Bipartisan Governance

The performance of the United States Government and the security and economic well-being of the American people have suffered because of the intensifying partisanship that has afflicted political processes and societal debates in recent years. This partisanship frequently has had the effect of subordinating good governance to political combat and locking leaders into inflexible positions. We have seen innumerable examples of both parties failing the most basic tests of governance, including the 2013 government shutdown, the inability to enact a long-term deficit reduction program, reliance on the fiscal cliff sequester, the near abandonment of a bill-by-bill appropriations process, and repeated failures to pass an annual budget resolution.

Faced with reflexive partisan roadblocks, Congress also has frequently retreated from legislating on foreign policy, with negative consequences for national security. Treaty ratification during the Obama Administration has come to a near standstill. For many years, comprehensive Foreign Affairs Authorization bills have received low priority for floor time and leadership attention. Congress is largely failing to pursue systematic and timely reviews of the most strategically important questions in foreign policy. In the process, it is weakening its capacity to function as either a partner or as a constructive critic of the Executive Branch in foreign affairs.

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This partisanship in Washington and its amplification in media outlets competing for the attention of partisan-based audiences are exacerbating divisions within American society, as a whole. Attempts to vilify political opponents as disloyal and redefine policy disagreements as failures of character or even scandals have become increasingly common. This has contributed to the uncivil and destructive tone that has claimed a greater share of
American political dialogue. Political incivility, in turn, undercuts the ability of parties to work together, makes the achievement of unity in times of crisis more difficult, and increases the chances of politically motivated violence.

Across a wide range of domestic and foreign issues, there is a perception that Americans are inextricably divided in ways that we were not several decades ago. This dysfunction within our government and political system requires not just awareness and patience, but solutions.

The Lugar Center is dedicated to incentivizing public officials to put governance first, fostering more meaningful policy debates, encouraging civility in political speech, and promoting structural reforms that can reduce partisanship.

We acknowledge that adversarial political parties, contentious elections, and policy disagreements are unavoidable elements of the American political system. Indeed, the Founders were realists who understood the power of factionalism, parochialism, and personal ambition. They understood that an effective government could not be based on good intentions. Accordingly, they designed a system to check abuse and prevent power from accumulating in a few hands. But they knew that the efficient operation of such a Republic would require a great deal of cooperation. They knew that it would require most elected officials to have a dedication to governance, and they trusted that leaders would arise in every era to make their vision work.

The Lugar Center’s efforts to advance bipartisan governance are grounded on the belief that leaders and citizens can act in a bipartisan manner irrespective of their party loyalties, their ideology, or their individual interests. Bipartisanship is sometimes inaccurately defined as the pursuit of centrist outcomes. But there is no contradiction between holding strong ideological views and embracing bipartisan principles. Bipartisanship is a way of approaching leadership that prioritizes governance, fairly evaluates ideas outside one’s own ideology, tempers one’s political rhetoric, and seeks opportunities to work with the other party and build greater consensus.

Embracing bipartisanship does not require leaders to alter their political principles or support policy proposals that they fundamentally oppose. But it does require them to ensure that their responsibility to govern is not paralyzed by their ideology or undercut by their pursuit of partisan political advantage. It requires them to be open to the possibility of compromise and to recognize that building consensus on policy issues has inherent value to national security and prosperity.

Through research and commentary, The Lugar Center seeks to encourage bipartisanship among elected and appointed officials and inform the public on the negative impact of partisanship in our government. We develop and promote proposals designed to increase national unity and mitigate the effects of partisanship. And we work with like-minded organizations to create opportunities for bipartisan dialogue, with special emphasis on foreign affairs.
Bipartisan Index

The Lugar Center and Georgetown University’s McCourt School of Public Policy have produced a non-partisan ranking of how often each Member of Congress works across party lines.

Read about the Bipartisan Index in the Roll Call op-ed "Reviving the Lost Art of Bipartisanship" and The Hill op-eds "Real conservatives and real progressives can get things done" and "Bipartisanship in Congress: Some progress, still a long way to go" by former Senator Richard Lugar and Georgetown University’s McCourt School of Public Policy Dean Edward Montgomery.

Senator Lugar's Introduction to the Bipartisan Index

The Bipartisan Index is intended to fill a hole in the information available to the public about the performance of Members of Congress. There are innumerable studies, rankings, and indexes that grade members according to a partisan, parochial, or special-interest standard.

We sought to develop an objective measure of how well members of opposite parties work with one another using bill sponsorship and co-sponsorship data. We gravitated toward bill sponsorships and co-sponsorships for two reasons. First, they allowed us to construct a highly objective measure of partisan and bipartisan behavior. Second, sponsorship and co-sponsorship behavior is especially revealing of partisan tendencies. Members’ voting decisions are often contextual and can be influenced by parliamentary circumstances. Sponsorships and co-sponsorships, in contrast, exist as very carefully considered declarations of where a legislator stands on an issue.

