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

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I am honored to be here this evening on the beautiful campus of Franklin College, as part of the Convocation Lecture Series. I am especially gratified that my visit coincides with the appearance of the amazing works of the Remnant Trust currently on display in the Hamilton Library. I would like to thank President Tom Minar, who is bringing great energy and vision to Franklin College. I am excited to see where his leadership and the hard work of the faculty, administration, and student body are destined to take Franklin in the decade ahead. It is also a personal pleasure to be able to recognize Franklin College’s Gail Lowry who has been a close friend for decades and who was an indispensable member of my Senate team.

Needless to say, we gather today during a period in American political and social life that will occupy historians and political theorists for decades to come. The American political landscape is experiencing spasms of upheaval and conflict that usually presage a major political realignment. It is all the more remarkable that this is occurring during a period when our economy is not in recession.

For the first time perhaps since the Civil War, the person elected President in November will arrive in the White House with virtually no opportunity for a traditional political honeymoon. Neither Donald Trump nor Hillary Clinton are likely to command the support of a significant number of members of the opposite party. It is not clear that any major initiatives backed by either Presidential candidate could be passed into law anytime soon.

Through all the partisan battles that have encumbered recent Presidents, we forget that Bill Clinton, George W. Bush, and Barack Obama had some running room to pursue signature initiatives at the beginning of their terms. In the first few months of 1993, President Clinton was able to pass the Family and Medical Leave Act and the Motor Voter Registration Law with some Republican support. The 2001 George W. Bush Tax cut was supported by 11 Democratic Senators, and Bush’s “No Child Left Behind” education reform bill was backed by a majority of Republicans and Democrats in both Houses.
President Obama had tougher sledding, in part because the 60-vote Democrat Majority in the Senate created greater incentives for unified Republican opposition. But even in this situation, the President received significant Republican support for some initiatives, including nine Senate Republicans who voted for the State Children’s Health Insurance Program in February 2009.

Yet it is almost impossible to conceive either presidential candidate receiving significant support from the opposite party, especially for domestic initiatives. Some of this certainly relates to the idiosyncratic nature of this presidential election. The candidates have extraordinarily high unfavorable ratings with clear majorities expressing disapproval of both Clinton and Trump. Even before last week’s open microphone revelation, Donald Trump’s approval ratings rarely exceeded 40 percent. If elected, he would be opposed almost universally by Democrats and would have great difficulty maintaining general support of Congressional Republicans for most of his stated goals. On some key issues – especially those pertaining to foreign policy and trade – he might lack even majority support among Congressional Republicans. Hillary Clinton, meanwhile, would be burdened by a quarter-century of contentious history with Republican critics and numerous scandals and missteps both genuine and imagined.

It would be hopeful to believe that the stark divide at the top of our political system is solely the product of two unpopular candidacies. Unfortunately, that is not necessarily true. The Lugar Center has attempted to measure and define the ongoing partisanship in American political life through our Bipartisan Index, which was developed in cooperation with the McCourt School of Public Policy at Georgetown University. The Index measures the frequency with which members of Congress co-sponsor bills introduced by members of the other party and the frequency with which their own bills are co-sponsored by members of the other party.

Our data shows a steep decline in bipartisan behavior surrounding bill sponsorship and co-sponsorship beginning in 2001. The scores reached their nadir in 2012, before a slight uptick in 2013 and 2014. But the last two full Congresses were by far the least bipartisan among the eleven that we have studied.

Consistent with this, our historical Senate scores found that a generational shift has taken place regarding the willingness of new Senators at the progressive and conservative ends of their parties to engage in bipartisanship. For example, we found that Republicans who began their Senate careers since 2005 occupied nine of the bottom twelve spots among the total of 227 Senators serving since 1993. All nine of these contemporary Republicans have significantly lower lifetime bipartisan scores than the late Senator Jesse Helms, who was considered to be the most conservative Republican of the 1980s and 1990s.

