependent on their financial generosity. Super PACs established by wealthy individuals are not the only source of unlimited campaign dollars. They



**The dominant role of wealthy and large special-interest contributors to campaign coffers... is why nearly four out of five Americans think that government is “run by a few big interests looking out for themselves.”**

are joined by the growing number of 501(c) organizations—enterprises recognized by the Internal Revenue Code as not-for-profit and tax-exempt social-welfare and business leagues (501(c)(4)s are social-welfare organizations; 501(c)(5)s include labor unions; 501(c)(6)s include business leagues.) Like Super PACs, these groups are prohibited from coordinating efforts with a campaign or party. Federal Election Commission rules interpret the standards as requiring qualified organizations to spend less than half of their money on political activity. But, the rules also create an enormous loophole; 501(c)4s are permitted to give to Super PACs, while remaining exempt from donor-disclosure requirements. Voila! Super PAC money becomes dark money.<sup>35</sup> It speaks volumes about the state of the country's political intolerance when, in some cases, anonymity is sought not out of du-

plicity, but to avoid harassment, ridicule, or perhaps worse for supporting a cause with which others may disagree. The public's disdain for the present system is why a host of localities—incubators of innovation—are experimenting with novel initiatives to democratize campaign finance. The city of Seattle has instituted a system that provides every voter with four \$25 vouchers that the recipient may assign to a candidate of their choice, who agrees to abide by certain campaign-finance restrictions and disclosure requirements.<sup>36</sup>


### ***Money for Attacks; Attacks for Money***

Super PAC dollars and other forms of independent expenditures are the engine behind the tsunami of negative political messaging in politics. Studies show the Super PAC-financed ads are typically far more toxic than candidate- or party-sponsored appeals. By April of 2016, \$132 million had already been spent that year on negative ads by candidates and their supporters.<sup>37</sup> Ironically, polls indicate that the public generally disapproves of candidates who run negative ads, but the data also show they work. Politicians and campaign strategists are keenly aware of the paradox. Super PACs offer a nifty workaround, enabling candidates to outsource their dirty work. In the wake of a shooting at a Republican baseball practice in



Alexandria, Virginia, a GOP Super PAC launched an ad against Georgia Democratic congressional candidate Jon Ossoff, in which the narrator linked Ossoff with the “unhinged left [that] is endorsing and applauding shooting Republicans.”<sup>38</sup>

The double whammy is that campaigns and their surrogates not only use money to go negative and divisive, but go negative and divisive to get money by inflaming interparty animus. That such negative tactics push the political system to the point of paralysis appears to be of little or no concern to the ambitious, for whom only winning at the ballot box truly matters. For the nation, however, they are a cascading disaster. The continued dominance of Super PACs promises weaker parties, and even dirtier and more negative campaigns in the future.



**The continued dominance of Super PACs promises weaker parties, and even dirtier and more negative campaigns in the future.**

### ***Dollars and Dereliction of Duty***

Among the most insidious effects of the all-consuming money chase is how it distracts incumbent political leaders from their primary duties: serving constituents, learning complex issues, and collaborating to find common ground on solutions to future-defining national challenges.

In his third and fourth years in office, Ronald Reagan attended a total of three fundraisers for the party and his reelection committee. During the second half of their first terms, George H.W. Bush attended twenty-five, Bill Clinton attended eighty, George W. Bush attended eighty-six, and Barack Obama attended one hundred and sixty-four.<sup>39</sup> Members of Congress seeking reelection, as the overwhelming majority do, maintain an even more demanding schedule of fundraising, with breakfasts, lunches, dinners, and outings. In between these activities, they must dial for dollars. In a recent speech, Trevor Potter highlighted the archetypal case of Congressman Steve Israel. Israel estimated that fundraising consumed 70 percent of his working time—approximately thirty hours per week. The congressman chose to leave Congress rather than submit to the dominating demand of chasing campaign cash.<sup>40</sup> While many states prohibit political fundraising by incumbents while their respective legislature is in session, Congress has made no law to bind its members. Former Congressman David Jolly’s tasking by his party to



raise \$18,000 a day is ample testimony to the insanity. Given the light workload and time-suck of fundraising and politicking, it should not come as a surprise that 2016 was a spectacularly unproductive legislative year for Congress.

Moreover, the premium placed on access to money to run for election skews the makeup of individuals willing and able to run for office. One of the first things party officials ask a prospective candidate about is the strength of his or her personal finances and financial network. The demand is twofold. Campaigning is a full-time job, and candidates must have the wherewithal to personally afford a sustained effort. Moreover, with the average cost of winning a Senate and House seat in the 2016 cycle topping \$10.4 million and \$1.3 million, respectively, national parties have a vested interest in recruiting wealthy candidates, because it brings down their own costs.<sup>41</sup> The emphasis on wealth, or access to it, as a precondition of candidacy was further strengthened by the Supreme Court's decision granting the right of individuals to spend unlimited sums on their own campaign. Craig Holman, government affairs lobbyist for the consumer advocacy organization Public Citizen, points out, "Wealthy candidates who try to buy office with their own money tend to lose, but in order to set up a campaign, you have to know a lot of wealthy people and wealthy special interests—and that's something that most of us are not privy to."<sup>42</sup>

However, remember, there is nothing wrong with exercising the Constitutional right to petition government. Whenever large campaign donations are made, the question of buying influence is invariably raised. This is especially true in the case of lobbying, but the policymaking process needs the expertise of special-interest representatives bring so long as the process is open and accessible to all. Contributing money is a perfectly legitimate form of civic engagement provided there are sensible limits, full transparency, and broad participation. Combining the two roles—advising Congress while arranging large contributions—is where the practice runs afoul.

As a young Congressional staffer, I observed a classic approach of a dual-hatted fundraiser-lobbyist to a United States Senator just off the Capitol steps. The lobbyist enthusiastically provided the Senator with a detailed status report on planning for a major campaign fundraiser among his industry colleagues. Upon completing his update, he said to the Senator, "Now, let me take that hat off, and put on another hat." Pantomiming the exchange, he proceeded to express the industry's wishes regarding the Senator's position on a pending matter. In this instance, the appeal may have had no impact on the Senator's position. But one can hardly expect that such an approach repeated daily on Capitol Hill carries no influence. A system that tolerates—and encourages—two-hatted roles is broken.

Even if just by the perception of impropriety leads the public to be suspicious that the problem runs far deeper than perception.

### ***The Shadow of Plutocracy***

For that reason, it is not surprising that political leadership is drawn predominantly from the most well-to-do. OpenSecrets.org reported that the “median net worth of a member of Congress was \$1,029,505 in 2013...compared with an average American household’s median net worth of \$56,355.”<sup>43</sup> Some experts connect the rise of self-funding candidates to congressional inertia. In the past, when parties predominantly funded federal candidates and their campaigns, strong party leaders had the leverage to maintain discipline in the ranks. Members’ political success and advancement depended on party loyalty. This arrangement made possible cohesive congressional voting blocs, and grand compromises when the national interest and the public compelled action.

Today, candidates no longer rely on political parties to finance their campaigns. On the contrary, the parties depend on candidates and their networks. As a result, the political penalty that members of Congress pay for defying party leadership is vanishing. Greater political independence by members may not seem like a bad thing on its face, but it fosters ideological and unruly sub-factions that are less and less conducive to forming a governing consensus within party ranks, much less across the aisle. Referring to the 112th Congress, Thomas Mann and Norman Ornstein have referred to this as a problem of poor followership, rather than of poor leadership.<sup>44</sup> In a free society, wealthy individuals have every right to run for high political office. Often, self-made builders of wealth have prized talents that make them quite suitable to the mission. But, it is decidedly undemocratic when wealth becomes a prerequisite for political service.






Sometimes, money for access is not a push, but a pull. An anecdote shows how it works. The president of a large company and major employer, accompanied by the corporation’s lobbyist, was paying a visit to an important House member from his state. The visitors were ushered into the congressman’s office. As the guests took their seats, the congressman kicked off the meeting by curtly observing that while his opponent in the upcoming reelection campaign had received a full PAC donation from the company, he had not. The pointed and uncomfortable conversation compelled the executive to excuse himself so that he could place a phone call to the firm’s PAC chairman, instructing him to send a donation immediately to the member’s campaign, after which the official meeting resumed. During the 1998 debate on major anti-tobacco legislation, the Senate was nearing a decisive

vote on the landmark public health measure. The tobacco industry had spent \$37 million in the first six months of the year in advertising and lobbying to defeat the legislation. It had every right to do so. Toward the decisive vote on the measure, however, the industry let it be known that it would generously support any members who voted against proceeding to a final vote on the matter. This assurance was relayed to the members of the Republican caucus as they sat in conference. As the Republicans were meeting in Congress that day, the Democrats were caucusing on the other side of the Senate chambers. A senior member of the party told his fellow Democrats, in about so many words, that it could not afford to lose tobacco as a partisan political issue. After having been debated and amended over many weeks on the Senate floor, the bill was killed by a procedural vote that afternoon. The industry appeared to make good on its pledge. That year, tobacco companies made \$23 million in federal campaign contributions.<sup>45</sup>

### Strategic Objective:

Clean, transparent, and more democratic campaign-finance laws, norms, and practices.

#### Key Reforms

- **Reasonable limits and donor disclosure** on all forms of political expenditures intended to influence elections.  
 Passage of laws at federal and state levels to impose fair limits and transparency requirements; limiting amounts that can be raised from outside congressional districts and home states.
- **Elimination of Super PACs** to rid the system of megadonors.  
 Continue testing the law in the courts, based on the court's erroneous premise that the "non-coordination" doctrine obviates corruption.
- **Elimination of loopholes** to ensure that social, business, and labor organizations are not used to deliver unlimited, undisclosed sums to Super PACs to influence elections.  
 Close the 501(c) loophole allowing non-disclosure.
- **Delinking of fundraising from official business** to restore the integrity of government.  
 Disallow political fundraising while Congress is in session. Fill loopholes to prohibit lobbyists from serving as fundraising bundlers. Prohibit lobbyists from serving on candidate finance committees. Require Members of Congress to regularly post their fundraising schedules on their respective websites.
- **Democratizing campaign finance** to include a greater share of the electorate in the political financing process:  
 Pilot Seattle's citizen voucher system in a state's, or a consortium of states', federal campaigns.

## ***Leaving Home***

In many cases, the special interests funding new and incumbent candidates for Congress live outside the home state and districts of the office seeker. For that reason, a growing share of funds raised for congressional races come from those who are ineligible to vote in them.

OpenSecrets.org reports that, in twenty-six of last year's thirty-three Senate races, the victor raised more money from individuals and organizations located out of his or her home state than donors from within.<sup>46</sup> In its *Buckley v. Valeo* decision, the Supreme Court majority opinion held that political finance and political speech are synonymous. If money is equal to speech, could the nation's framers have possibly intended that office seekers (including sitting senators and House members) "listen" more to parties they would not officially represent in Congress than those they would? The answer is clear. No.

The nexus between money, access, and influence is why many special interests must give to politicians, often to the candidates and both parties—and, not infrequently, to both sides in the same race. This helps explain why in the United States, the world's leading democracy, more than 40 percent of eligible voters choose not to vote, while two out of every three Americans believe that the influence of special interests means their vote does not matter. A poll conducted by the *New York Times* found that 57 percent of all Americans—and nearly two-thirds of independent voters—agree that "politics and elections are controlled by people with money and by big corporations," so they believe their vote has no impact.<sup>47</sup>

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## Dysfunctional Structure

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Incumbents and the parties have vested themselves with a variety of other statutory and structural advantages that favor them over a stronger, more vibrant democracy. These structural advantages and distortions across the continuum of self-governance—districting, voting, and lawmaking—constitute a major cog in the machinery of national division and public dysfunction.

When framing the national charter, the country's founders began by establishing a "people's branch" of government in the form of the United States Congress. They vested each state with the power to formulate its respective congressional districts, from which representatives would be elected by popular vote. In *Federalist Paper No. 56*, James Madison explained the purpose of districting. He wrote, "Divide the largest State into ten or twelve districts, and it will be found that there will be no peculiar local interests in either, which will not be within the knowledge of the representative of the district."<sup>48</sup> Inclusion and local interests, not exclusion and partisan interest, were the objectives.