The Bipartisan Index measures the frequency with which a Member co-sponsors a bill introduced by the opposite party and the frequency with which a Member’s own bills attract co-sponsors from the opposite party.

It is essential to understand that one cannot get a clear and fair picture simply by tallying up bipartisan sponsorships and co-sponsorships in a single Congress. The main problem is that behavior related to sponsoring and co-sponsoring bills differs greatly depending on whether a member is in the majority or minority. To overcome this problem and give our index greater historical value, we constructed a 20-year baseline of data to which majority and minority members could be compared. One also must make decisions about how to compare members who co-sponsor a lot of bills with those who co-sponsor only a few; whether and how to give credit for an increasing number of bipartisan co-sponsors on a bill; whether to include commemorative legislation and resolutions; and how to handle members who introduce a very small number of bills or none at all. We tested solutions to each of these questions and others before settling on what we believe is an effective formula for measuring bipartisanship.

I would emphasize that we do not believe that it is wrong for members to have partisan bills in their portfolio of co-sponsorships. Every member of Congress has such bills. Nor do we believe that all bipartisan bills are wisely written and considered. However, a consistently low score on this index will
be a very strong indication that a legislator is viewing his or her duties through a partisan lens. Conversely, a consistently high score is a strong indication that a legislator is prioritizing problem solving and open to working with the other party when possible.

What we are measuring in this Index is not so much the quality of legislation but rather the efforts of legislators to broaden the appeal of their sponsored legislation, to entertain a wider range of ideas, and to prioritize governance over posturing.

With this in mind, we regard any score above zero as a good score. We designate Members who score above zero as “Bipartisan Legislators” because they are above average compared to the 20-year baseline scores for their respective group. But we also offer special commendation to those members who score in the very top ranks. For the 113th Congress, the top two Senate scores belong to Susan Collins of Maine and Joe Manchin of West Virginia. In the House, the two top scores were achieved by Christopher Gibson and Peter King, both of New York.

If a member is disappointed in his or her score, there is a straightforward way to improve it in future congresses: Put more effort into recruiting bipartisan co-sponsors for your bills and consider co-sponsoring bills introduced by the opposite party. We hope members will do that and we regard the Bipartisan Index as a way of providing encouragement.

Our focus with the Bipartisan Index is not just on individual members. We also are looking at how Congress as a whole is performing. We hear often from commentators who claim that we are experiencing an extraordinarily partisan era. Regrettably, our analysis bears this out to a large extent. You can see by the charts that the last three Congresses have yielded very low scores on the Bipartisan Index. The 112th and 113th Congresses had the two lowest scores among the eleven Congresses that we have analyzed so far.

What this means is that at the beginning of the legislative process, when effective governance would argue for broadening a new bill’s appeal, too often the opposite is happening. Bills are being written not to maximize their chances of passage, but to serve as legislative talking points. Taking a position is not the same thing as governing. For Congress to be successful, the parties must work together at the beginning of the legislative process.

The Founders of our Republic were realists who understood the power of factionalism, parochialism, and personal ambition. They understood that good intentions would not always prevail. Accordingly, they designed a system to check abuse and prevent power from accumulating in a few hands. But they knew that the efficient operation of such a Republic would require a great deal of cooperation. They knew that it would require most elected officials to have a dedication to governance, and they trusted that leaders would arise in every era to make their vision work.

In this spirit, we encourage members of Congress to more frequently open themselves to the possibility that colleagues from the opposite party may have good ideas that are deserving of consideration.
Speeches

Read Senator Lugar's speeches on bipartisan governance:

- Denison University Lugar Symposium Keynote Address (April 13, 2016)
- Cleveland Council on World Affairs Global Impact Award Speech: "The Water's Edge: Has American Foreign Policy Lost its Capacity for Bipartisan Unity?" (October 6, 2015)
- University of Illinois Institute of Government and Public Affairs Edgar Fellows Address: "Bipartisanship in an Era of Polarization: What Does It Mean and How Do We Achieve It?" (August 4, 2015)
- Georgetown Public Policy Institute Whittington Lecture: "Securing Our Country in an Era of Partisanship" (April 9, 2013)
- Address at the Duke University Sanford School of Public Policy: "Embracing Governance over Partisanship" (February 12, 2013)
- Senator Lugar's Final Senate Floor Speech (December 12, 2012)
- 2008 Paul H. Douglas Education Lecture: "Rejuvenating Bipartisanship in a Partisan Era" (November 11, 2008)

Media Coverage

What do new Bipartisan Index rankings say about the Ohio delegation? Senior Fellow at The Lugar Center discusses.
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Senator Lugar talks about the 2017 Bipartisan Index
_POTUS Sirius XM Radio_, May 3, 2018

