

What is the Common Good? The Case for Transcending Partisanship

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Abstract: Even if most of us can agree on a definition of the “common good” (not a simple matter), there are substantial barriers to establishing public policies in accord with that agreement. The “democratic” element in our political system – the right of voters to choose the men and women who will create our laws – depends on the views of those voters being given considerable weight in determining eventual policy outcomes. Unfortunately, we have developed a political system – both in our elections and in the governing process – that gives disproportionate influence to relatively small numbers of voters (who are also the most partisan) and allows political parties through their closed procedures to limit the choices available to general election voters. Coupled with legislative rules that allow partisans to determine the makeup of legislative committees, the resulting process leaves the common good, however defined, a secondary consideration at best.

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I have yet to meet a person who is consciously opposed to furthering the common good. This universal sentiment has practical relevance, however, only if there is substantial agreement as to what constitutes “the common good.” Are the collective good, the national good, and the majority good all the same? Good for whom? In the short term or the long term?

Rape, murder, arson, reckless driving through crowded intersections: all provide ample room for widespread agreement and, as a consequence, commonly accepted proscriptions. There are significant disagreements as to how each should be punished, debates about the practical and moral effects of capital punishment or the extent to which mitigating circumstances ought to lessen the price society exacts, but little dissent on the question of whether the actual commission of the deed should be punished. But what about telling a lie about another member of the community? What if that lie were to lower the esteem accorded that individual by other members of the community? Could we not

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all agree that such an act should also be punished both because it undermines the fabric of social life and because it devalues the life thereby damaged? Well, no.

In *New York Times v. Sullivan* (1964), the Supreme Court ruled that a lie, even if damaging to the person lied about, is perfectly acceptable (that is, not a punishable libel) if the spreader of the falsehood is a journalist, unless (a) the perpetrator knew or should have known that the statement was false, (b) the damages were substantial, and (c) the falsehood was motivated by malicious intent. Please note that the connective word is *and*, not *or*. If any of those elements were to be absent – for example, if the person lied about could not prove malicious intent – no suit for libel would prevail. Clearly, it is not beneficial to society to have its members lied about, to have their characters demeaned, to have their reputations damaged based on a falsehood. How does that advance the common good? The Court found that the benefit to society – the common good – would best flow from the existence of a free press unconstrained by fears of damaging repercussions in the event of error. It is a limitation imposed by weighing the harm to one against the presumed benefit to the larger community of which he or she is a part.

In 1735, John Peter Zenger, the publisher of *The New York Weekly Journal*, was put on trial for having published articles sharply critical of William Cosby, the Crown-appointed colonial governor. Under the laws of the time, simply the act of defaming Cosby was sufficient to sustain the charge. In addition, Zenger's libel trial was presided over by a Chief Justice whom Cosby himself had appointed. Zenger's lawyer, Andrew Hamilton, in a bold move, argued Zenger's case not to the bench but to the jury, claiming that because the assertions in Zenger's articles were largely based on fact, truth alone

should be a sufficient defense. The jury agreed and Zenger was freed. Mickey Edwards

By one definition of the common good, damaging the reputation of a high public official (in this case, an appointed representative of the King) undermined the legitimacy of the government and harmed the cohesion and stability of the state. It was clearly contrary to the common good to allow such attacks to go unpunished. The opposing view held that the common good was best served by an unfettered press, empowered to hold officials accountable so long as what was said about them was true. The *Sullivan* case expanded the second view by concluding that the good of the community was further served by allowing even untrue criticisms unless made with malicious intent. The Zenger case was the principal step in creating a distinctly American freedom of the press; the *Sullivan* case severely compromised the citizen's right not to be defamed – and both cases can be defended on the grounds of serving a higher community good.