In many states, the districting process has been hacked by partisan state legislative majorities through gerrymandering. As explained by the Brennan Center for Justice, the term refers to a range of redistricting abuses, "including, but not limited to, the fracturing of communities of interest, the protection of incumbents, the targeting of political foes, and/or the lack of competition in districts."<sup>49</sup> The party chieftains predominantly use the practice to create "safe" districts for party colleagues. These absurd creations, combined with the money advantage conferred by the present campaign finance set-up upon sitting members of Congress, is largely why House incumbency remains a whopping 90 percent, despite a congressional approval rating of 11 percent from a reform-minded electorate.<sup>50</sup> *Cook Political Report's* David Wasserman reported that, in the 2016 elections, only forty of the 435 US House seats were competitive.<sup>51</sup> The prospects look even worse for the 2018 midterm elections. The *Cook Political Report* says that only five of 435 congressional races are true "tossups," and fewer than twenty as leaning one way or another. "In other words," says Lee Drutman, "only about one in 20 Americans lives in a place that appears likely to have a competitive House election."<sup>52</sup>



Electoral Reform			
	Campaign and Districting Reform	Election Reform	Inclusion of Third Parties
<b>Federal Level (Executive and Congressional)</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>+Eliminate SuperPACs and 501 (c) tax loophole</li> <li>+Require bulk of financing to come from within state/district and set limits on outside donation</li> <li>+Refocus presidential debate on issues</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>+Support amendment to pro-rate electoral college votes based on popular vote</li> <li>+Set standards and oversight to ensure integrity of voting systems</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>+ Support pilot of "ranked choice voting/instant runoff" voting</li> <li>+Support expanded state pilot of allowing candidates to appear on the ballot as a nominee of more than one party</li> <li>+Permit independents to chair a committee based on seniority rather than caucus affiliation</li> </ul>
<b>State Level (Legislature and Governors)</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>+End Gerrymandering</li> <li>+Expand Seattle's Campaign Finance Vouchers</li> <li>+Start primaries later</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>+Establish open primaries</li> <li>+Expand practice of allowing candidates to appear on the ballot as a nominee of more than one party</li> <li>+Adopt best practices to ensure ballot integrity</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>+ Ease requirements for inclusion of third parties on ballots and debates</li> </ul>
<b>Civil Society</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>+Lobby for the overturning of Citizen United which allow SuperPACs</li> <li>+Establish protocol on proper campaign conduct and force candidates to sign document certifying that they will not use certain tactics</li> <li>+Create mass petition on finance reform</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>+Promote election reform</li> <li>+Create public bodies to address barriers to voting</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>+Convene task force to set best practices for states on ballot access and media debate participation for third parties</li> </ul>

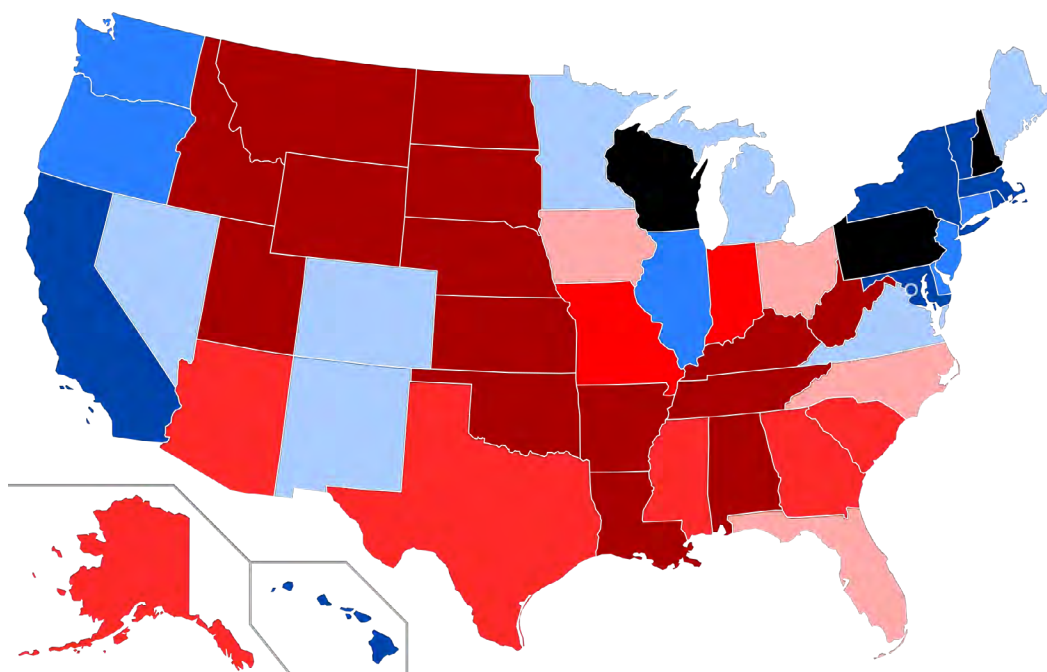
Congressional Reform				
	Duty	Modernize	Accountability	Efficiency
<b>Federal Level</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>+Ban fundraising while in office</li> <li>+Prohibit lobbyist from involvement in PACs</li> <li>+Members required to certify they have read legislation before voting</li> <li>+Regularize meetings with bipartisan leaders and POTUS</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>+Allow state and local leaders to question members through hearings</li> <li>+Create cross-committee task forces to address multi-disciplinary challenges</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>+Make pay contingent on completion of budget, authorizations, and appropriations</li> <li>+Establish "Question Time" (British Model)</li> <li>+Require all fundraising events sponsored and held by Congress members to be publicly available</li> <li>+Require legislation to identify benchmarks and evaluation schedule for success of legislature goals</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>+Implement two-year budgeting</li> <li>+Reform single-senator threshold to block legislation</li> <li>+Streamline oversight through joint hearings/investigations</li> </ul>

Large margins of incumbent victory have been in evidence for several decades. In each of the congressional elections since the 1980s, approximately three of four incumbents have won with at least 60 percent of the vote—wipeouts in electoral terms. This trend has ushered in the career politician serving in a full-time Congress, and ushered out the citizen-legislator who had been the founders' aspiration for representative government. The sinecure of congressional service is why a two-term member was heard to tell confidants that she could not afford to leave Congress because she had two kids to put through college—a consideration quite likely shared by many of her colleagues.

The map below shows the widening one-party dominance in states where congressional districts have been carved for that purpose. Though Republicans claim the greater advantage, the process should not rest easy with one party over another. The pendulum can easily swing with the next redistricting, following the decennial census and change in the respective state majorities.

President Ronald Reagan called gerrymandering “a national scandal.”<sup>53</sup> President Barack Obama described it as a practice that “allows politicians to pick their voters, rather than the other way around.”<sup>54</sup> The public continues to express its antipathy to the practice as well. Seventy-one percent of the respondents to a Harris poll said that “those who stand to benefit from redrawing congressional districts should not have a say in how they are redrawn.”<sup>55</sup> The view was equally strong among Republicans, Democrats, and Independents, and among those describing themselves as conservative, moderate, or liberal.

The menace of gerrymandering is more than the antidemocratic vices of party-rigged districts and the professionalization of elective politics. Politically monolithic districts contribute to the demise of centrists, and the disappearance of leaders able to communicate with an ideologically diverse electorate. As their presence dwindles, so do the prospects for congressional consensus building. “Walled safely inside their gerrymandered districts, incumbents are insulated from general-election challenges that might pull them toward the political center,” says noted author Jonathan Rauch.<sup>56</sup> Increasingly, members do not break orthodoxy by compromising with the other party for love of office. That is why from 1994 to 2012, only thirty-eight sitting members of Congress failed to win party renomination.<sup>57</sup> It is also why Congress has become so dangerously inert. As it is, the House of Representatives—a training ground for future senators, governors, and even presidents—is home to an artificially rigid membership that is poorly prepared and motivated in the democratic arts of persuasion, principled compromise, and leadership.



*Source: US States by Cook Partisan Voting Index. April 30, 2017.  
 Legend: Deep Blue=  $\geq D+10$ , Medium Blue=  $< D+9$ , Light Blue=  $< D+4$ , Black= EVEN,  
 Light Red=  $< R+4$ , Medium Red=  $< R+9$ , Deep Red=  $\geq R+10$ .*

Later this year, the Supreme Court will take up a districting case from Wisconsin that questions the legality of applying partisan criteria in the drawing of congressional boundaries.<sup>58</sup> The court has an opportunity to set a new standard of districting, one centered on advancing public interests—such as accommodating communities of interest, and reflecting sensible geographical and local jurisdictional boundaries—rather than serving powerful incumbents and partisan ambitions.

### ***Broken Election Rules and Practices***

Presidential primaries, funded with tax dollars, play an enormous role in selecting the nation's chief executive. Yet, under current law, more than twenty-six million Americans are not permitted to participate in them. This is because those Americans are registered as neither a Republican nor Democrat, and do not live in one of the twenty-five states that have some variety of open primary.<sup>59</sup> Opponents of opening primary voting to independents and other non-party members believe that doing so defeats the notion of “party,” and subjects the primary process to



partisan gamesmanship. The country must decide what is fairer—giving party affiliates (who compose only 60 percent of the country's registered voters) the exclusive right to determine who will appear on the nation's presidential ballot, or opening that influential right to all Americans. The public comes down on the side of the latter. Polls show that 70 percent of Americans support allowing registered independents to vote in the primary of their choice.<sup>60</sup> Expanding the practice would be another lever compelling federal candidates to appeal to the broadest base of voters, including centrists, rather than to the increasingly fringe-dwelling party bases.

Even the most fundamental and traditional campaign functions have been corrupted by the parties, and suborned by the media. It does not seem to shock the nation's conscience that the campaign gurus, party chieftains, and media moguls have such enormous influence in determining the exact number and format of debates for Congress and the presidency. The nominees are interviewing with the US electorate for the nation's most important job, and arguably the most influential post in the world. Why should the nation's political elite determine the parameters of presidential debates? Their say is why US presidential debates are too few, too short, and almost completely uninformative. A country that produced the Lincoln-Douglas debates now seems content with ninety minutes of ad-hominem, sound-bite-centered, content-starved national embarrassment—the political version of the *Jerry Springer Show*—two or three times per election season. The vituperative spirit of national political debate that outshouts substantive discussion mirrors the boorish political discourse seen with greater regularity on the floor of Congress, on many of the political talk shows, in Internet chat rooms, and even in social venues.

Not only Americans are turned off by the sideshow; the world watches and wonders how the US model is a worthy one. The Chinese use the election as an example of how the United States is hypocritical about its values, and how one-party rule is more stable.<sup>61</sup> The Russian government highlighted the spectacle in public-information campaigns to disgrace democracy.<sup>62</sup> The United States embarrassing itself on the world stage can only reinforce Vladimir Putin's conviction that fanning and exploiting bitter US internal divisions is an effective strategy for damaging the United States.<sup>63</sup>

Much is wrong with the rules put forth by the Commission on Presidential Debates (CPD). This is true not only of how debates are conducted, but of the restrictive terms regarding who can participate—including the arbitrary threshold of 15 percent in the polls required for a candidate to get on the debate stage. This marginalizes third-party voices, depriving them of the opportunity to present their

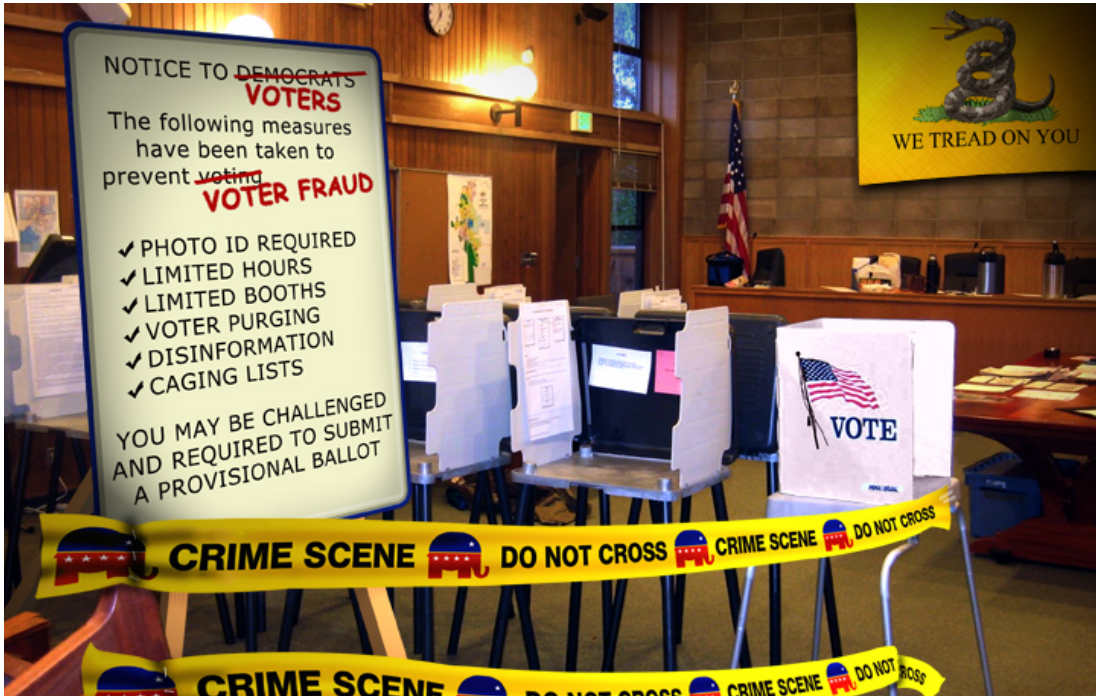
positions on a primetime national stage, and reinforcing two-party hegemony over the process.