Similarly on the Democrat side, we found current liberal Senators with far lower scores than liberal icons of the recent past like Ted Kennedy, Paul Wellstone, Daniel Inouye, John Kerry, and Tom Harkin.
But of even greater concern is that elevated partisanship at the top levels of the American political system is mirrored by fundamental political divisions that reach down to the American electorate.

A fascinating *Washington Post* opinion poll of residents of Virginia, conducted a month ago, found that 60 percent of respondents who planned to vote for Hillary Clinton did not know of a single family member or close friend who planned to vote for Donald Trump. Similarly 54 percent of Trump voters did not have a family member or close friend who planned to vote for Clinton. This cultural disconnect is all the more notable in that Virginia is considered a purple swing state that can go either direction in a presidential election. So even as the state itself runs close to fifty-fifty in its voting behavior, the two political camps are deeply segregated.

Liliana Mason, a scholar at the University of Maryland, has distinguished between social polarization and issue position polarization. Her research indicates that in recent decades, social polarization – characterized by strong group identity and partisan bias -- has expanded beyond polarization on specific issues. Americans agree on issues more than their deep social polarization would indicate. If this observation is true, political divisions are not necessarily resulting from differences on policy issues like the budget, health care, or the use of military force. Instead they are more likely to be driven by cultural resentments and prejudices that draw Americans into mutually exclusive groups that reflexively oppose ideas and symbols associated with other groups. These cultural resentments and prejudices have no obvious basis for compromise. In other words, healing the partisan divide requires more fundamental changes than just seeking agreement on political issues.

This can be seen throughout President Obama’s presidency. He has endured intense levels of vitriol and suggestive rumor that had little to do with his policy choices. Whether one agrees with his policies, most of them have fit squarely within the orthodox traditions and expectations of the Democrat party. Yet, polls repeatedly have indicated that large numbers of Republican voters regard him as a socialist. Despite abundant evidence to the contrary, an August 2015 CNN Poll even found that 29 percent of respondents and 43 percent of Republicans thought the President was Muslim. A different poll of usual Republican primary voters found that 54 percent believed President Obama was a Muslim. The resilience of the “Birther” conspiracy is another case in point.

We can debate the cultural and psychological reasons for this, but it is symptomatic of the willingness of Americans to disparage political rivals in terms that are harsher and less connected to the truth than those that are acceptable in other areas of life. A study published last year in the American Journal of Political Science by Shanto Iyengar and Sean Westwood found that discrimination against opposing partisans frequently exceeds discrimination based on race. Moreover, the study underscored: “Unlike race, gender, and other social divides where group-related attitudes and behaviors are constrained by social norms, there are no corresponding pressures to temper disapproval of political opponents. If anything, the rhetoric and actions of political leaders demonstrate that hostility directed at the opposition is acceptable, even appropriate.”
Most graphically we have seen this play out during the candidacy of Donald Trump, in which he has willfully rejected existing norms of civility in his public discourse. Even though Trump and some other candidates in recent election cycles have not originated the divide in American politics, their behavior has excused and encouraged the growing disrespect Americans have for fellow citizens with different political views.

The American political system clearly is failing to address obvious problems for which broad based solutions are well understood, such as immigration reform and the viability of entitlement programs. On numerous issues, we are failing even to have a civil conversation. In my view, the principal cause of this failure is the widening partisan gulf, not just within our government, but also in our broader society. In our Republic, effective governance requires some level of cooperation. And yet the answer of many voters to these deficiencies has been to support candidates who exemplify partisanship, confrontation, and political coarseness. We are at risk of attempting to solve our problems by doubling down on their main cause.

It is important to remember that our current struggles are not unique. Among the works on display in the Hamilton Library are numerous books by authors attempting to come to grips with the politics of their times. Aristotle, Hobbes, Jefferson, Locke, Machiavelli, Mill, Rousseau, and others in the collection each advanced prescriptions on how societies can be effectively organized and governed.

We have a tendency in this country to regard our Constitution as the last word in political organization and theory. It is an amazing document produced by leaders who deserve to be revered. But they understood, as we should, that political expectations and practices are not static. They change as social norms evolve, as technology develops, and as international circumstances shift around us.