During George W. Bush's presidency, a major policy quarrel ensued after the public became aware that persons detained in the "war on terror" were being held in captivity indefinitely, with neither charges filed against them nor an opportunity to defend themselves. What's more, it became known that the United States had engaged in waterboarding and other forms of physical coercion in the process of interrogating captives. The *common* in common good usually refers to the people of a single community – in this case, the United States – and it could be argued that the prisoners in question fell outside that definition. But just as advocates and opponents of capital punishment debate the effect of such punishment on the society that employs it, the supporters and detractors of the Bush administration's interrogation policies argued whether the primary "common good" claim lay with

national security or with adhering to traditional American values. (This country had, after all, argued forcefully during the Nuremberg trials that the sanctioning of torture was sufficient grounds for putting German officials to death and had denounced China for its use of waterboarding, describing it as torture.) But, the Bush administration's defenders answered, the prisoners whose treatment was in question were not "innocents" but enemies, engaged in war against the United States, even though no such charge had been made nor the factual basis of such a claim tested. To that point, the administration's defenders asserted that to put such persons on trial would pose risks to the nation's security. Those on both sides of these arguments had in mind some clear perspectives as to which position better supported the collective good of the American people.

The same distinctions arise in matters relating to taxes, spending, and the size and scope of government. It was once thought that an individual's income was his or hers to manage and to dispose of as that individual thought desirable; today it is often argued that leaving more money in a citizen's pocket, rather than taking it in taxes, is a *de facto* taking of money from the government ("how will we pay for the reduced taxes?"). Proponents of each position believe they are arguing from a common good perspective. Is the common good best served by ensuring "the greatest good for the greatest number" or by honoring the individuality – and the attendant rights – of each citizen?

Society is a collective, but its constituent parts are individuals. Is the common good determined by the weight of numbers – the greater good for the greater number? If so, the framework of American government is fatally flawed since its operating premise is that the individual (the component part, the cog in the societal machine) has rights that

cannot be denied even by a vote of thousands to one.

To some extent, the fulcrum point in this balancing act is where conservatives and liberals divide. The problem is that where emotion overrules analysis, where outcome outweighs process, the sides themselves become confused, and conservatives and liberals alike sometimes champion the right of the individual and sometimes the right of the collective to deny an individual a right to which he or she might otherwise be entitled. There is a confusing lack of consistency in determining where the common good lies. This is true of adherents to the Republican Party as well as adherents to the Democratic Party. And while it may be argued that ideology (conservative or liberal) is a more consistent indicator than party affiliation, such is not always the case. Even the ACLU, which famously defended the right of Nazis to march in Skokie, Illinois, later cracked down on dissent within its own organization.

With well-meaning and intelligent citizens divided in their concepts of the common good, and a nation sufficiently large that there might well be millions on any side of the definitional divide, those who are empowered to make law and set policy in a democratic society have only three options available to them: they may (a) side with the more numerous faction (that is, majority rule); (b) take advantage of their own positions in government to impose their own views, regardless of the wishes of the citizens; or (c) find a way to forge a compromise between the competing visions. Assuming that the majority view would not impinge on the constitutional rights of the minority, the first option remains problematic because any significant changes in law or policy should have as much buy-in as possible; enthusiasm is not necessary but some degree of

acceptance is if government policies are not to be divisive and fuel resentment. The second option is contrary to the democratic impulse. Edmund Burke was correct in arguing that elected officials are not to be rubber stamps for their constituents but should instead bring their own expertise, experience, and judgment to the decisions they make. But to ignore completely the wishes of citizens is to render the concept of representation moot; accountability after the fact – removing a legislator from office – cannot undo the decision that prompted the retaliation. The wishes of the people must at least be weighed in the decision-making process. That leaves the third option, compromise. And therein is the problem.

Simply put, incentives work. If elected officials understand that the electorate values compromise and problem-solving and that working cooperatively with those on the other side of an issue will be rewarded with reelection and a long career, the degree of partisanship and incivility in Congress, state legislatures, city and county councils, and executive branch offices will diminish. If, on the other hand, one's success at the ballot box is dependent on conveying intractability, political rigidity, and antagonism toward competing viewpoints, many candidates for office – and many elected officials – will be inclined to adopt those attitudes. People who run for office and pursue political careers tend to be more firmly set in their ideas about government than their neighbors. There is little evidence that conservatives become more liberal or liberals more conservative in pursuit of victory, but the election process does determine which candidates get elected in the first place and the attitudes they bring with them into the public arena.

