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Broken Politics

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Our governing processes are broken. In a recent CNN/Opinion Research survey, 86 percent of Americans said they believe the federal government is broken and only 14 percent felt that it worked. We have a weak capacity for leadership, high political polarization, massive citizen



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cynicism, superficial media coverage, and limited understanding of difficult policy issues. This “perfect storm” of failures makes it nearly impossible to address either short- or long-term problems facing the United States.

In the last year, governing challenges have complicated our ability to address a variety of issues such as the economy, health care, climate change, and financial regulation. And these governance difficulties are not unique to the Obama Administration. Examples of governability challenges were common during the presidencies of George W. Bush (social security, tax reform, and immigration) and William J. Clinton (health care, the environment, and trade negotiating authority).

With numerous examples over an extended period of broken politics leading to broken policies, we need to think about ways to reform our political system in ways that enhance our capacity for innovation, leadership, coalition-building, problem-solving, and implementation. We have to understand that failed governance is a problem for people of all political persuasions. While certain

elements achieve short-term advantage from gridlock, stalemate, and hyper-partisanship, the system as a whole suffers and Americans grow more cynical. We must get serious about improving institutional performance, administrative infrastructure, and governance processes if we wish to address our policy problems.

A Broken Political System and Its Policy Ramifications

A Mismatch Between Government Mission and Capacity

We have a serious mismatch between government mission and capacity. In the aftermath of the global fiscal crisis, the federal government under Presidents George W. Bush and Barack Obama dramatically increased its role in the economy. It took ownership stakes in leading financial institutions, bought stock in and made management changes at auto companies, put billions into the insurance industry, and drafted a host of new rules and regulations for many areas of the economy.

Yet at the same time we have increased our public mission, the federal government has its weakest capacity in years in terms of staffing, research infrastructure, and regulatory ability. We have spent the last several decades complaining about the inefficiency and ineffectiveness of the “government in Washington”, and the result has been that we have downsized the public sector, out-sourced service delivery, and reduced the staffing and analytical infrastructure of the public sector. With exceptions such as the Census Bureau, the Federal Reserve, and some parts of the Labor and Commerce Departments, many agencies have little ability to analyze data, document trends, and measure new parts of the economy. This weakens our ability to address major policy problems because often we don’t even have basic data measuring the nature of the difficulties.

Declining Institutional Performance

Recurring stalemates over major issues from economic growth, climate change, trade, and immigration to health care and Social Security suggest that an assessment of our governing and administrative capacities is long overdue. Our Constitution’s checks and balances were designed to facilitate deliberate decision-making. But a chorus of public servants and distinguished commentators has raised concerns that our leadership is incapable of making difficult decisions, particularly those that impose short-term costs for long-term benefits.

It is crucial to improve the capacity of our national political institutions, both



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from the standpoint of promoting growth and innovation, and addressing other fundamental policy problems. The failure to craft politically sustainable policies over the past two decades suggests that our government is not up to the job at hand. The inability of our political institutions to encourage decisive leadership, foster constructive deliberation, strike a balance between competing values, and sustain an intelligent policy making process underlies our repeated policy failures.

Our last two presidents and our current chief executive have each tried with some success to forge majorities to move big initiatives. President Clinton secured passage of NATO enlargement, NAFTA and the WTO; balanced the federal budget, and reformed the welfare system. President Bush gained some support for education reform and new prescription drug benefits. President Obama enacted a massive economic stimulus package, albeit along partisan lines.

Yet each president also has seen major efforts fail. Clinton was not able to forge a public consensus on health care reform in 1994, climate change agreements in 1997, or trade negotiating authority in 1998. Bush was not able to pass entitlement reform in 2004 or immigration reform in 2007. Obama has had difficulties assembling a winning coalition on health care, climate change, and financial regulation.

Public Polarization, Hyper-Partisanship, and Limited Cooperation

Public sector decision-making has been compounded by public polarization and hyper-partisanship. Although self-described moderates have remained a steady plurality of 40 percent of American voters over the last 40 years, self-described liberals and conservatives have sorted themselves into ideologically distinct political parties. Like-minded people at either end of the political spectrum tend to seek out ideas and media outlets that conform to their own views.