The ability of any society to thrive depends not only on its founding traditions, but also on its adaptability.

Our modern society is being challenged by numerous forces, but many of them have their origin in otherwise celebrated advances in information technology. We love our smart phones, the instantaneous research we can do on the internet, and our ability to express ourselves through social media. But the revolution in communications technology has made deep changes to our political society to which we have not fully adjusted.

We live in an age of instantaneous amplification where information and ideas enter the firmament without verification or reflection. Local events, frequently captured on video or photographs taken with smart phones, become national stories regardless of whether they have any importance or can be legitimately placed within a trend. The multiplicity of voices and reactions stoke outrage and make the development of a national vision or perspective extremely difficult. Moreover, the range of media outlets and the business models of many news organizations encourage consumers to select news sources with which they agree. And increasingly, Americans are receiving news from like-minded friends through social media.
This contrasts with the far more centralized news system that prevailed before the Internet in which the dominant television networks, wire services and newspapers had an economic stake in tailoring news for a wide and diverse audience. Even as these sources competed fiercely for viewers, they did so within a journalistic tradition that rewarded good reporting, the verification of facts, and setting stories within a broader context. It is impossible to do that in 140 characters or less.

Advancement in information technology must be embraced. But as we seek to use these technologies to improve our connectedness and our productivity and expand the genius of human kind, we must understand more fully their complicated impact on American political culture. And we must devise ways to seek greater unity, even as we celebrate the power of individual expression.

If we simply accept that we are now an angry, gridlocked society led by a Congress and Executive Branch that are incapable of compromise, we greatly reduce our prospects for solutions. Gridlock also encourages the accumulation of power by the Executive Branch. This endangers separation of powers, which are the cornerstone of our Constitutional system. Moreover, we know from numerous lessons of history that popular anger can be manipulated in ways that lead to intolerance, civil unrest, violence, and self-destructive national policies.

These are difficult circumstances. But unity is not beyond our grasp. I believe we still possess a fundamental American character that pervades every region, ethnic group, and political affiliation. We still share numerous hopes, not the least of which is to give our children the opportunity to attend a good college. And there still is a strong sense of decency and compassion among Americans that eclipses the partisanship of the moment. We see this clearly in times of genuine crisis.

Leaders and citizens, and indeed colleges, must be devoted to fulfilling this national character. All who care about the future of our country should be thinking about how we lift ourselves out of political dysfunction. We should be considering how to support candidates who place governance ahead of partisanship, and we should be holding elected officials and media figures and ourselves to a higher standard of civility.

These are not aspirations that can be fulfilled instantly. The essential first step is to understand the gravity of the problem and join in the belief that we can achieve a solution within our democratic traditions.

I will conclude with a simple declaration that represents my own vision of what candidates should communicate when running for high office:

● “I affirm that members of the other party love our country and are people of good will, and I will avoid portraying them as unpatriotic or disloyal.

● I believe that members of the opposing party can contribute to good policy. I will explore opportunities to work with them and will attempt to include them in early deliberations on my
initiatives. I recognize that bipartisan support from elected officials broadens public acceptance of new laws and policies and improves the chances that they will be successfully implemented.

● Even as I participate in partisan debates and work on behalf of my party, my first motivation will be a careful reflection on what is good for the country. I will avoid legislative and policy actions that have no purpose other than to score partisan political points.

● Although I will advance arguments consistent with my own political philosophy, I will study issues in depth with an open mind. I will consider multiple points of view and avoid an exclusive reliance on my party’s positions and talking points.

● I will maintain my civility, even when others around me do not. I will measure my words, to avoid inflammatory rhetoric that often is destructive to the political process and national unity."

My statement might not play well in our current political environment, but I believe most Americans recognize that we have to find ways to resolve our disputes and work together. I appreciate all that each of you at Franklin College is doing through your work, your study, and your personal interactions to advance political understanding and bring greater unity to American society.

I thank you for your timely leadership.