A political system like ours, in which candidates must first pass through the fire of partisan primaries, dominated by

the most zealous and uncompromising of party loyalists, tends to weed out the “good government” candidates in favor of a warrior class that sees politics not as a search for the common good but as a series of pitched battles to defeat the “enemy” by any means possible. The general electorate may desire compromise, but to many of those who participate in the partisan primaries that determine the choices available to voters in the general election, compromise is viewed not as a desirable process of working together but as selling out, an unforgivable abandonment of principle.

The party primary system, ironically, dates back to a major democratic reform of the late 1800s and early 1900s, a Progressive Party initiative that established primaries as an alternative to the proverbial smoke-filled rooms in which small groups of party insiders decided who would be put forth as a party's nominees. The reform opened the process, making it much more democratic, but by ensuring that the primaries would be dominated by the most partisan and ideological voters (the only ones likely to be motivated enough to participate in these semifinal rounds of an election), the power of the bosses was eventually replaced by the power of the ideologues.

In today's more frenetic environment, with its diversions, polarizing mass media, and a citizenry woefully uneducated in civics, a popular congressman like Delaware's Mike Castle can be kept off the general election ballot for a seat in the U.S. Senate by a primary opponent who receives a mere thirty thousand votes in a state of nearly a million people. Or a popular incumbent senator like Robert Bennett of Utah can be denied reelection by two thousand votes in a closed party convention in a state of nearly three million people. Those candidates who want to avoid the same fate will inevitably be

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under great pressure to adopt whatever hard-line positions are required to pass through the party primary barrier – and to remain firmly attached to those positions when they come up for reelection. Looking over their shoulders, Utah’s Orrin Hatch and Indiana’s Richard Lugar moved noticeably to the right in anticipation of primary challenges in 2012 (Lugar lost anyway), and Maine’s Olympia Snowe decided to retire. Although it is most notable in the Republican Party, both major political parties have become engaged to some degree in this process of purification, purging from their ranks those who think for themselves and whose conclusions diverge from those of the activists who dominate the nomination process.

In addition to Castle and Bennett, Lisa Murkowski suffered the same fate in her campaign for reelection to the Senate from Alaska and narrowly won a write-in campaign because having lost her primary she was not eligible to be listed on the November ballot (a result of the “sore loser” laws which enable parties to control the election process). And years before, Democrat Joe Lieberman – who had been a state attorney general, U.S. senator, and his party’s vice presidential nominee – was defeated for renomination by a liberal antiwar activist, Ned Lamont; fortunately for Lieberman, he lived in one of the few states without a sore loser law and was able to retain his seat by running in the general election as an independent.

Today the Republican Party is almost monolithically conservative, while moderate and conservative Democrats have all but disappeared from Congress. The average Republican in Congress is now more conservative than ever before, and the average Democrat is more liberal. As the positions have hardened, the gulf has widened. There is no need to come together to weigh where the greater nation-

al good may lie; the deciders have already decided.

Elected officials face other pressures to remain firmly locked in a partisan camp. In most states, congressional and state legislative districts are shaped by whichever political party holds a majority of state legislative seats. When population shifts necessitate a redrawing of district boundaries (perhaps pitting incumbents of the same party against each other, or determining which incumbents will be given more difficult districts in which to campaign), party leaders will have both opportunity and means to reward loyalists and punish independent thinking. Running in a district with no serious likelihood of losing to a member of an opposing party, a candidate becomes even more dependent on remaining in the good graces of members of his or her own party. “Sticking with the team” becomes a matter of political survival. Compelled by the pressures of partisan redistricting to stick to the party line, elected officials are further discouraged from reaching across the aisle to find common ground or forging compromises with members of another party.