Libertarian presidential candidate Gary Johnson sued the Commission on Presidential Debates, the Republican and Democratic Parties, and 2012 candidates Barack Obama and Mitt Romney over the rule requiring a candidate to garner at least 15 percent of the electorate's support, as an average of five national polls. He argued that collusion between the committee and the major parties to keep him out of the electoral political market amounted to a violation of antitrust law.<sup>64</sup> Whether or not the suit has merit, what is certain is that the public deserves many more debates, and far fewer pre-canned speeches, partisan rallies, and contrived photo-ops.

Imagine if presidential debates, because of public demand or force of law, were comprehensive, substantive, and dignified, along the lines of seven two-hour debates, each focused on a specific policy area—national security, foreign policy, the economy, energy, the environment, and so on. Further, think about how much more informative debates could be if the in-depth proceedings were moderated by a subject-matter expert with excellent journalistic skills (there are lots of them), rather than media personalities possessing cosmetic or rehearsed subject-matter knowledge. As it is, the campaigns and party establishments prefer limiting candidates' exposure to potential embarrassment. It does not behoove them for the public to see candidates' knowledge gaps, difficulty in thinking on their feet, lack of composure, or inability to exercise leadership skills in an intellectually demanding environment—like the Oval Office. The country needs more election-season means of exploring office seekers' worthiness—meaning not just their ability to campaign effectively, but the talents and character to lead and govern well. These are two distinct skills sets.

Nothing is more instrumental to democracy than simultaneously assuring both the fullest possible citizen participation in elections and the unquestioned integrity of every step in the franchise of voter registration, ballot casting, and results tabulation. While maximizing voter participation and integrity should be a point of convergence for the parties, it has become just another point of departure for partisan animosity and division.

Depending on which party is pushing it, election reform is almost always perceived by the other side as a backdoor attempt to influence the outcome of elections, rather than one to assure their good order and conduct. Requirements such as photo-identification standards, limits on early voting, and proof of citizenship spur partisan fights, particularly when the laws are passed by partisan majorities.<sup>65</sup> Indeed, the courts have struck down as overreach a variety of new voter-validation



*Cartoon: Voter Suppression Crime Scene. Uploaded February 28, 2014.  
Source: DonkeyHotey.*

requirements imposed by states leading up to the 2016 election.<sup>66</sup> Stiffer standards of voter validation can adversely affect the poor and minorities, who, as studies show, face comparatively greater obstacles to exercising their franchise.<sup>67</sup>

While many Democrats oppose common-sense requirements, such as having to produce a valid form of identification to cast a vote, Republicans often stand in the way of automatic voter-registration proposals. Kim Wyman, the state of Washington's secretary of state, told the *Atlantic*, "I have met many Democrats that are convinced that Republican are trying to keep their party from voting, and I've met many Republicans that are convinced that Democrats are cheating and it's really hard to convince either side otherwise."<sup>68</sup> One way of breaking this impasse is vesting voter rules in nonpartisan commissions, to help find the sweet spot for maximizing voter participation while ensuring election integrity.

Indeed, the United States advances this premise abroad through its overseas democracy-development programming sponsored by the National Endowment of Democracy (NED). NED urges fledgling democracies to use nonpartisan person-

nel and institutions to develop registration, campaign, and voting rules to avoid even the appearance of impropriety. Meanwhile, the United States predominantly vests the power of election lawmaking in Congress and state legislatures. Charges of ballot rigging and inaccurate counting have arisen in many elections throughout history. During the 2016 election, Donald Trump claimed that millions of illegal votes were cast against him, costing him the popular vote.<sup>69</sup> Meanwhile, a group of computer scientists and election lawyers, purporting to have discovered results-altering manipulations in Michigan, Wisconsin, and Pennsylvania, unsuccessfully lobbied Hillary Clinton to initiate a court challenge to the election. Whether spurred by partisan sour grapes or legitimate irregularities, there is no denying the inherent complexities of counting 130 million ballots in the nation's 3007 counties, across fifty states that use many different means for casting and tabulating votes, or that such disparity invites controversy.

Electronic and Internet-dependent voting systems were ushered in to ease the process for voters, and to eliminate human error, ambiguity, and corruption in the tally process. These cyber-based "improvements" face a new and menacing range of threats—from international hackers to solar flares and power outages. Even in the aftermath of the Help America Vote Act of 2002 to raise standards in the voting system, serious problems remain. Not the least of them is that most electronic voting systems contain proprietary technology held secret even from election officials. And, as states and counties have phased in technology, they have phased out paper ballots, eliminating auditable paper trails. Physical evidence of voting, a vital check on the system, becomes even more important given efforts by foreign countries to hack electronic US election systems. Earlier this year, the Department of Homeland Security notified twenty-one state election boards that Russian hackers had attempted to break into their systems.<sup>70</sup>

Not all ballot rigging occurs at the voting booth. The two major parties have engaged in their own form by making it as hard as possible for other parties to even get on the ballot. In the 1800s, many states enabled "fusion" voting, and some jurisdictions, such as New York, Connecticut, and six other states still do. The practice enables candidates to appear on a ballot as the nominee of more than one party. Also known as cross-nomination, cross-endorsement, or open-ballot voting, the practice is a way to give alternative parties and their followers a voice, as major candidates must vie to address their issues. Another process to ensure that all votes matter is ranked-choice voting, which requires a majority, rather than a plurality, to win an election. In an election in which only a plurality is gained, multiple parties are winnowed down to two based on the ranked choice of voters, until a remaining candidate wins a majority. Nothing is more instrumental to the integrity of

democracy than ensuring that the process of registering for, casting and counting votes is inclusive, pro-democracy and beyond reproach. Anything that makes it harder for individuals to register, vote, and have their ballot matter should be met with a skeptical eye.

### ***Graduating the Electoral College***

In the American system, the chief executive is chosen by an Electoral College, composed of 535 electors apportioned to the states based on their respective populations. Each state's number of electoral votes corresponds to its total number of congressmen (apportioned based on population) and senators (two for each state). The Electoral College members cast their ballots for president every four years in December, following the November popular vote. The founders established the Electoral College to strengthen the representation of states versus simple majoritarian rule, which would confer undue power on heavily populated states. Further, it forced candidates to appeal to diverse constituencies across the country, rather than exclusively on dense population centers.

Most states award their electoral votes in a winner-take-all manner. That means that even if a candidate wins a state's popular vote by a single ballot among millions, the state's entire allotment of electoral votes is bound to the state's popular-vote victor. Every presidential election, a Democratic-dominated state like California reliably places its fifty-five electoral votes in the Democratic column, and a Republican-dominated state like Texas puts its thirty-four electoral votes into the Republican column, no matter the margin of victory. The only exceptions to the sweepstakes approach are Maine and Nebraska which, with some wrinkles, prorate their electoral votes (four and five, respectively) per the popular vote.<sup>71</sup> In practical terms, winner-take-all electoral voting means that, except to fundraise, no Republican presidential nominee need step foot in California to challenge Democratic views, and no Democratic nominee need campaign in Texas to challenge Republican views. The absence of a stiff competition to win electoral votes from every state—including the nation's largest—is democratically deficient. It disenfranchises millions of voters, and is hostile to centrism. Prorating electoral votes in all states would compel candidates for the land's highest office to vie for votes everywhere, not just in the decisive "swing states," which the political shamans and pundits pinpoint well before any votes are cast.





*Obama, McConnell and Boehner – Toasting a Possible Future. Uploaded November 3, 2014. Source: DonkeyHotey.*

### ***Broken Congressional Structures***

In the US Congress, as in its state counterparts, the Republican and Democratic leaders run the show. The party leaders in Congress primarily see themselves as defenders of their respective parties' interests, rather than defenders of their branch of government.<sup>72</sup> They operate in an environment constructed to prosecute partisan warfare. The parties have separate cloakrooms, caucuses, steering committees, and conferences. In the chambers and committee hearing rooms, Democrats sit on one side and Republicans occupy the other. Every trapping of the legislative bodies is geared to displaying and reinforcing political separatism of, and combat between, the two parties. The institution is no longer able to meet its perfunctory duties—the regular order of establishing the national budget, determining appropriations, and deciding on the authorization of federal agencies and initiatives. Its priorities seem threefold: the incumbency of members, depriving the other party of legislative victories that might aid its prospects in the next election,


and making the party look good (or at least not as objectionable), by making the other party look bad.

Its inefficacy is why departments, and even the most important government functions, operate inefficiently and are regularly hobbled by the threat of shutdown. It is why policy lags the national needs in a fast-changing world, and why finger-pointing and blame have become public sport. Something is terribly wrong when frustrated members of Congress feel compelled to establish a “Problem Solvers Caucus”—a body composed of forty members.<sup>73</sup> That is precisely what the House and Senate themselves are supposed to be.


Congress has not passed all its appropriations bills in two decades.<sup>74</sup> The Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), the Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA), the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms (ATF), the State Department, the Federal Trade Commission (FTC), and the National Weather Service (NWS) are all operating on expired authorizations.<sup>75</sup> Many departments, agencies, and programs that are desperately in need of reform, by any partisan calculation, have never been reauthorized or updated.

The Congressional Budget Office reported that “in the 2016 fiscal year, Congress funded more than \$300 billion in programs that lawmakers have not reauthorized—more than a quarter of discretionary spending. That’s a huge jump from two decades ago, when unauthorized programs were closer to \$35 billion, just 10 percent of the budget.”<sup>76</sup> Yet, the 114th Congress (which served from January 2015 to January 2017) was still able to hold a schedule chock-full of hearings, and to pass numerous commemorative bills such as National Hydrogen and Fuel Cell Day, National Bison Day, and Hemp History Week.<sup>77</sup>

Hearings are prime opportunities for partisan scrimmaging, and perhaps a politically advantageous press release or two. Seeking to get in on the action, more and more members have clamored for seats on major standing committees and for a chairman’s gavel. Naturally, the number of subcommittees has steadily climbed along with the volume of hearings, while congressional power and productivity have dropped. The committee structure itself is archaic. Modern problems require



**Law requires the military services to work jointly to protect the nation’s security, but nothing seems to compel its political servants to cooperate in advancing the nation’s interests as a whole.**



## **Government cannot function properly when key leadership posts—including within the nation’s security, justice, and judicial systems—sit empty.**

forums for discussion between the Republican and Democratic leaders, the House and Senate leaders, the president and congressional leaders, or between state governors and national leadership. Law requires the military services to work jointly to protect the nation’s security, but nothing seems to compel its political servants to cooperate in advancing the nation’s interests as a whole. John Hamre, president and CEO of the Center for Strategic and International Studies, believes that the bloat, along with changes in seniority rules, has played a role in diminishing the power of chairmen and the effectiveness of standing committees—for many years the repository of congressional expertise and interbranch influence. From a memo to his board of trustees made available to the author, John Hamre said, “The Senate Armed Services Committee now has 27 members, over a quarter of the Senate. The House Armed Services Committee now numbers 61. And members of the Senate and the House now routinely serve on many more committees and subcommittees, diminishing their time and focus.”<sup>78</sup> While an expanding congressional complex widens the playing field for political sport and more press releases from Capitol Hill, the game diverts critical time and energy from the administration of government.

comprehensive, multidisciplinary approaches, yet Congress still structures itself in committees focused on bureaucratic turf. There are no committees designed to comprehensively tackle national problem sets. Committees bring their perspectives to the joint table once a matter has reached the floor of the House and Senate, where time is short and matters are rushed. Moreover, structures to promote bipartisan agenda setting and planning are nonexistent, and rely almost entirely on personal relationships, rather than on official mechanisms. Similarly, there are no regular meetings or

