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A Democrat's Bipartisan View

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The 2016 election has been a bulldozer, breaking and defying political science, conventional wisdom, punditry, predictions, and, every so often, common sense. If politics is a reflection of the id of society, then American society is anxious, afraid, and distrustful of most institutions including political parties.

And yet the Democratic Party and the GOP are storied institutions in American life, and party organization is a critical pillar of democratic governance. So where do political parties go from 2016 onward?

Before peering into the future, let's look at the past. For many years, political party affiliation was a loose set of guidelines, or a spectrum of beliefs. There were liberal Republicans and conservative Democrats, and much in between.

In my own case, while in Congress, I voted with the national Democrats around 60 to 70 percent of the time, but would often vote with Republicans when it was in the interest of my constituents. I wasn't afraid to cast these kinds of votes because I felt they were the right things to do for Kansans and I didn't fear reprisal by the party. Democratic campaign officials understood that I felt the need to take certain positions against the party. That didn't make me a traitor.

In today's political climate, elected officials cross party lines much less frequently if they do so at all. Certainly voters have become more partisan themselves. But in my judgment, increased partisanship among voters is the effect and not the cause of increased partisanship in political institutions. Campaign consultants, in coordination with the news media and well-funded organizations with extreme views, have used modern communications tools to exploit emotions like fear and anxiety to increase turnout among their supporters. It's easier to get people to vote if they are afraid of what the other party might do than it is to inspire voter support with a comprehensive plan to, say, make the tax code more progressive or to rein in government spending in the Department of Education.

In addition, there has been an exponential increase in the amount of campaign funds raised and spent in recent years – especially so-called “dark money” or unreported contributions. And much of that money is spent on highly vitriolic and negative ads on TV and in social media, further discouraging compromise and bipartisanship. I suspect that the 2016 elections, federal and state, will see spending records, and public disgust with the political system, reach all-time highs.

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Voters have expressed this frustration by pulling the levers for political outsiders. The extreme positions and rhetoric of Donald Trump have clearly created an opening for profound divisions in the Republican Party, where even Governor Mitt Romney, the 2012 candidate, is encouraging Republicans to not vote for Trump. We may see some parallels, even if less severe, with Bernie Sanders supporters on the Democratic side.

So where is this all leading us? The most growth in political affiliation are the numbers of Americans who are self-identified independents. Unless party ideology becomes less rigid and political independence for members of both parties more common, Americans will eventually see political parties as irrelevant. Will they tune out politics completely, disengage and not vote at all?

The truth is that whatever the result of the current election, something needs to happen in order for our government to engage with and respond to the big issues of our time. Will voters demand that their politicians commit to solving major national problems like fixing the nation's infrastructure, fighting terrorism sensibly, upgrading our energy policy, making progress on long-term fiscal soundness, making college more affordable? It is in the hands, hearts, and minds of the American people to demand political change.

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