Members of Congress also gain important reelection advantages if they are able to secure positions on committees with jurisdiction over matters of particular interest to their constituents. A seat on the Agriculture Committee may seem inconsequential to a citizen in inner-city Baltimore but it is of great importance to a citizen whose community depends on farming. Membership on the Armed Services Committee or the defense subcommittee of the Appropriations Committee is immensely important to constituents in districts that are heavily reliant on the jobs at military bases. Energy issues matter greatly to citizens of states that are home to large oil and gas producers. In an ideal world, one might expect familiarity with agriculture, defense, or energy issues to

make one a natural fit for the committees that deal with such issues, but expertise in the subject matter is not always sufficient to land such an appointment. Instead, it is a pledge to support the party position, regardless of one's own beliefs, constituent preferences, or independent judgment, that often determines who wins prized committee seats, especially leadership positions on those committees. The ability to compromise is simply excised before the appointment is made.

These are examples of a systemic flaw in our politics and our governance. While political parties are endemic to democratic forms of government (the right of free association will inevitably bring together people who share similar political views), civil society has increasingly surrendered control of its election and governance processes to those parties and, through a party-oriented system of primary elections, to the most partisan and zealous party members. Consider, for example, the "sore loser" laws in most states. Under statutes promulgated by the parties, the names of candidates who lost in a party primary are prohibited from appearing on a general election ballot. Thus in the Delaware case cited above, while less than 6 percent of the state's population participated in the U.S. Senate primary, Mike Castle's name was not eligible to appear on the ballot when the rest of the state's voters went to choose the man who would be their voice in Washington. If Castle had won the primary, his Republican opponent, Christine O'Donnell, who was preferred by more Republican primary voters, would have been denied a place on the ballot. It was not the candidates but the citizens of Delaware who were the victims of this party-centric system, their options restricted by laws designed to help party insiders call the shots in determining how Americans will govern themselves.

Finally, there is another problem that makes it difficult to focus the government's attention on solutions that address our common problems in ways that benefit the community at large. In the Republican presidential primaries leading up to the 2012 election, former House Speaker Newt Gingrich, accused of persistently strange behavior ranging from proposing statehood for the moon to likening himself to Pericles, struggled early, had a brief flirtation with success in South Carolina, and then fell into a succession of third- and fourth-place finishes in a four-man race. And yet he persisted, able to do so because a wealthy owner of a Las Vegas casino poured millions of dollars into Gingrich's campaign. Other very rich men and women, empowered by the Supreme Court's *Citizens United* decision, used super PACs to direct millions into the efforts to elect Mitt Romney, Rick Santorum, and President Obama. The president benefited from the largesse of supporters who opposed construction of the proposed Keystone gas pipeline; Republican candidates were helped by the pipeline's advocates. Support for "Obamacare," the president's health care initiative, funded one side of the campaign, and those who wanted the legislation repealed were on the other side. The elections became a contest between rich people pursuing narrow interests.

The hand of the political parties is felt in this part of the process, too. While parties generally remain distant from contested primaries, the ultimate outcome of congressional races is heavily influenced by party contributions. Increasingly, members of Congress have been pressured to raise special funds for a pool to be drawn on to support the campaigns of candidates seeking to defeat officeholders of the other party or to win an open seat. Party leaders have complete discretion as to where to spend those dollars, and because non-

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incumbents have a harder time gaining the necessary funding for expensive advertising campaigns, winners often take office feeling a strong sense of indebtedness to the party leaders who helped them secure their victories. In addition, the largest super PACs are operated by party insiders. Obligation piles upon obligation, often a result of the great piles of money that now flow into campaign treasuries, and the ability to be open to alternative policy prescriptions is compromised still further.

Once elected to Congress, legislators who desire seats on prestigious – and powerful – committees may find themselves required to pledge fealty to party positions in exchange for the appointments they seek. Before the first hearing is held, the first witness questioned, the first brief written, the legislator knows what he or she is expected to do on those issues of most importance to the party.

In each of these instances – the need to cater to party activists in partisan primaries, the influence of party-directed campaign funds, and the required allegiance to partisan positions – the ability to independently assess where the greater common good may lie is seriously compromised. Critical thinking requires the ability to question assumptions, including those that underlie one's own preconceptions. Because determining what constitutes the common good is rarely a simple matter, anything that inhibits serious inquiry is more likely to perpetuate harm than to provide benefit, whether that benefit consists of expanding or constraining the role of government (so long, of course, as the action remains within the boundaries of constitutional permissibility). How, then, can we improve on the ability of our elected leaders to put their best intellectual efforts toward first defining and then advancing the common good, however they may ultimately perceive it?