The Department of Homeland Security, for example, reports to more than ninety-three congressional committees and subcommittees, not to mention several dozen congressionally sponsored commissions and task forces with overlapping jurisdiction.<sup>79</sup> Congressional oversight is an essential component of the constitutional system of checks and balances, but excess and inefficiency in the process can be nearly as abusive as too little oversight. Administration officials spend an inordinate amount of time responding to Congress, diverting agency time and resources from their executive management duties. These are resources that



could, and should, otherwise be directed to preventing problems in the first place. A witness told the 9/11 Commission that the multiplicity of reporting lines to the Hill served as “perhaps the single largest obstacle impeding the department’s successful development.” The reporting requirements were summarized by the Commission: “Through not more than one authorizing committee and one appropriating subcommittee in each house, Congress should be able to ask the secretary of homeland security whether he or she has the resources to provide reasonable security against major terrorist acts within the United States and to hold the secretary accountable for the department’s performance.”<sup>80</sup>

### ***Rules and Procedures***

Congress continues to operate under rules and procedures that are outdated and dysfunctional, including Senate procedures requiring unanimous consent to take up and act on legislative matters or face days of parliamentary time wasting. Many important proposals and amendments cannot even get considered while the body deals with the parliamentary maneuverings of a single senator who can individually bring Senate proceedings to a halt. This helps explain why perfunctory budget bills, appropriations measures, and authorization measures never get to the president’s desk, and government lurches from one stopgap funding measure to the next, while the ever-present threat of government shutdown looms. Agility and forward planning are critical to keep pace with quickly changing economic, social, and security dynamics at home and around the world. The executive branch cannot execute its duties strategically when budgets are in a constant state of limbo. Before a rule change last year, sixty votes were needed in the Senate simply to overcome the objection of a single senator to proceeding to the consideration of an executive nominee. Still, today a single senator can object to consideration of a legislative measure or taking up an executive calendar item, without even a requirement to state the reason why. Holding up nominees already examined by the responsible oversight committee, and ready for full Senate action, is often a tactic senators employ to leverage some goodie from the administration, or simply to play partisan games.

More than four thousand federal positions require Senate confirmation. The Congressional Research Service reported that senior-level vacancies in executive agencies are a growing problem. As of this summer, two-thirds of the fifteen Cabinet agencies still had vacancies for deputy secretary—the agencies’ second-highest position. The openings in the current administration are a combination of the failure to nominate and the Senate’s inertia in processing them. Whatever the reason, government cannot function properly when key leadership

posts—including within the nation’s security, justice, and judicial systems—sit empty. Even a standard slightly higher than unanimous consent to proceed with Senate business—whether the consideration of legislation or the confirmation of a nominee—would make Congress, and the country, more functional.

### ***Practices***

Many legislators recall the sea change in congressional culture created in 1979 with the advent of C-SPAN’s continuous television coverage of House and Senate proceedings. Though instituted to enhance transparency and public education, many former lawmakers say that coverage has played a major role in inflaming factional passions and bogging down the legislative process. Candid debate and earnest consensus gave way to acrimonious daytime political drama—a kind of running campaign commercial. The parties conceived new ways to embarrass one another before the press and public. While broadcast coverage has shed light on congressional proceedings, it also sparked more heated rhetoric and partisan posturing, which have only deepened the interparty animosity and distrust.

When C-SPAN expanded its live-television coverage to congressional committee hearing rooms, the mania followed. Hearings, a longstanding forum for fact-finding, have become political stages where learning gives way to party grandstanding and lecturing. “The idea that Washington would work better if there were TV cameras monitoring every conversation gets it exactly wrong,” says former Democratic Senate Majority Leader Tom Daschle in the book *City of Rivals*. “The lack of opportunities for honest dialogue and creative give-and-take lies at the root of today’s dysfunction.”<sup>81</sup>

This is not to suggest that television cameras in House and Senate chambers should be removed, that oversight should be curtailed, or that advice and consent should be replaced with rubber stamps. On the contrary. But, transparency, accountability, and oversight need not be synonymous with inefficiency and partisanship. Up until the Clinton administration, the president of the United States would send to Capitol Hill detailed legislative proposals, often in the form of a written bill, to implement priority agenda items. Other than for the president’s annual budget proposal, which is required by law, the practice has withered. Presidents and their congressional party members calculated that offering specific proposals carried too much political risk. To insulate themselves from criticism that could be leveraged by opponents in the next election, the chief executive turned from offering legislative specifics to issuing broad objectives and sets of guiding principles, or simply identifying a desired outcome.

**Strategic Objective:** Strong, nonpartisan, public-interest-centered pillars of democratic governance: districting, voting, and lawmaking.

### Key Reforms

- **Districting reform** to ensure congressional boundaries are drawn to serve the public interest, rather than partisan intrigues.  
 Utilize nonpartisan commissions to set boundaries based on transparent, public-interest principles and criteria.
- **Electoral College reform** to make Presidential elections fairer, more competitive, and inclusive.  
 Prorate Electoral College votes in all states.
- **Campaign period limits** to assure focused, efficient campaigns that do not divert the time and attention of incumbent elected officials from their official duties.  
 Shorten official campaign season by beginning the primaries later, and holding a set number of regional primaries.
- **Debate reform** to make campaigns more substantive and informative.  
 Utilize citizen bodies to set requirements on the form, number, topics, and conduct of debates, to ensure exposition of candidates' issue literacy, policy positions, and leadership skills.
- **Enhance voter registration and turnout** to strengthen participatory democracy.  
 Utilize independent citizen bodies to establish voter registration and balloting procedures that reduce barriers to voting, while assuring empirically based election integrity.
- **Secure vote casting, tabulation, and reporting** to ensure election honesty and accuracy.  
 Nationwide utilization of transparent, auditable, cybersecure vote casting, tabulating, and reporting systems that conform to best practices and minimum standards.
- **Joint agenda setting** to promote congressional accountability and collaboration.  
 Require congressional leaders to announce a joint agenda at the beginning of each Congress.
- **Congressional accountability to improve** the effectiveness and efficiency of the people's branch.  
 Pre-oath skills, issue literacy, and civics training and continuing education for elected officials. Make congressional pay subject to completing perfunctory duties: establishing a budget; determining appropriation levels; and deciding whether to reauthorize, reform, or let expire lapsing programs and departments. Require each bill to state specific objectives and measurable benchmarks. Utilize crowdsourcing for solutions based on principles and guidelines approved through congressional resolution, two-year budgeting and automatic continuing resolution funding.
- **Committee reform** to streamline congressional committees and oversight procedures.  
 Reduce the number of committees and utilize joint committees empaneled to address challenges versus turf.
- **Collaboration reform** to promote bipartisan cooperation and problem solving.  
 Establish interparty, intercommittee, intercameral, interbranch, and presidential-gubernatorial bodies that meet regularly to promote joint communication, agenda setting, and problem solving. Foster cross-party engagements through social and patriotic events.

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## Slanted and Self-Serving Media

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After World War II, most Americans obtained their news from one of three major networks (ABC, CBS, and NBC). Despite ritual complaints of a habitually liberal press, the national networks were obliged to deliver the news more or less evenhandedly. While the news industry did not always live up to its professed standards, it recognized an official code of ethics that included adherence to truth, accuracy, impartiality, and the labeling of advocacy and commentary. Most outlets generally aspired to respect the code, and the FCC was tasked with overseeing and enforcing the tenets of equal time and fairness over limited public airwaves.<sup>82</sup>



**As the political center is collapsing, the media center is cratering as well.**

With modern technology has come near limitless media choices, via an expanding array of pipelines, including broadcast and satellite television and radio, cable TV, and the Internet. Accordingly, FCC enforcement of the Fairness Doctrine was deemed unnecessary. Yet, in the digital era of grand media choice and competition, fairness and responsibility have lost ground to bias and unprofessionalism. Speed has gained premium over accuracy. Commentary and interpretation overshadows facts and information. And, much of the media seek not so much to inform as to provoke, to advocate rather than perform their adversarial duties. As the political center is collapsing, the media center is cratering as well.

In advocating for the First Amendment to the Constitution, guaranteeing free speech and press, Thomas Jefferson said, “No experiment can be more interesting than that we are now trying, and which we trust will end in establishing the fact, that man may be governed by reason and truth. Our first object should therefore be, to leave open to him all the avenues to truth. The most effectual hitherto found, is the freedom of the press. It is, therefore, the first shut up by those who fear the investigation of their actions.”<sup>83</sup> The avenues of information must be open and vibrant, but they must be orderly, such that truth is not run off the road by falsehoods and innuendo.

### ***Editorial Journalism***

The proliferation of alternative news sources—and the opportunity for more voices to take part in public affairs and national discourse—should be, and generally is, a democratically positive development. But, there is no escaping the fact that society's journey back to the future of slanted and sensationalized press is a competitive phenomenon. The bare-fisted fight among media outlets for audiences, ratings, and revenue is encouraging a circus-barking sensationalism, while biased news coverage and commentary are helping outlets capture market share among a Balkanizing, confirmation-seeking electorate.

The diversity of media and messages bombarding most people today makes living in an ideological bubble difficult, but people are drawn to news outlets that reinforce their worldviews, and grow hostile to those that challenge their preconceptions. Studies show that Americans often judge information as team members (Republican or Democrat), not as truth seekers. So, they are quite inclined to believe whatever might comport with their personal biases, and dismiss what does not. Some analysis indicates that evidence contrary to a personal bias strengthens preexisting beliefs.<sup>84</sup> Republicans tend to tune into Fox, CNBC, and their pick of favorite conservative radio jocks and websites, while Democrats patronize CNN and MSNBC, along with left-leaning radio and digital sources.<sup>85</sup> Goodbye, Chet Huntley, Douglas Brinkley, and Walter Cronkite. Hello, Sean Hannity, Rush Limbaugh, and Rachel Maddow.

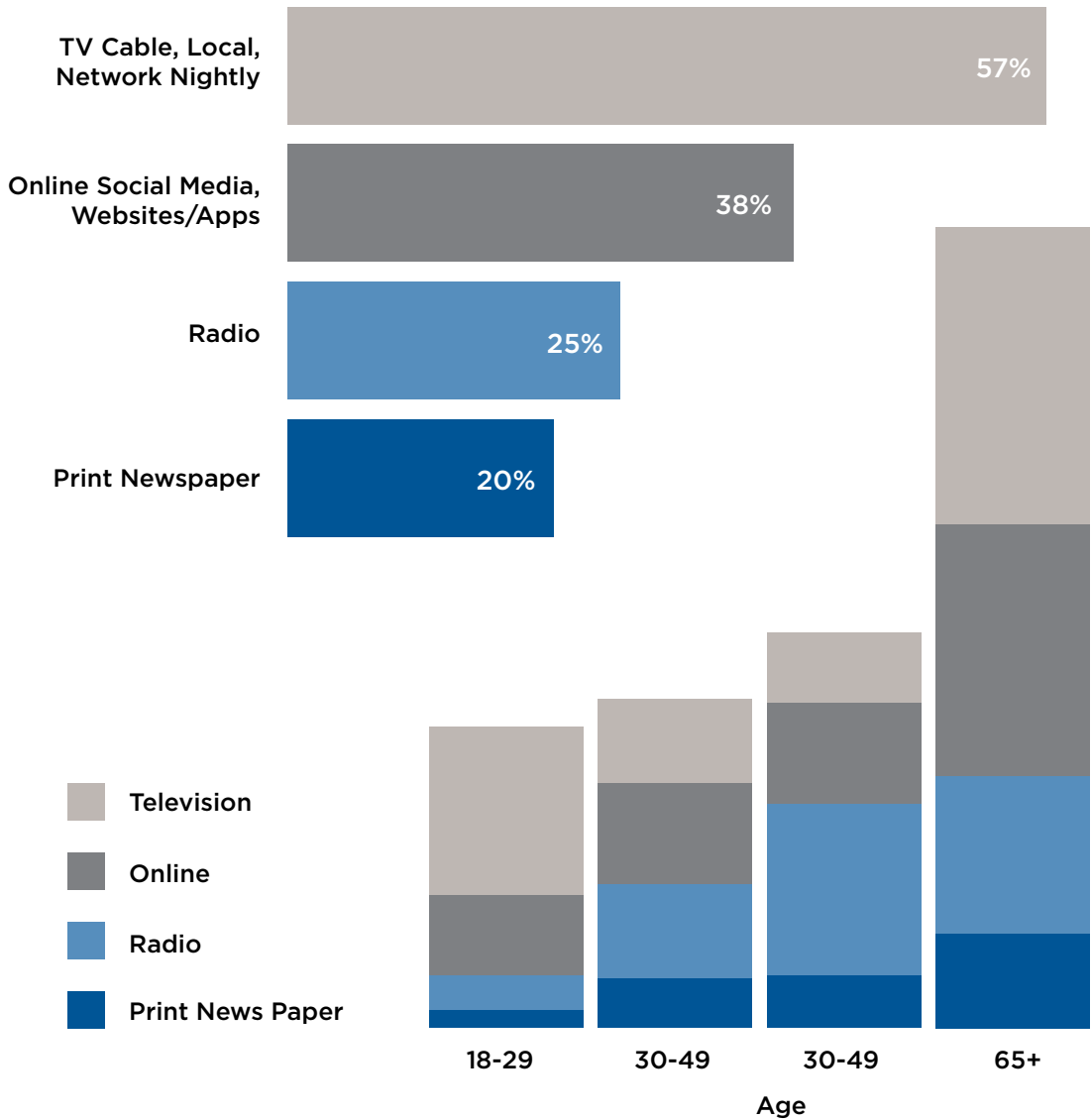
In a piece for *Slate*, author and social commentator Bill Bishop observed, "It's not what people say that matters in today's politics. It's what people hear. Voters go out of their way not to hear what upsets their existing beliefs."<sup>86</sup> Tuning into outlets that cater to one's worldview and personal political biases, and tuning out those that challenge them, may be personally comforting. But, it comes at a heavy price to mutual understanding and national cohesion.

