

Vic Fazio

What Drove Congress To Become So Polarized?

At this 10th anniversary of the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks, we remember the unity and resolve of the American people in the wake of a great tragedy.

It was not the first time we unified in patriotism and love of country. Indeed, the American response after Sept. 11 sounded like the nation's response to the attack on Pearl Harbor some 60 years before. But in this first decade of the 21st century, that sense of common American interest was fleeting.

In recent years, profound division has re-emerged about every aspect of public policy, and the rhetoric of political debate betrays an increasingly toxic character. The latest dispute over the debt ceiling exposed the depth and intensity of the current partisan division — a division that threatens not only the efficacy of Congress but also the already flagging public confidence in Congress as a functional institution.

It's easy to lay blame at the feet of various political leaders. But no president or speaker alone could be responsible for fissures so deep and pervasive.

Our society is polarized for many reasons. Increasingly, we tend to live in enclaves of like-minded people. Other factors, like the churches we attend, the media we absorb, our workplace environments and even our schools contribute to a political culture with no center. As a result, redistricting has an easy time hardwiring the brand of representation in a vast majority of seats. And our weakened civic culture has exposed our political system to tremendous volatility in the aftermath of a shattering and lingering economic downturn.

Perhaps it was inevitable the American electorate would be driven to extremes by an economic crisis unlike anything in the collective memory. And yet when the American people most needed to trust government, they found their institutions gridlocked, divided and incapable of concerted action.

Indeed, since the economic crisis of 2007 and the struggle to pass the Troubled Asset Relief Program proposed by President George W. Bush, nothing of consequence has happened in Washington that was truly bipartisan. Instead, rigid and often unanimous opposition is the norm. And media coverage this summer indicates the relentless coverage of the 2012 presidential campaign will continue unabated for the next 18 months.

Meanwhile, members of Congress face external pressures that shift moment to moment. To be admonished by Rush Limbaugh or any of the countless other talk show hosts on the right can be a terribly intimidating experience for any Republican contemplating compromise. And if Grover Norquist decides a member has violated his no-tax pledge, the word goes forth overnight to the party base — and its donor base.

Similarly on the left, no Democrat wants MoveOn.org to spread the word that he or she has fallen out of line with party dogma. And no member wants to be sacrificed to organized labor in the way that Sen. Blanche Lincoln was in her Arkansas Democratic primary last cycle. In such a climate, it's no wonder that Sens. Dick Durbin (D-Ill.) and Tom Coburn (R-Okla.) — who agreed to support the recommendations of the Simpson-Bowles commission — are often cited as modern profiles in courage.

As if the blogosphere and talk radio are

not challenging enough, the mainstream media also sends messages that further undermine public confidence in Congress and the credibility of individual members.

Take, for instance, the reporting of the stalemate of the reauthorization of the Federal Aviation Administration. Inexcusable as it was, the failure to agree was based on differences of policy that deserved discussion. The media focused only on the easy critique of Congress and the impact on the thousands of public and private jobs at stake. As such, the media largely avoided details of the labor management dispute in the airline industry or the costs and benefits of rural airport subsidies. It's always easier to bash Congress and feed the public perception of government failure in Washington.

But why and how has Congress itself become so polarized? Much has to do with the way members live and interact with each other. Unlike 20 years ago, most members now live in their districts, jetting to Washington for a few jam-packed days at a time. There is little time for personal communication among members, particularly across party lines. In the era of cellphones, BlackBerry, iPads, Facebook and Twitter, the process has become much less personal. And when a legislative body works well, it is the personal collaboration by its leaders that brings results.

Collegiality across party lines has been sacrificed to the strictures of the calendar and changes to the gift rules that, though noble in intention, have limited many of the interactions that often furthered productive discussion and legislative action. And outside committee hearings, Capitol Hill meetings today are nearly always partisan, if they happen at all.

Against this solemn backdrop, we are left to wonder: What about the economy and the perilous debt in need of significant reduction? What about the short-term needs as growth stagnates and joblessness becomes permanent for many? Where is the sense of national purpose that has always guided our leaders and brought the nation through its most daunting challenges? Is it possible that a rigid political class no longer has the ability to lead its own base to compromise even on issues that make the most preliminary attempts to stabilize our precarious economy?

There are no easy answers. But this we know for certain: Tax reform must raise revenue. Entitlements must be adjusted and made sustainable. And the federal government must be limited for many years.

No sections of the budget can go untouched. All of this and some short-term stimulus must be part of a grand bargain before we are consumed by the presidential election. The American people deserve better and look to the bipartisan leadership and the 12 appointed supercommittee members for solutions. No member will be more popular with their constituents and allies if this job is done well. But if we fail, the country will suffer even more — and for much longer.

At the peak of the Civil War, President Abraham Lincoln urged Americans to "disenthral ourselves." Today, as we reach a crucial time in our nation's economic history, it's time that our political leaders and their partisan supporters do the same.

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