Serving the common good, no matter how defined, requires workable institutions, public confidence, and public engagement. Not one of those three criteria is met in today's political environment. Our institutions are dysfunctional, public confidence in the ability of elected officials to deal with community difficulties is almost nonexistent, and even in a "high turnout year," the percentage of Americans who contribute to, work in, and even vote in public elections is disappointingly low, especially for a nation that likes to think of itself as the world's foremost beacon of democracy.

The solution to this problem may be difficult to achieve, but it is easy to describe. We must restore civility to America's public discourse, and we must reduce partisanship in governance. We must begin to make public decisions as Americans working together to address concerns rather than as members of rival armies doing battle over the trappings and privileges of power. Here's how we can start the process:

First, return the election process to a conversation among citizens rather than a battle between bank accounts. Given the importance of the citizen's right to be heard on political matters, it may be difficult to rein in independent expenditures on behalf of preferred candidates and policies; but the size of those expenditures can probably be limited, just as direct contributions to candidates have been limited. In addition, it is almost certain that non-individual contributions – by corporations, labor unions, political action committees, and political parties – can be limited or eliminated, either by legislation or constitutional amendment restricting campaign spending to fully disclosed expenditures by actual living human beings. (The law itself recognizes that corporations are only artificial people, not real ones, and labor unions, political parties, and

political action committees are not people, either.) Limiting campaign support, either directly to a candidate or as an independent expenditure, would help return the focus to public, rather than private, interests.

Second, ensure that citizens will have a broad range of choices when they go to the polls to choose the men and women who will make the nation's laws, set tax rates, create or disband public programs, and decide whether to go to war. Three states – Louisiana, Washington, and most recently, California – have changed their laws to eliminate closed party primaries. In those states, any candidate who qualifies, by filing fee or voter signatures, can appear on the ballot in a primary in which every qualified voter is entitled to participate. The ballot may include two or more members of the same party and members of several parties. If no candidate wins a majority, the top two finishers face each other in a general election even if both are of the same party or if neither is from one of the two major parties. Americans, who demand choice in almost every aspect of their lives, from soups to stereos and from sneakers to cell phones, would again have a full range of choices when they go to the ballot box.

Third, take away the ability of party leaders to draw congressional and state legislative boundaries for partisan advantage. The Constitution, with its requirement that members of Congress actually live in the states from which they are elected, envisions citizens being represented in Congress and state legislatures by men and women who understand their concerns and interests. Conversely, voters would be able to select their representatives from among men and women with whom they are familiar. When political parties draw district lines, urban dwellers may end up attempting to represent the interests of farm communities with which they have little in common, all in the name of helping

elect more members of whichever party is dominant in the state's legislature. Party, not common interest, becomes the primary factor.

After I won a congressional seat that had been held for nearly a half-century by the other party – which then had an overwhelming majority in the state legislature – my district was redrawn from a single square-shaped county in the middle of the state to a large upside-down “L” stretching from central Oklahoma to the Kansas border and halfway over to Arkansas, the only purpose being to put as many of my fellow Republicans as possible into my district and thus make the other districts safer for Democrats. The result was to place tens of thousands of wheat farmers, cattle ranchers, and small-town merchants in a new district where they would be represented by an urban congressman, familiar with big-city issues and unfamiliar with the economic interests of his new constituents. So much for the founders' intended representativeness.

Thirteen states have taken this power away from their state legislatures, either entirely or to some degree, and placed much of the redistricting authority in the hands of independent, nonpartisan redistricting commissions. Every state should do the same: drawing district lines should be about able representation, not partisan advantage. To genuinely consider alternative definitions of a common good, one must be freed of dependence on party.