Diversity of opinion and broad media choices are good. However, the consumption of news dished out by partial analysts and editorialists, and the catering by major media to confirmation bias to capture and hold a partisan audience, further greases the gears of national division.

### ***Weakening Boundary Between Journalism and Politics***

Neither is democracy well served by the nation's waning reverence for the separate and distinct roles of politics and journalism in free society. There was a time when, by and large, journalists were journalists, and politicians were politicians. The media

## About four-in-ten Americans often get news online



About four in ten Americans often get their news from online. *Source: Pew Research Center*

are supposed to report upon and watchdog government and politics. But, the strong financial relationship and revolving door between journalism and practical politics is blurring the boundaries between institutions with two very distinct roles in society. Tim Russert, Chris Matthews, George Stephanopoulos, and Pete Williams all had long careers in politics before moving to preeminent media platforms. Roger Ailes was a longtime political operative before becoming chairman and CEO of Fox News and Fox Television Group. He returned to the field of partisan political consultancy after stepping down from his influential network post. They are joined by the new hybrid called a “news contributor”—a misnomer, since they do not really contribute to the news; often they contribute views and opinions.


The Center for Public Integrity found that in last year's presidential race, more than 480 journalists contributed to one of the two presidential campaigns—all but \$14,000 of the \$396,000 to Hillary Clinton.<sup>87</sup>

The world scratches its head with wonder about the direction of US democracy when a partisan contributor to a leading media outlet tips presidential debate questions to her party's candidate, or when a civil legal filing alleges that a cable news outlet and presidential candidate colluded to produce a false and sinister story about the murder of a young Democratic National Committee (DNC) staffer, hoping to smear the opposing candidate.<sup>88</sup> The latter allegation may yet prove false. Whether it does or not, Americans find the scenario completely plausible. That itself speaks volumes about the erosion of public confidence in the mainstream media.

Today, Americans access news and commentary from an expanding array of media and sources. According to the Pew Research Center, “Nearly four-in-ten U.S. adults (38%) said that they often get news from digital sources, including news websites or apps (28%) and social networking sites (18%). That trails the 57% who often get news from a television source but outpaces both radio (25%) and print newspapers (20%).”<sup>89</sup> Every media outlet, from network giants to Internet startups, is brawling for ears and eyeballs, in a news cycle that is continuous and fast. The outlets race to be out quickest with the most attention-grabbing messages, resulting in questionable editorial decisions, excessive drama, and, sometimes, willful inaccuracy.

Readers and listeners find themselves drawn to a headline, only to find it is an attention-grabbing exaggeration of the underlying story—a damaging practice, given that nearly half of Americans read only headlines.<sup>90</sup> For most people, the truth is getting harder to pick out of the noise. This is why, according to a Pew Research Center poll, only 18 percent of Americans believe national news is very trustworthy, and more than 74 percent say news outlets are biased.<sup>91</sup> The continuous streaming

of political cops and robbers heightens public cynicism. The sense of social and political warfare is why media outlets and politicians advertise themselves to be “on our side.” For there to be an “our side,” there must be a “their side”—Republicans versus Democrats; Congress versus the White House; government versus public; white collar versus blue collar; police versus citizenry; business versus consumer. Especially when it comes to political parties and policy questions, as partisans would have it, the other side is often more than just wrong; it is corrupt, and its turpitude serves sinister forces and dark agendas.



**Just like campaign coffers, the media bankrolls grow in proportion to the intensity of domestic political tensions, partisan rivalry, crisis, and fear.**

### ***Politics and the Media: Codependent Financial Bedfellows***

Further fanning public distrust of the media and widening fear about the state of American democracy is the industry’s symbiotic financial relationship with politics, and their shared interest in division and acrimony. Campaign and issue-advocacy advertising are media goldmines. *TheStreet*’s Chris Nolter says, “During times of peak demand, stations can sell political ads for 40 to 50 times more than the rates for the run of the mill car ad, making political spots disproportionately valuable.” Moody’s analyst Carl Salas told *TheStreet* that, “It has become increasingly important because, for one, political advertising is now over 10% or 12% of average revenue and its growing fast.” By 2016, cable news channels made almost \$2 billion in gross ad sales, according to the projected spending on paid political advertising in the record-setting 2016 presidential race.<sup>92</sup>

The public may wonder whether the media can be prudential watchdogs and responsible truth tellers when so much of their revenue is derived from political advertising. Paid advertising, of course, is not the only facet of US politics on which the industry thrives; there is the daily ad revenue from the coverage of the political circus. Media cover the day-to-day partisan wrangling of perpetual campaigns and political knife fighting. The nastier, the better for viewership. Just like campaign coffers, the media bankrolls grow in proportion to the intensity of domestic political tensions, partisan rivalry, crisis, and fear. One might marvel at the coincidence that the most earth-shaking news each day just happens to break in between the commercials of major news shows like Shepard Smith’s and Wolf Blitzer’s, with startling gongs and alarming red screens.



During last year's campaign, Donald Trump dominated the daily news cycle—enjoying near-continuous coverage, and far exceeding the attention received by his primary rivals. Many viewers tuned in to hear what brash, personally insulting, or provocative thing the candidates might say or do. The spectacle became a kind of running political reality television show. The more colorful and controversial the candidates, and the more contentious the issues, the bigger the bucks, and the networks cashed in. As *Forbes* trumpeted, Donald Trump was not the only winner of this year's election. The three major cable news networks earned record profits and attracted record audiences, as millions of Americans tuned in to watch the dramatic showdown between Trump and Hillary Clinton.<sup>93</sup> Candidate Trump artfully used the unprecedented platform to help him trounce his party competition and win the general election. In the process, he helped save CNN financially—a spectacular irony considering President Trump's oft-repeated charge of news fakery.<sup>94</sup>

As they do for every presidential campaign, analysts and historians will expend enormous time and brainpower examining the social, economic, and political meaning of the last election. For the election industry and those who worry about the state of US democracy, several lessons are abundantly clear. First, ugly ad-hominem charges and innuendo sell to partisan constituencies (e.g., Hillary the liar and Donald the racist). Second, the parties and politicians will reap the material benefits of the factional animosity sharpened by ad-hominem political rancor, in the form of bigger donations and stauncher allies. Third, the media will convert the drama and ugliness into higher ratings and more revenue. The nation's dividend from this dynamic is also depressingly clear: greater political polarization, and diminishing chances of forging the cohesion and consensus to solve national problems.

### ***The Salacious and Trivial***

Still another legacy is evident. Ad-hominem political attacks and counter-charges will obscure the truly important information the public needs to assess an individual's fitness, preparedness, and worthiness for high office—the information it is the media's duty to bring to light.

Despite all the time exhausted on the presidential contest, the parties, polls, and press never quite informed the public how a President Trump would curtail imports without retaliation from trading partners and spurring inflation, or the specifics of what would replace the Affordable Care Act once it was repealed. Neither did the public learn how a President Clinton would honestly advance ambitious new

government programs and outlays without massive tax increases, nor how either candidate's plans would legitimately tackle the gigantic national debt.

Americans learned far more about the candidates' campaign and rhetorical skills, but precious little about their ability to govern, lead, and unify, while making tough, realistic choices. The complete cratering of civility and the evaporation of substance make one wonder what ad-hominem, fact-free depths the country will reach in the 2020 presidential election. If history is a guide, the popular press will be predominantly interested in drawing a few major policy differences to create a contrast, so it can focus on the day-to-day horse race of fundraising and poll numbers, campaign stumbles, and, hopefully, a good scandal.

### ***Political Drama, Crisis, and Fear***

What grows increasingly clear is the press and the parties suffer from a crisis of credibility, for many of the same reasons. They both trade on fear and division, using exaggeration and hyperbole as stock in trade.

Righteous paths are obscured as complex issues are presented to the public in simplistic extremes: Is Obamacare good or bad? Is trade either economic poison or the magic potion of prosperity? Are federal regulations the tools of good government at work, or the costly weapons of a nanny state? Political parties and the press may find value in painting politics and government in black and white, but truth is often gray, and answers are rarely binary. The nuances and tradeoffs inherent in difficult policy questions and serious governance do not befit the political industry's need for warfare, or the petty, sound-bite-centered campaigns with which they wage it.

Much of the organized political shouting is designed to play on emotion—particularly fear, anger, and disgust. The evocation of these passions requires two ingredients: grave injustice or danger, and someone to blame. The partisan narrative is almost always that the opposing party is responsible for the nation's problems. What better way to scare money out of people's wallets, and voters into the election booth? The Wesleyan Media Project's report on the 2016 presidential election found that the Clinton campaign's message contained less policy discussion than that of any presidential candidate in the last five elections, instead focusing on personal attacks nearly 70 percent of the time.<sup>95</sup>

A study by Emory University political scientists Alan Abramowitz and Steven Webster found that "Democrats and Republicans have never been as divided as they are today."<sup>96</sup> The team's data show that political division is driven more by

animus than inspiration: “A growing number of Americans have been voting against the opposing party rather than for their own party.”<sup>97</sup> This well-worn playbook is taking a heavy toll on the electorate.

This has contributed mightily to the public's lack of trust in politicians and the press. According to Gallup, a majority of Americans viewed the media with trust until 2004; a 2016 poll found that now just one-third do so—an all-time low.<sup>98</sup> The cratering of confidence is why so many people believe almost nothing they hear, while, paradoxically, so many Americans are willing to believe almost anything—particularly if it suggests public-sector duplicity. Russian President Vladimir Putin grasped the strategic value of exploiting public distrust in the media and US vulnerability to fake news trafficked in the digital commons. A report on the Kremlin's disinformation campaign found that its goal “is not necessarily to convince people that the Russian view of the world is the right one or that their interpretation of events is better, but rather to destroy and undermine confidence in the Western media.”<sup>99</sup> Putin's calculus to keep US institutions fighting one another is a splendid, asymmetric tactic for weakening the West without firing a shot. Americans should be stirred to action by foreign powers' manipulations that muddy truth to advantage themselves. They should be no less offended when more subtle forms of fake news are used by domestic political and media powers to do the same.

### Strategic Objective:

An energetic, fearless, and tough press; fair, balanced, and accurate political news and information; and a factually informed electorate.

### Key Reforms

- **Restore journalistic professionalism** and accountability to improve the quality, accuracy, and objectivity of news and information.  
 Enhanced professional training; third-party (nongovernmental) accreditation of news outlets based on adherence to journalism code of ethics.
- **Program labeling** to provide public transparency on the genre of programming.  
 Trusted third-party (nongovernmental) labeling of broadcast programming as news, commentary, or hybrid programming.
- **Misinformation whistleblowing** to enhance the reliability of news stories and information in a free and open society.  
 Trusted third-party (nongovernmental) labeling, and notification of unverified stories.
- **Verification** to improve public awareness of hoaxes and fake news.  
 Accessible web-based tools for identifying bogus stories and publicizing sites and sources trafficking in hoaxes and fake news; education campaign to teach students how to differentiate between fake and real news, and how to validate information.