The polarization that exists today is pervasive. In the House, southern conservative Democrats and northern liberal Republicans have largely disappeared, reflecting changes in both ideological sorting of voters and the increased partisan consistency of citizens in the voting booth. Electoral redistricting has contributed as well, helping to make most legislative seats safe for one party or the other. All too often, that means either there is virtually no competition at all, or the only meaningful competition takes place in primaries, not in the general election.

As a result, candidates spend more energy winning the support of activists in their own party than in appealing to crossover voters. Appealing to the party base, rather than to more centrist interests, discourages deliberation, distorts the

policy making process, encourages the two parties to compete rather than to cooperate in constructing policy solutions, and forestalls institutional reforms aimed at improving electoral and governing institutions. Congress is more divided along party lines than at any other time in recent memory.

The Limits of Media Coverage and Public Engagement

The news media cover politics as a forum for combat rather than as a deliberative process. On the one hand, the expansion of new media – from cable news to websites, web-videos, and blogs – has expanded the reach of political discourse. On the other hand, this means that newspapers, magazines, television networks and websites compete with innovative outlets for readers, viewers, and listeners. Many newer outlets “narrowcast” to the tastes and opinions of followers with political orientations and agendas that differ from the public at large. Mainstream media have responded by trying to be more “edgy,” more opinionated, and hence have become more polarized and polarizing. This exacerbates our governing problems and undermines the ability of the general public to understand policy issues.

The ability of the general public to grasp what is happening has been made worse by the collapse of traditional media business models. Rising unemployment and a declining economy have placed enormous fiscal pressures on news organizations. The simultaneous declines in ad revenues and circulation levels have undermined the traditional business model of newspapers, radio, and television networks. At the same time, the emergence of new competitors in the form of Internet web sites and bloggers has intensified the competition among media outlets.

The media collapse has made it difficult to cover substantive policy challenges, especially on controversial subjects. Policy issues such as health care or energy security are vastly complex. The mass public only has limited attention for the intricacies of such matters, and it is hard to explain policy tradeoffs. This is particularly true when opponents of short-term costs are more active and motivated than proponents of long-term benefits. At the very time when leaders need to appeal to the public for support, it is hard to engage citizens in substantive decision-making.

Low Public Confidence in Government and Big Business

It long has been the case that voters do not trust the government in Washington to do what is right. In 1964, 76 percent of people trusted government just about always or most of the time. Today that number is down to about 30 percent in the Gallup poll. We have shifted from a public opinion climate where most

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Americans trusted government to do the right thing to one where most *mistrust* the government. Large numbers of voters feel that public officials do not have citizens' best interests at heart and are not very honest.

Public confidence in big business also has dropped by half over the last 30 years. In 2009, when asked how much confidence they had in 16 different American institutions ranging from the military, police, organized religion, Congress, the presidency, and the private sector, big business ranked dead last in the public's mind. Only sixteen percent indicated they had a great deal or quite a lot of confidence in big business, compared to 82 percent for the military, 59 percent for the police, and 52 percent for organized religion.

Of the political institutions, Congress barely ranked ahead of big business at 17 percent, but the presidency (51 percent) and the Supreme Court (39 percent) generated considerable more confidence. Interestingly, the dismal ratings for big business do not reflect an anti-business sentiment among the general population. People were very confident (67 percent) in small businesses, long considered the backbone of the American economy in terms of job creation and innovation. It is large firms where people direct the bulk of their ire.

Restoring our Governance Capacity

In a situation of extreme political polarization, partisanship, and mistrust, it is difficult to think about rational discussions designed to address deeply-rooted policy problems. If Democrats say blue, Republicans are virtually guaranteed to say brown (or vice versa), regardless of the particular policy question. We see this dynamic on a wide variety of issues stretching back over several presidencies. Political leaders have proposed a variety of policy remedies to address budget deficits, health care, entitlement reform, tax reform, climate change, immigration, and financial regulation, and few have gone anywhere.

The persistent nature of our inability to address fundamental problems suggests how polarization, partisanship, and mutual mistrust limit the ability of the federal government to address a variety of issues. Parties with big majorities often go too far in their policy reach. And parties that are out of power engage in delay, deadlock, and obstruction as a tool for electoral advantage. Either is a recipe for ineffective policymaking.