However one may ultimately envision the common good, it is necessarily true that *common* must refer either to the people collectively or the national interest as a whole, which may, of course, diverge. And *good* must refer to “that which is best,” whether in the short term or with a longer perspective. In either case, determining the common good must entail some diligent examination of fact and some serious reflection. Anything that in-

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trudes upon that process, including previous commitments (pledges to various interest groups, which violate the congressional oath to carry out one's duties without condition or reservation), loyalty to party or person (a president, for example), or indebtedness to supporters (including financial contributors), renders moot the purposes of democratic representation and the purposes of the constitutional structure. This obligation argues for several important systemic changes.

In other places, including a book on this subject, I have spelled out my concerns about a number of the most common proposals to eliminate the corrosive effect of money on the political system. I won't repeat them here out of recognition of the limited space available to me in this essay but will repeat the basic conclusion I have reached. We are a nation of people – more than 300 million of us – and it is to us and to the Constitution that our elected officials owe their allegiance. It is people, not entities and not interests, that should select those who will write the laws and make the policies that will affect our lives. Just as only people – real, not artificial, people – may cast votes at the ballot box, only real people should be empowered to provide the funding for political campaigns. No money from corporations, labor unions, political action committees, or political parties. Votes and money should come from the same place: the individual American citizen.

When Congress acts, it should act on behalf of the *common* good, not the good of Republicans and not the good of Democrats. Our members of Congress should act as Americans, all members of the same club, not rival clubs. The problem is that the basic architecture of Congress reinforces not commonality but separateness. House Speakers, who exercise ultimate control over legislative procedure, even determining (through appointments

to the House Rules Committee) which bills may be considered for enactment, are selected by the majority party. The majority chairs, and has more members on, every committee and every subcommittee; it determines which bills will get a hearing and who will be asked to testify as to the bill's merits. To "discharge" a bottled-up bill from a committee and bring it to the floor for a vote requires 218 members' signatures, which means that at least one, and usually far more than one, of the members of the majority party must sign the discharge petition, thereby incurring the wrath of both the Speaker and the chairman who might hold considerable sway over the member's own legislative initiatives and future committee assignments. One way to break this partisan control over our laws is to require that committee positions be filled without regard to party membership and to require that Speakers be elected by bipartisan majorities. (In the Senate, the leader is the head of the majority party, but Senate Majority Leaders are more constrained by the intricacies of the Senate's rules.)

Members of congressional committees receive briefings from staff members who conduct research, interview experts, and recommend which positions to take. The problem is, Republicans are briefed by partisan Republicans and Democrats by partisan Democrats. Briefings are inevitably tainted by partisan or philosophical preconception. A better answer would be to empower a nonpartisan House manager or parliamentarian to hire committee staff members based on education and experience and after sufficient vetting to ensure the ability to provide unbiased data to all members, without regard to party affiliation.

On the House floor, members who wish to address their colleagues move to the front of the chamber ("the well") and

stand at a lectern. But it isn't that simple: there is not one lectern but two – one for Democrats, positioned in front of the Democrats (who all sit together, on one side of the chamber) and another for Republicans, positioned in front of the Republicans (who all sit together on the other side of the chamber). It is sometimes hard to remember that these are all members of the same Congress, all Americans, all having taken the same oath of office, as they divide from their first day in the House into separate camps, eating at separate tables, reading newspapers and making telephone calls in separate cloakrooms. Republicans meet in their “conference,” Democrats in their “caucus”; they seldom meet together other than on the House floor or in committee rooms where they line up on opposing sides. All of those artificial divisions should be removed – cloakrooms available to all, single lecterns, mixed seating in committees (by seniority, perhaps). It is fruitless to seek agreement on the common good in an environment where there is no common.

In suggesting ways to improve the ability to discern and serve the common good, I have discussed the importance of systemic change in the election process, the redistricting process, the ways in which political campaigns are funded, and how Congress selects leaders, considers legislation, and functions on a daily basis. That, however, is not enough: the Congress operates, elections are conducted, and procedures are established within a broader context. It is not only Congress that needs repair.