Indiana's U.S. senators earn high marks for bipartisanship in Lugar Center analysis
_Kokomo Perspective_, May 1, 2018

A choice between GOP prosperity and Democratic obstruction
_Concord Monitor_, April 29, 2018

Editorial: A lot more cooperation is needed in Congress
_Wisconsin State Journal_, April 29, 2018

Delaware Valley-area GOP reps rate high in bipartisanship survey
_WHYY_, April 26, 2018

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_The Gazette_, April 25, 2018
Curbelo, Ros-Lehtinen rank among the most bipartisan members of Congress
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*Cleveland.com*, April 25, 2018

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Hell freezing over? Even in Trump age, some N.J. politicians are nice to the other party.
*NJ.com*, April 24, 2018

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*NJ.com*, May 13, 2017

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The Lugar Center’s Director of Policy discusses the Bipartisan Index
*The Texas Standard*, May 8, 2017

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*Sirius XM*, April 27, 2017

Senate Republicans Became More Bipartisan in the Last Congress — Democrats, Not So Much
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Isolationism and its Consequences for Conflict Prevention
*Foreign Policy Association*, April 24, 2017

Does bipartisanship even work in today’s polarized Congress? Yes.

Bipartisan group wants civility, respect and compromise from Trump and new Congress

Meet the 5 most bipartisan politicians in Congress
*The Christian Science Monitor*, November 1, 2016

We need men like Richard Lugar
*Evansville Courier & Press*, October 21, 2016

Richard Lugar, as usual, talking sense
*NUVO*, October 21, 2016
US Senator advocates for agreement and cooperation
*The Denisonian*, October 18, 2016

When even failure on gun control feels like a small victory

Moderates are squeezed out or pulled apart
*Fort Wayne News-Sentinel*, April 29, 2016

All Eyes on Indiana

Lugar calls for return of 'establishment values' to save America
*Northwest Indiana Times*, April 17, 2016

Lugar principles for political candidates
*Northwest Indiana Times*, April 17, 2016

Terrorism a bipartisan concern
*Leader-Telegram*, March 27, 2016

Politicians stress importance of 'good citizens'
*The Shield (University of Southern Indiana)*, March 24, 2016

Lugar-Hamilton discussion at USI is worth your time

Lugar and Hamilton: Good candidates, informed voters can make politics more civil

Low scores for cooperation to Wisconsin’s congressional delegation

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*Evansville Courier & Press*, March 18, 2016

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*The Youngstown Vindicator*, March 11, 2016

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*The Atlantic*, March 8, 2016
Study Finds Sanders, Cruz to Be the Senate’s Most Partisan Members
*The Fiscal Times*, March 8, 2016

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*The Hill*, March 7, 2016

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Supreme Court Fight Is New Front in Partisan Warfare

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*Sirius XM’s POTUS Politics*, December 16, 2015

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*The Hill*, December 15, 2015

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*rtv6 The INDY Channel*, September 19, 2015
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See which N.J. Republican congressmen cross party lines the most
*NJ.com*, July 27, 2015

Lugar, Hamilton Talk Political Civility at Lieutenant Governor’s Conference
*The Statehouse File.com*, July 9, 2015

Veteran lawmakers tout need for civility in government
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Sen. Lugar is out of office, but full of ideas
*The Indianapolis Star*, June 25, 2015

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How Bipartisan Are Our Politicians?
*WBOC 16*, May 29, 2015

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Lugar Center Index Ranks Lawmakers on Bipartisanship
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*Roll Call*, May 18, 2015

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*Duke University Sanford School of Public Policy*, February 13, 2013

Events & Speeches

Is National Unity Possible? Achieving Political Cohesion in an Era of Group Demands, Media Fragmentation, and Individual Expression
Franklin College, October 13, 2016

Former Senator Richard G. Lugar to speak at Franklin College
Franklin College, October 13, 2016

WATCH: Sen. Lugar and Rep. Lee Hamilton discuss civility and public service at Taylor University
Taylor University, October 12, 2016

Dialogue on Civility and Public Service Features Lugar, Hamilton
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Denison University Lugar Symposium Keynote Address
Denison University, April 13, 2016
WATCH: Denison University Lugar Symposium Keynote Address
April 13, 2016

The Water’s Edge: Has American Foreign Policy Lost its Capacity for Bipartisan Unity?
Cleveland Council on World Affairs, October 6, 2015

Senator Lugar joins President Obama, Mayor Greg Ballard at Ivy Tech Community College in Indianapolis
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Senator Lugar’s Final Senate Floor Speech
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University of Illinois, November 11, 2008

TLC Experts

A Modest Proposal to Restore Bipartisanship to SOTU
Politico, January 12, 2016

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