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# Technology's Role in Political Decay

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The life-changing benefits of high technology often come with damaging side effects and abuses. This paradox is certainly evident at the intersection of modern digital communications, data science, and politics. Information and communications technology (ICT) is disrupting every aspect of human experience. Politics and governance are no exception. At its best, ICT can foster a better-informed electorate and greater participation in the political process. Data science can bring new, evidence-based discipline to policy decision-making, while helping identify poor proposals and faulty appeals. New communication tools enable candidates to connect directly with voters without requiring huge sums of money, and bring greater transparency and enhanced citizen activism. The dark side is that high technology is arming partisans with powerful new tools to manipulate the public, and creating social practices and norms that reinforce the political system's most damaging pathologies.

In sum, in the words of social-media strategist Clay Shirky, "Whereas the phone gave us the one-to-one pattern, and television, radio, magazines, books, gave us the one-to-many pattern, the internet gives us the many-to-many pattern."<sup>100</sup> This means we can all be journalists, commentators, and information providers quickly and at scale. The public does not need to wait to hear how trained journalists deliver the news; we can get it from one another. Politicians can go around their parties and sidestep the mainstream media to speak directly to the public through social media. The question is whether the Internet's elimination of longstanding guardrails will broaden the boulevards of democracy, or send us careening over the cliff of irresponsibility and misinformation.


## ***Partisan Microtargeting and Manipulation***

Few topics excite as much spirited debate as the proper limits for how personal digital information can, and should, be used by third parties. Americans' personal electronic data, anonymized or not, is continuously collected and processed to learn: how they live and think; where they go, virtually and physically; and what they do, buy, and value. Marketers of goods and services are not alone in studying individual tastes and behaviors; political marketers are doing so as well. The lessons

they derive are enabling the election industry to identify and better influence potential donors, supporters, and voters—a practice that political strategist Alexander Gage labeled “microtargeting” in 2002.<sup>101</sup>

Microtargeting has been a feature of political campaigns over the past fifteen years, but took on a prominent role beginning in the 2012 presidential contest between Obama and Romney.<sup>102</sup> Zac Moffatt, the Romney campaign’s digital director, told the *New York Times*, “Two people in the same house could get different messages...Not only will the message change, the type of content will change.”<sup>103</sup> That year witnessed the launch of Google Political Toolkit and Google AdWords. The services enabled campaigns to target YouTube videos and other campaign appeals to reach the demographically desired audience.<sup>104</sup> Facebook does something similar—not by allowing marketers to use personally identifiable information (PII), but allowing them to target groups based on preferences.<sup>105</sup> Political-strategy companies, including Democratic DSPolitical and Republican CampaignGrid, have become eager buyers, purchasing massive amounts of personal data to inform computer-based campaign analytics.<sup>106</sup>

The insight is why, as a CNN feature story on the practice of microtargeting pronounced, “campaigns know you better than you know yourself.”<sup>107</sup> The capabilities have taken on quasi-Orwellian overtones. Algorithms can help political operatives and issue advocates determine not only whom to target, but what, how, when, and where to target them to achieve maximum persuasive effect—even to the extent of pinpointing swing neighborhoods and households in critical election battlegrounds. Before the era of computerized campaign analytics, the key to victory was winning over a larger share of the political center than one’s opponent. No longer. The data-driven ability to microtarget makes mobilizing the base the favored strategy. Thanks to big data and microtargeting, say Chuck Todd and Carrie Dann, lawmakers have concluded with electoral evidence, “that they don’t need the center or swing voters to win.”<sup>108</sup> Such calculation is yet another factor driving rhetorical stridence, and the polarization of the public and its elected bodies.



**Thanks to big data and microtargeting... lawmakers have concluded with electoral evidence, “that they don’t need the center or swing voters to win.”**

### ***Computerized Pandering***

One might argue that greater understanding by political parties of the public and its preferences is pro-democracy. That is decidedly not the case when the knowledge is used to more effectively pit groups against one another for partisan gain, to pander to potential supporters, or to suppress an opponent's advocates by alienating them from the political process with just the right message. *Wired*, a publication that follows the cultural effects of emerging technologies, observed, "It's no secret that politicians pander. They cling to trite concepts and overused buzzwords because they've got polls, focus groups, and an ever-growing deluge of data from social media sites telling them that those terms are the ones we want to hear."<sup>109</sup> The age-old practice is among democracy's profoundest vulnerabilities. It is also one that has become exponentially easier to practice thanks to the nichification of media and social networks that prepackage identity groups enabling parties, politicians, and issue advocates to target and tell precisely them what they want to hear.

Public opinion polls, however, show that Americans do not like micro-pandering. In a survey conducted by the University of Pennsylvania's Annenberg School of Communications, 86 percent of the respondents said they do not want political advertising tailored to their interests.<sup>110</sup> Moreover, "Sixty-four percent said their support for a candidate would decrease if they found out a candidate was micro-targeting them differently than their neighbor. The study also found that 20% more respondents reacted more strongly to political targeting than they did to being targeted as a consumer."<sup>111</sup> One wonders what the polling response would be if the respondents were informed that technology is not only telling politicians what topics strike home with different individuals, but is on the cusp of telling politicians precisely what to say, either to gain a person's support or to alienate his or her support for an opponent.

The advance of data and behavioral science will bolster campaign analytics, influencing every step in the political marketing process—but at what price to the integrity of the democratic process?<sup>112</sup>

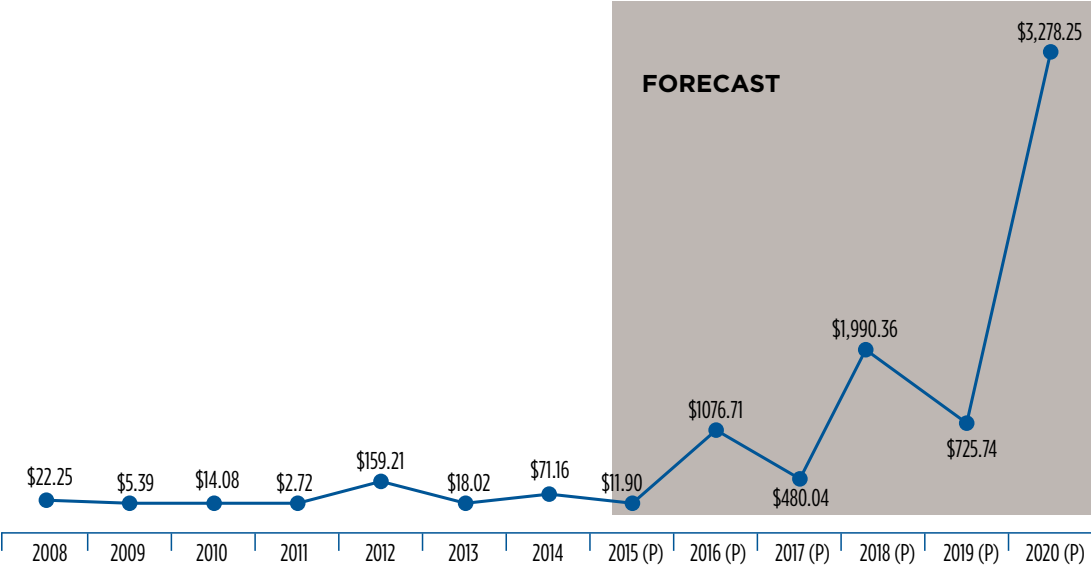
### ***Rude and Crude***

With so much information rushing at people constantly, the speed and brevity of messaging are at a premium. One hundred-forty character tweets, disappearing Snapchat images, and soundbites that have shrunk to nine seconds cannot possibly provide a distracted public audience with the just treatment needed to cope responsibly with modernity's complex issues.<sup>113</sup> As a 2015 Microsoft study

found, “Heavy multi-screener find it difficult to filter out irrelevant stimuli—they’re more easily distracted by multiple streams of media.”<sup>14</sup> The space and time constraints are why political messaging so often plays on fear and emotion, at the expense of substance, fairness, and reason. Within short digital windows provided by social media, ad-hominem insults and deceptive generalizations have become the default political scripts. It is why the other side of the story so often goes disrespected or untold, frequently leaving fairness and reason aside. As social media caters and contributes to a shrinking public attention span, it does yeoman’s work reinforcing confirmation bias.

When Internet political appeals are not seeking to command attention by overtly inflaming partisan passions, they must, experts say, provide “entertainment.” Vincent Harris, a top Republican operative with deep expertise in how politicians can most effectively harness the Internet and social networks for advantage, says that politicians must figure out how to get noticed in a “twenty-four-second news cycle.” To do this, says Harris, a politician must be entertaining, unique, and visual.

US Total Online/Digital Political Ad Spending, in \$ Millions, 2008-2020



Source: Borrell Associates

This may be true, and cartooning, which is devoted almost exclusively to satire and criticism, has an important place in the analysis and commentary about politics. When it is practiced by politicians seeking to score points, it invariably trivializes issues and opponents, cheapening the quality of national debate. No matter what damage it may do, it creates buzz. And as Harris points out, “Buzz online equals money online. Money online equals money off-line. Money off-line equals GOTV (get out the vote), which equals votes. This is a very close-knit, tied-together thing.”<sup>115</sup>

The more the country’s politics are conducted in the virtual domain, rather than eye to eye, the worse political trolling will get. Study after study shows that people tend to speak more crudely, extremely, and disrespectfully online. Psychologists have labeled this phenomenon the “online disinhibition effect.” Author Farhad Manjoo describes it as phenomenon “in which factors like anonymity, invisibility, a lack of authority and not communicating in real time strip away the mores society spent millennia building. And it’s seeping from our smartphones into every aspect of our lives.”<sup>116</sup> In sum, though today’s issues are highly nuanced—requiring deeper dialogue and understanding—the political debate is getting shorter, shallower, and inaner. The more this happens, and the nastier the nation’s political squabbles become, the more that good people will withdraw.


### ***Social Media and the Echo Chamber***

The Millennial generation (those born between the early 1980s and 2000s) surpassed the Baby Boomer generation to become the largest generational grouping, with nearly seventy-five million people. They have come of age using digital communication devices. Three-quarters of them get their news online and through social media.<sup>117</sup> The penetration of web-connected devices—phones, tablets, and laptops—and the staggering amount of time Americans use them are giving campaign strategists and political marketers unprecedented opportunities to continuously message and influence Americans.

The San Diego Supercomputer Center (SDSC) at the University of California-San Diego estimated that “the sum of media asked for and delivered to consumers on mobile devices and to their homes (also in 2015) would take more than 15 hours a day to see or hear.”<sup>118</sup> Pew reports that 62 percent of Americans get their news on social media.<sup>119</sup> The proliferation of news and entertainment outlets to meet the demand for content is creating intense competition among political parties, politicians, and the press to gain public attention at scale.



For parties and politicians, winning the competition for attention amid the media riot means making brasher, and more provocative, statements to stand out above the din. As the rhetoric becomes shriller, the chances for bipartisan comity and cooperation dim. For the media, sticking out above the competitive noise requires dishing out political shock and awe—playing to an audience by focusing on the villainous, salacious, and conflictual—and it requires doing so faster than the competition. The frenetic running drama contributes to the public's cancerous mistrust of the nation's political leadership and democratic institutions.



**The more the country's politics are conducted in the virtual domain, rather than eye to eye, the worse political trolling will get.**

As many withdraw to the sanctuary of their own social networks, they tend to seek out and associate with those who see the world as they do, Facebooking with those they know, and Twittering and Instagramming with the like-minded.<sup>120</sup> Parochial social networks can create an echo chamber that amplifies group views and biases, and reinforces political schema.<sup>121</sup> Moreover, electronic flocking enables the political industry to microtarget messaging that further reinforces parochial viewpoints and biases. As *Wired* noted, “Social media...gives campaigns a good sense of which topics are most correlated with favorable or unfavorable conversation about a candidate.”<sup>122</sup> In the book *Connected*, Nicholas Christakis and James Fowler explore how social media invite the tendency to seek out information and people who align with one's own beliefs—a phenomenon that social scientists have labeled “homophily.”<sup>123</sup> Their studies say that “social media networks concretize what is seen in offline social networks, as well—birds of a feather flock together. This segregation often leads to citizens only consuming news that strengthens the ideology of them and their peers.”<sup>124</sup>

One might think that the diversity of information on the Internet broadens the debate and exposes people to a diversity of opinion. Indeed, more recent studies question the power of the echo chamber, but the Pew Research Center, which gathers statistics and analyzes online behavior, found that users who are more ideological tend to be more politically active on social media.<sup>125</sup> Moreover, numerous studies by psychologists and social scientists show “that when confronted with diverse information choices, people rarely act like rational, civic-minded automatons. Instead, we are roiled by preconceptions and biases, and we usually

do what feels easiest—we gorge on information that confirms our ideas, and we shun what does not.”<sup>126</sup> Indeed, studies show that not even very accurate online fact-checking tools help clear the air.<sup>127</sup> People believe what they want to believe, and there are plenty of places in social networks and on the Internet to find something that helps them believe it.