Addressing America's governance capacity requires attention to the political process. Because of our country's administrative, institutional, and policy problems, we need a reform program that strengthens capacity, promotes effective leadership, and fosters informed civic discourse. In thinking about a reform agenda, four principles should guide our vision of political and institutional action.

Principle 1 – American government requires administrative and institutional reforms that foster cooperation between the branches, across party lines, and among levels of government.

Presidents and Congress have struggled to pass legislation that represents a broad spectrum of American opinion. All of this infects the judiciary, where confirmations become protracted, and the courts often seem to decide salient policy questions on partisan grounds. Administrative agencies are not equipped to handle the substantial expansion in federal role that has taken place. We need to address a series of obstacles to broad political cooperation and administrative action.

- *Recommend institutional fixes that empower Congressional majorities without suppressing minority rights (e.g. address the Senate filibuster)*
- *Explore ways to empower “moderate” voters, particularly in selecting members to the House of Representatives (e.g. a major effort to fix electoral redistricting)*
- *Examine whether “bipartisan commissions” help elected officials avert gridlock*
- *Reconsider how cabinet agencies can more effectively deal with complex policy challenges that cut across economic, regulatory, technological and diplomatic matters*
- *Promote administrative innovation within the public sector*
- *Propose reform of advise and consent to improve the selection of judges and justices, and the performance of the courts*

Principle 2 – Effective leadership involves public discussion of the complexities and trade-offs inherent in addressing major policy challenges.

Recent leaders have sought to address major policy challenges, but have had limited ability to do so. With challenges in the areas of health care, financial regulation, immigration, education, and trade, we need to pay attention to several aspects of political leadership.

- *Assess the level of public awareness of the complexities and tradeoffs and consequences embedded in each challenge (e.g. fossil fuel consumption and greenhouse gas emissions)*
- *Identify latent majorities as well as elite opinion that could be motivated on major issues. This includes mapping the main advocacy and public education*

organizations, the nature of their goals, and the resources and political strategies they are employing

Principle 3 – Policy action requires informed and responsible civic discourse among politicians, policy advocates, the media, and other stakeholders.

Helping educate the citizenry about the need for institutional fixes or policy solutions is of crucial importance. On the one hand, there is no more critical dimension to effective democracy than an active, engaged and responsible public. On the other, civic education is very expensive, organizationally challenging, and easy to get wrong. To deal with these problems, we need to look at a number of topics.

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- *assess the best ways to take advantage of the extraordinary reach of new information technologies to reach broader audiences*
- *examine new ways of establishing a media dialogue with broader audiences about policy costs and benefits, including taking advantage of celebrities and entertainment-based activism*
- *look for non-governmental stakeholders, and incentives that encourage the media to cover issues more deeply*

Principle 4 – The technology revolution offers the potential to improve the way the public sector functions, make government more efficient and productive, and address pressing policy problems.

Technology innovation represents a way to improve government transparency, strengthen accountability, and boost responsiveness. There are ways to employ technology for online service delivery, public outreach, social networking, and civic engagement. We have a once in a generation opportunity for meaningful change at the state and federal levels. We need to view our digital infrastructure as the contemporary equivalent of highways, bridges, and dams.

- *assess the potential for the technology revolution to improve transparency, accountability, and government performance*
- *use high-speed broadband and wireless to stimulate job creation and economic development in health care, education, and energy*
- *Employ social networking sites for public outreach and crowd-sourcing of new ideas*

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Ways to Move Forward

To address basic problems such as budget deficits, job creation, health care, climate change, and immigration, we need reforms to our basic governing process. We no longer have the luxury of assuming that policy failures or inaction is the fault of a specific individual, a particular political party, or an identifiable set of political or economic circumstances. The fact that our governing problems have cut across every recent president demonstrates the importance of addressing fundamental governance questions.

We need to engage a wide range of our country's most respected and innovative thinkers to understand why our system is dysfunctional and what practical steps would make it perform better. Until we get our political house in order, it will be impossible to make much progress. We must take our governance challenges seriously if we wish to remain competitive in the long-run.

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