Democracy is a participatory system. It requires an informed electorate, knowledgeable in the processes of government. It requires a citizenry competent in critical thinking, able to probe and question and consider alternatives. It requires civil conversation and the ability to listen without forming rebuttals even as other

perspectives are offered. Our elected officials fail us; they operate in a system that fails us; our news media fails us; our schools fail us. American democracy is dysfunctional, but the dysfunction is not wholly the fault of those we have elected: those of us who elected them share in the blame. Our members of Congress are locked into philosophical boxes – but many of us are, too. We listen to only views we already agree with, read only writers whose perspectives we share. We listen to, and believe, the nonsense we hear whether we hear it from Rush Limbaugh or Keith Olbermann; we accept as truth the opinions of a Charles Krauthammer or a Paul Krugman, but rarely both.

In the broadest and most general sense, the pursuit of the common good is merely an expression of our desire to have our government – the members of society acting through a formal collective process – act in the best interests of the community as a whole. Because collective decisions in a democracy are made through intermediaries (the men and women we place in elective office), our first thoughts are often about whether the trust we have placed in them has been well rewarded. But it is a mistake to place the burden of advancing community interest solely, or even primarily, on the holders of public office. A functioning democracy requires a high degree of participation. That is generally thought to be measurable by the percentage of eligible voters who register and the percentage of registered voters who vote. But in fact that is a barometer of interest, not contribution. To be a contributing member of society and a valuable piece of the quest for the common good, citizens must be willing to adopt fundamental behaviors that are sorely absent from today's life. Let me reiterate just a few:

First, we must all be able to engage in constructive dialogue. That does not mean just a vigorous expression of a viewpoint

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– something we all are quite good at – nor does being articulate and reasoned in that expression answer the need. Civil dialogue of the kind necessary to democratic governance is a two-way activity that requires both speaking and listening. Missing not just from government forums but from the private sector as well is a willingness to listen to, and fairly consider, a point of view that does not comport fully with our own preconceptions. Unfortunately, it is far more common for a citizen to begin forming a rebuttal even as another is speaking. It is not about learning so much as it is about “winning.” True conversation requires not only a willingness to understand other points of view but to continue a dialogue so that we can integrate the varying perspectives into a story that will allow us to find those common interests and aspirations from which we can build the compromises necessary to achieve a truly common good.

It is also necessary for the citizens of a democracy to learn the skills of critical thinking – the ability to challenge, question, test that which is presented as fact or fact-based argument. A citizen who simply accepts as true whatever assertions are voiced by a favorite columnist or commentator or candidate of a preferred party quickly becomes a soldier in Army A, ready to do battle with the soldiers of Army B, with a goal not of coming together but of destroying the opposing force. Modern technology has given Americans a new ability to know more than ever before – more that is true and more that is not. Here we can learn a lot from science, for a good scientist begins by testing hypotheses: sounds good, but will it hold up under scrutiny? To a newspaper reader or screen watcher, such a system would require questioning the credentials of the person making the assertion, asking what advocates of a different position might say about the matter.

There is more required of the citizen than active listening and critical thinking – for instance, an education system that emphasizes civics and a media focused more on information than on conflict. The list is long because democracy requires not just participation but serious, informed, dedicated, intelligent participation. Ignorance and gullibility are useful skills for one who wishes to remain secure in an undemocratic society, but they are deadly to democratic governance. They make coming together to understand the common good nearly impossible. The reforms need to begin with government, but they cannot stop there.

The National Institute for Civil Discourse, the Aspen Institute, the Bipartisan Policy Center, No Labels, and other institutions have undertaken serious efforts to get beyond the divisiveness that paralyzes our search for commonality. It is not an attempt to erase disagreement: vigorous debate over alternative policies is the central ingredient of a vibrant democracy. Nor is it an attempt to create an artificial politics of the “center”: many great advances in our society have come not from the center but from the edges of the conversation (the civil rights movement, the labor movement, the women’s movement). Instead, it is a desire to create a conversation between citizens, whether in office or otherwise, who seek to find that common ground on which we can all stand, that win-win place of compromise and conciliation that will allow us to move forward together as a single nation, diverse in our ideas and our experiences but united in our desire to advance together as a national family. That should be our goal.