### ***Bots and Phantoms***

Internet bots (also known as web robots or bots) are specialized software that can perform many legitimate functions online far faster than any human could. Political campaigns and influence-seeking third parties use them to create phony online polls, or to make online traffic appear heavier, to create false impressions of support and momentum.

Alessandro Bessi and Emilio Ferrara of the University of Southern California’s Information Sciences Institute have studied the use of bots “to support some candidates and smear others, by injecting thousands of tweets pointing to Web sites with fake news.”<sup>128</sup> They found that the practice dates to the 2010 midterm elections, and was used extensively in the 2016 presidential election.<sup>129</sup> Studying Twitter data for a pre-election period covering all three debates, advanced machine-learning techniques enabled them to detect bots populating “election-related conversation.”<sup>130</sup> The team discovered nearly half a million bots responsible for nearly four million of the twenty million tweets they studied.<sup>131</sup>

Last April, former FBI Agent Clint Watts testified before the Senate Intelligence Committee that Russia used bots “to spread false news using accounts that seem to be Midwestern swing-voter Republicans.” The purpose was to influence real Midwestern swing-voter Republicans by, as Watts said, “amplifying the message in the ecosystem.”<sup>132</sup> Per *Bloomberg*, electronic forensics found that nearly half of Trump’s Twitter followers were electronic phantoms created by bots.<sup>133</sup>

This includes Russian government bots, which have continued to cyber meddle in US political affairs since the 2016 presidential election. Bona-fide public opinion is the linchpin of representative democracy. When it is misrepresented, or artificially formed through electronic phantoms created at scale by partisan or foreign ma-



**Bona-fide public opinion is the linchpin of representative democracy. When it is misrepresented... the integrity and legitimacy of the system is undermined.**

nipulators, the integrity and legitimacy of the system is undermined. The misuse of technology is charting new paths for deceiving the public.

### ***Digital Dirty Tricks***

Practically everything in the digital and virtual worlds is subject to electronic manipulation, including what people say, do, and mean. Words and pictures can be easily enhanced or altered, to stir either favorable or unfavorable impressions. Campaign commercials often use video and audio manipulations to play on emotions and prejudices, to uplift or embarrass, to endear or alienate, to unite, and, all too often, to divide. Brooks Jackson, director of the Annenberg Political Fact-Check.org—a nonpartisan organization that “monitors the truthfulness of political discussion”—noted, “Dirty tricks have been a part of politics for as long as there’s been politics. But the Internet has taken the old-fashioned slanderous whispering campaign to a completely new level...They are more dangerous and more insidious.”<sup>134</sup> Before the faceoff between Clinton and Trump, Joel Penney, a professor at Montclair State University’s school of communication and media, predicted, “We will likely see more attempts from campaigns—as well as their supporters—to meme-ify every perceived misstep of the opposition, which means an endless barrage of online ridicule and mockery. I would predict that the 2016 campaign will easily be the ugliest and most negative in history.”<sup>135</sup> Who would argue he was not right?

In a report on the future of political dirty tricks and deception online, author Julian Sanchez predicted, “Taking a cue from phishing con artists, political scammers might seek to hijack or spoof the official sites of campaigns or local election boards, giving their misinformation an added veneer of credibility. Similarly, spoofed e-mails could be employed to persuade recipients that information is coming from a trusted source. In addition to conventional denial of service attacks, the Internet might also be used to facilitate distributed phone-jamming, of the sort often used to disrupt get-out-the-vote efforts.”<sup>136</sup> An endless roster of online trickery—spoofing, spamming, and hacking—are at the fingertips not only of official campaign political operatives, but also of surrogates and rogue operators wishing to game or manipulate the system. Almost anyone with a modicum of online savvy can make mischief at scale. Examples from recent elections include a fictitious 2007 email showing Democratic presidential nominee Barack Obama swearing his oath as a US senator on the Quran and a phony 2008 photo of Republican vice-presidential nominee Sarah Palin brandishing a rifle while wearing a US flag.<sup>137 138</sup> For further explanation of tactics used in making online ads divisive, please see the Appendix.

In the digital age, the ability to deceive is so great, and the level of public skepticism so high, that no one really knows what data, images, or utterances are authentic. As a result, the *New York Times* says, “documentary proof has lost its power...Now, because any digital image can be doctored, people can freely dismiss any bit of inconvenient documentary evidence as having been somehow altered.”<sup>139</sup> One can readily anticipate that the use of digital dirty tricks to create the appearance of scandal will become so prevalent that it will blind the public to legitimate cases of misconduct. Scoundrels and criminals will be able to easily sow doubt in practically any form of evidence, by credibly claiming it is the product of partisan fakery.

The beginning of this chapter noted the dichotomy of the good and bad that technology can bring. The Internet is the greatest human invention since the printing press. The good that it can do is limitless. Its openness and accessibility are its greatest assets, but also its severest vulnerabilities. While universal devices and the World Wide Web (WWW) enable everyone to be a journalist or a political commentator contributing content, ideas, and viewpoints to the public domain, society is still struggling with how to cope with abuse of these freedoms: the trafficking of fake news, the inobservance of journalistic ethics, and the vanishing norms of fairness and responsibility.

The cyber world is prowled by many predators, foreign and domestic, hiding anonymously in the digital back alleys from remote and safe locations for malign

## Strategic Objective:

Harnessing technology to further democratic principles and ideals, while mitigating their abuse.

### Key Reforms

- **Public campaign** to improve public awareness about Internet-based misinformation and political digital dirty tricks.  
 Major initiative by nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) to disclose and report bogus digital tactics.
- **Development and deployment** of tools to detect and label communications generated by bots.  
 Major, collaborative initiative by the ICT industry to develop tools, protocols, and standards to help assure the authenticity of news, social-networking traffic, and communications, such as through Google alerts and Twitter feed notices.
- **Employing technology** to improve the integrity of campaigns, elections, policymaking, and governance.  
 Development and deployment of data-based algorithms to assess the veracity of political statements and claims, to improve transparency, and empirically identify best policies to achieve national objectives.
- **Joint industry-community task force** to identify technological and social methods of countering the spread of misinformation.  
 Study and report by a national commission on how to counter misinformation on the Internet.

purposes—everything from bullying a schoolmate to undermining a nation. Technology creates a perpetual race between digital cops and robbers in an endless game of leapfrogging technology. National security officials designate cyberspace the fifth domain of warfare, after land, sea, air, and space. Given overwhelming US global military superiority and near-total dependence on the Internet—including its political and election systems—what better way for foreign powers to attack the United States than from the inside, using cyberspace? And, what better target than the nucleus of everything that makes the United States strong and prosperous—the legitimacy and cohesiveness of its democracy?

Vladimir Putin is a superb geo-strategist. He understands the concept of “divide and conquer,” and fully understands the power to do so by using America’s freedom against it, and deploying the potent weapon of modern cyber technology to promote division. A former FBI agent said of Putin’s anti-US strategy, “The long-run objective is to have democracy break down...To have so many internal divides and so many fights between elected officials that there is no policy—which is exactly where we’re at in the United States right now.”<sup>140</sup> Americans are rightfully outraged by a foreign power’s electronic manipulations and use of disinformation to advance its objectives; they should be no less offended, fearful, or roused to action when those tactics are employed by domestic powers to advance theirs.

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# Cultural Degradation

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Analyzing the coefficients of political division and dysfunction evokes a line from the comic strip *Pogo*, in an Earth Day commentary on pollution: “We have met the enemy and he is us.” Politics and government are easy targets for criticism and public ridicule, for many reasons cited in this report. But, a fair analysis of this despoiled political ecosystem requires the electorate to reflect on the shortcomings in itself, and upon the social and cultural factors that contribute to the madness. If the nation is divided, then Americans are allowing themselves to be divided. And, if those voters elect are failing them, candidates’ manipulations notwithstanding, then “we the people” still bear blame.<sup>141</sup> As eighteenth-century French philosopher Joseph de Maistre observed, “In democracy the people get the leaders they deserve.”<sup>142</sup>

## ***Instant Gratification. Now!***

American culture is one that demands immediate gratification of personal and identity-group (social, professional, and geographic) wants. The digital age reinforces this. People are inured to immediate communications, online commerce, and rapid-fire cable and Internet news and information. In an *American Scholar* essay, Paul Roberts, author of *The Impulse Society: America in the Age of Instant Gratification*, wrote, “Under the escalating drive for quick, efficient ‘returns,’ our whole socioeconomic system is adopting an almost childlike impulsiveness, wholly obsessed with short-term gain and narrow self-interest and increasingly oblivious to long-term consequences.”<sup>143</sup>

The public’s appetite for just-in-time goods and services infiltrates political expectations. Americans are impatient. Most people reward those who tell them what they want to hear, not what the public needs to hear. We tend to dismiss those who do not profess to solve problems quickly—even though patient, longer-term approaches may be the only course for solving them at all. Perhaps this calculus exposes the soft underbelly of democracy. Voters are pandered to because, in part, they want to be pandered to, and politicians who do not accommodate this either cannot get elected or do not survive in office. It is not hard to wonder why truth telling is shrinking from the public dais. Sam Greene of King’s College observed, “...

many voters have stopped seeing government as a tool for the production of the common good, and have instead turned to politicians (and others) who at least make them feel good.

Thus, the news we consume has become as much about emotion and identity as about facts. That's where the vulnerability comes in, and its roots are in our politics—not in the internet."<sup>144</sup>

Aligned closely with the cult of instant personal gratification is a debilitating short-termism that grips US private and public institutions. Politicians focus on the next election, journalists on the next news cycle, and business leaders on the next quarterly earnings report.

"Short-termism is basically political expediency," says Eric Cantor, the former Republican majority leader of the House of Representatives. "It is not being willing to go home to constituents and explain to them the reason you need to affect a change—to essentially reduce the fear of that change so that it is less than the fear of the status quo."<sup>145</sup> The United States has become a tactical nation in a world that demands sound strategy, and where good things take time, patience, and constancy. Adversaries and competitors size up this aspect of American culture and believe that the end of US preeminence can be achieved by merely outwaiting it.

If it is to pierce the veil of public distractedness, messaging—whatever its content or veracity—must be quick and attention grabbing. The volume and speed of digital information, and the fast pace of modern life, have brought about a serious national attention deficit. What used to be a twenty-four-hour news cycle is now measured in minutes. If a point cannot be made within the stingy character limits of a tweet or the diminishing seconds of a soundbite, it is unlikely to penetrate the public consciousness with any scale or impact. This leaves the American polity with little time for deliberation, or for understanding the nuances of complex issues.

Attention deficit is eroding the ability to grasp nuance; that is why complex public issues are debated in unrealistic absolutes. National elected officials are treated like piñatas by special interests, and as punching bags by the press. Every issue must be attended to, and every need must be a priority, such that no major problems can be addressed particularly well or with sustained drive. If members of Congress do not read and fully understand the bills and amendments on which they vote, it is not solely because they are preoccupied with politicking; the next urgent issue and its accompanying special interests are always bearing down. The public expects elected officials to be knowledgeable on all matters under a frantic and constantly shifting public spotlight, as the mainstream press wrings issues and

stories of their drama and the ability to disturb, then quickly move on to the next new thing. Great nations must be able to do many things at the same time, but no nation can stay great if it is responding to every special interest all the time.

