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 is a time when we indulge in patriotism and love of country. Indeed, the American response after Sept. 11 sounded like the patriotic 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. 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 consume, our workplace environments and even our schools contribute to a political culture with no center. As a result, real-life experience has given way to 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, 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 pernicious 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? It is possible that a 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 enough revenue and be 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 “discreetly 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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