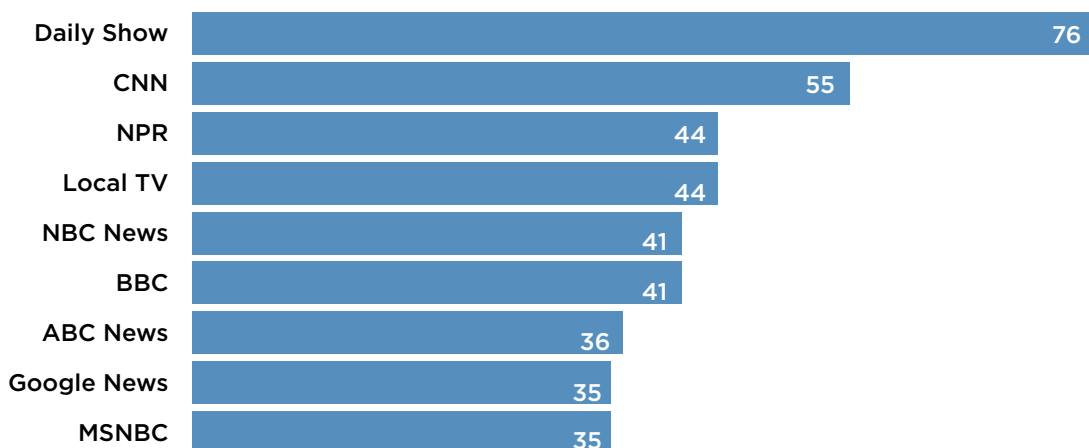
### ***Cynicism and Apathy***

“Politicians fib to get elected; they pander to particular constituencies; they leave principle at the door in favor of convenience in order to maintain power and position,” says Ben Shapiro of the *Daily Wire*, “(but) if you watch *House of Cards*, you’re likely to believe that top-level politicians off each other on a regular basis—and you might be more willing to believe conspiracy theories about the murder of former Democratic National Committee staffer Seth Rich. If you’ve seen *The Manchurian Candidate*, you’re more likely to believe that either former President Obama or President Trump is one.”<sup>146</sup>

The public has been conditioned to spy conspiracies, cabals, and cover-ups around every corner, and beyond all fact or reason. One reason why fake news is so powerful is that people enjoy it, and are all too eager to believe the worst in others,

## **News Outlets Used By At Least One-Third of Colbert Viewers**

*(% of Colbert Report viewers who get news from...)*



Source: Pew Research Center



and in officialdom. What they do not see quite as well is the unfairness of those prejudices to good people trying hard to serve rightly, or the danger to democracy when talented people are deterred from service because of the public's deep disdain and suspicion of elective politics. In that way, excessive cynicism becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. When the public's reflexive, broad-brushed enmity for politicians helps filter out the good, it self-selects the egoists, power seekers, and ideological hucksters for leadership. In that way, as de Maistre said, Americans get exactly what they deserve.

The book *Culture of Fear* chronicles emotion's prominent role in the modern United States to sell anything and everything: goods, services, news stories, and entertainment. Author Barry Glassner notes, "The short answer to why Americans harbor so many misbegotten fears is that immense power and money await those who tap into our moral insecurities and supply us with symbolic substitutes."<sup>147</sup> Unsurprisingly, campaign appeals trade on fearfulness to attract votes and attention. Richard Nixon declared, "People react to fear, not love. They don't teach that in Sunday school, but it's true." Indeed, much of the candidates' rhetoric in the 2016 presidential election was aimed at sowing fear about the other. In part, Donald Trump won by harnessing fear more effectively—not only fear of his opponent, but fear of immigrants, trade, globalization, modernization, and social change.<sup>148</sup> And, Hillary Clinton wanted voters to fear Donald Trump.<sup>149</sup> Part and parcel to fear is victimization. Political salesmen want people to see themselves as victims, and to hire the salesmen's candidate to get the culprits and make things right.

Perhaps antidotal to the excessive levels of fear coursing through the US bloodstream is another powerful cultural characteristic: the mania for being entertained. The gamification of disciplines such as learning, marketing, and working, and the social phenomenon of video gaming, underscore the phenomenon. The entertainment industry holds great sway with the American public; it heavily influences public attitudes and the nation's public life. Polls show that many Americans receive their news and lens about politics and government from entertainment media—not from *Meet the Press* and *Face the Nation*, but from news parodies and political satires on Comedy Central.<sup>150</sup> Political humorists and satirists play a fun and important role in culture and politics. But, the emergence of entertainment media as primary sources and filters of news and information for the electorate is not just a symptom of a troubled and trivialized national political life; it is a contributor.

The country's student body is woefully uninformed about basic US history and civics. "It is testimony to the failure of the country's education system," says Jonathan Cole in the *Atlantic*, "that a high percentage of the voting-age population

is simply ignorant of basic facts—knowledge that is necessary to act reasonably and rationally in the political process.” The American Council of Trustees and Alumni (ACTA) found that only 20 percent of college seniors at fifty-five highly ranked colleges and universities would have received better than a D grade on testing based on “standard high-school-civics curricula.”<sup>151</sup> One can legitimately wonder how well many members of Congress would fare if tested on topics of history, government, civics, and economics, or even how many would pass the standard US naturalization exam.

The country is in fiscal shambles. Its healthcare system is a mess. The tax and regulatory systems are badly in need of overhaul. Millions of people are unemployed or underemployed. Many communities and their residents languish in generational poverty. Americans worry that their jobs will be overtaken by robots, or shipped overseas. Infrastructure is crumbling. Public schools are underperforming. US economic competitiveness is under pressure, and threats to national and homeland security abound.

Despite the bottomless supply of campaign promises and partisan rhetoric, the problems listed above are pretty much the same batch of problems that have appeared on the national “to-do” list for decades. The electorate wonders why. Where is the full return on investment of a \$3 billion per year Congress, an annual federal budget that tops \$4 trillion, and a titanic federal debt of more than \$20 trillion (and growing)?<sup>152</sup> Year after year, the country fails to hear a concrete bi-partisan list of priorities, or a comprehensive set of strategies from Congress and the administration—just more talk and blame, and promises of solutions to come. Of course, the public is often told it must wait for the goods until after the next election.

### ***End of Centrism***

Though partisan faithful would be loath to admit it, the respective party centrists have far more in common than in contrast, particularly in economics, foreign policy, and national security. Both generally agree on basic principles such as the idea that private-sector-led growth is the most desirable and sustainable, though they may differ on how best to stimulate it. They concur on: the need for sensible tax and regulatory policy to foster economic growth; the importance of a strong national defense, as a guarantor of peace and security; and that US interests are served by maintaining a global leadership role. Among the nation’s centrist majority, the policy debate in these areas is generally far more over tactics and degrees than compass points. Even in presidential elections, the difference on the wedge issue of

tax policy is not always as earth shattering as the political combatants would have us believe. During the 2008 and 2012 presidential elections, the debate often boiled down to disagreement over a top tax rate of 35 percent versus 39.6 percent. Meanwhile, Obama, Romney, Clinton, and Trump all expressed some level of support or sympathy for lowering business tax rates, to improve US global economic competitiveness.

The focal points of divergence today are predominantly social issues and identity politics that tend to be highly emotional. Veteran journalist Tom Jacobs observed, "...many studies suggest we routinely overestimate just how different our positions are from those of our opponents. Bad, oversimplified journalism, along with the tendency of many high-profile political candidates to take extreme positions, has obscured the fact that many of our differences are, in fact, bridgeable."<sup>153</sup>

America's first president put his finger on what is making our differences so difficult to bridge. In his farewell address, he warned the young nation about the dangers of factions and political parties.

"The common and continual mischiefs of the spirit of party are sufficient to make it the interest and the duty of a wise people to discourage and restrain it. It serves always to distract the public councils and enfeeble the public administration. It agitates the community with ill-founded jealousies and false alarms, kindles the animosity of one part against another, foment occasionally riot and insurrection. It opens the door to foreign influence and corruption, which find a facilitated access to the government itself through the channels of party passions."<sup>154</sup>

Washington described exactly the nation's predicament today.

### Strategic Objective:

Building a culture that promotes a well-informed and participatory electorate, functional political processes and institutions, and good governance.

#### Key Reforms

- **Citizenship campaign** to enculturate common values of fairness, objectivity, civility, and good citizenship.  
 Develop public programming to model and foster the practices and habits of good citizenship.
- **Civics renaissance** to improve the electorate's understanding of the nation's history, government, governance, public affairs, and politics.  
 Implement a comprehensive national civics literacy initiative including school, curricula, educational standards, and public information and programming.

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## Conclusion

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When the nation's founders met in Philadelphia for the Constitutional Convention, they tasked Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Jefferson, and John Adams with creating a great seal for the new country. The effort did not yield success, but follow-on committees were formed to carry on the work. They, too, failed. Eventually, in 1782, the best elements of the various proposals were combined. The leaders soon agreed on the seal that remains a global symbol of liberty, and which bears the inscription "E pluribus unum," or "Out of many, one." These simple words embody the enormous power and hope of democracy. Based on these values, the nation's forefathers ordained a carefully crafted government to protect and advance the American idea, based on the equipoise of freedom and responsibility.

Over the past 241 years, that system built the freest and most prosperous nation in history, and triumphed through numerous trials: the Civil War, two World Wars, the Great Depression, the fight for civil rights, and the long-twilight struggle of the Cold War. The United States again finds itself at an inflection point. Perpetuating the democracy-wrecking forces described in this report will do what hostile powers have been unable to accomplish: spoil the American idea. The internal divisions Americans nurse, the essential virtues they abandon, and the deep political dysfunctions they tolerate pose a clearer and more present danger to the country than any martial threat from abroad.

The mission is plain: to restore the cohesiveness of US society, reinvigorate the functionality of public institutions, and resuscitate the values that are fundamental to US national character. The plan to achieve it can be described as "The Four Cs of National Renewal."

- **Competition:** Making the political parties, campaigns, and elections more competitive in the right ways—over ideas and practical strategies centered on national interest, rather than over money and incumbency, or focused on parochial interest. That requires campaign-finance and gerrymandering reform.
- **Cohesion:** Modernizing Congress to make it more cohesive and functional. That requires overhauling how the people's branch organizes and operates.
- **Content:** Empowering better self-governance by making truth, facts, and agendas more transparent to a more discerning public. That requires

practices and tools that call out political fakery and lies.

- **Civic engagement:** Marshaling a powerful, irresistible civic movement to overcome a resilient and debilitating status quo. That requires a relentless, national reform campaign.

National interest demands that Americans summon the power to override a stubborn status quo. There is no other choice. The world is changing rapidly, and the United States must change with it—becoming more agile, strategic, and decisive. Without authentic political reform, the country cannot hope to assure its prosperity and security in what could be, and should be, an epic of unmatched human advancement. A US exit from global leadership would be a tragedy—not only for this country, but for the cause of freedom that has always counted on the United States, even in its darkest hours. It is our duty to now show the world that democracy can do more than simply survive the Internet age of personal empowerment and decentralization. We the people must demonstrate that liberty, responsibility, and self-government can be refreshed and strengthened by a democratic system. This requires urgent and decisive reform of politics and government. But, as citizens, it requires a hard look at ourselves.

E Pluribus Unum.

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## About the Author

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# Appendix

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## ***Four-Step Process of Political Ad Development***

1. Engage in demographic targeting  
Cleave the populace into distinct groups that can be pitted against each other.
2. Evoke fear and disgust in viewers  
This will either get them to rally to your side or withdraw from the conversation.
3. Strengthen bonds within a demographic base  
Use tailor-made messages for particular audiences.
4. Attack the opposition  
Try to get as many people who might vote for your opponent to stay home on Election Day.

*Source: Joe Brewer, "The Psychology of Manipulation in Political Ads," Huffington Post, October 28, 2010.*

**Deceptive Audio:** The strategic insertion of sounds to induce an emotion and manipulate the response of the viewer, such as the insertion of laughing in one commercial to make it appear the candidate being attacked was chuckling inappropriately.

**Deceptive Dramatization:** The use of inferential and misleading imagery that's harder than statements for fact checkers to call out as foul.

**Deceptive Framing:** The practice of juxtaposing two pictures to create a non-existent, negative relationship.

**Glass House Attacks:** Ads slamming an opponent for "a behavior, position or vote that the attacker has made as well."

**Guilt by Association:** Ads that pair pictures of the opponent with a photo of some unsavory character to establish an association in the voter's mind.

**Hearing What's Not Said:** The act of superimposing a derogatory word or term on the picture of an opponent to create a malicious association.

**Misplaced Referent:** When ad makers "capitalize on the potential ambiguity of pronouns such as 'we,' 'you,' and 'they' to make the audience believe that the opponent is referring to one thing when actually he or she is referring to something else entirely."

**Out of Context:** The act of "ignoring parts of a statement or the context in which a statement was made...to distort our sense of what an opponent said or meant."

**Photoshopping:** Altering a photo in some way that's favorable to the sponsoring candidate or unfavorable to the opponent.

*Source: Lauren Feeney, "Patterns of Ad Deception," Moyers & Company, May 11, 2012.*



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