

INTRODUCTION

The Change That Can Transform Our Political Life

America is in peril. The signs are all around us: Our government is piling up enough debts to ruin us financially within a generation. Most of our children receive second-rate educations. Millions of our fellow citizens are losing their homes in foreclosures. We are consuming record amounts of foreign oil, thereby enriching countries intent on harming us. Global warming threatens to scorch our farm belt and flood our coastal cities. Our health care costs are soaring—growing twice as fast as our incomes. Our standing in the world has plunged. And rogue nations are obtaining nuclear weapons that could imperil world stability for the indefinite future.

Yet instead of grappling with these problems, our politicians battle mostly with one another. As one governor's wife put it, the members of Congress act like "two guys in a canoe that is headed for the falls, and all they do is hit each other with their paddles." Those two guys, though, have the power to drag the entire country over the precipice with them.

What can any of us do about it? Plenty—once most of us truly understand why our politicians behave the way they do.

To see what we mean, we need to tell you about our experience as mediators—and what it has revealed to us about American politicians. We referee conflicts among warring interest groups, government agencies, businesses, communities, and, occasionally, nations. The adversaries we've worked with have often started out angrier than typical politicians. Yet most of those adversaries have also wanted to stop wasting their time and money on endless battles. So they've sat down with their enemies face-to-face to search for a possible deal.

Many of them have succeeded. We've helped diplomats from around the world agree unanimously on how to slow down global warming. We've watched environmentalists and business titans reach agreement on how America could best meet its ravenous need for energy.

In fact, for nearly every major national problem that elected politicians are *still* fighting over, we know of ideological enemies who negotiated a practical solution that all sides endorsed. Those adversaries then presented their solution to elected politicians—who ignored it. The politicians just kept on feuding. We've seen this sequence occur time after time. Finally, we realized what drives elected politicians to behave so destructively.

Elections—the way they're organized today—are the main culprit. Look at just one feature that nearly all of us take for granted but that ends up sabotaging American political life: In nearly every election, a Republican and a Democrat compete for the seat. One party wins, while the other party loses. How, then, can we expect Republicans and Democrats in Congress to spend much time working together? That would be somewhat like expecting two prizefighters, while competing for a championship, to stop throwing punches—and start waltzing. Sure, the two parties cooperate occasionally. But much like two boxers shaking hands, that gesture lasts but a moment and is mainly for show. Each lawmaker knows that to win the next election he or she will have to knock the challenger from the other party out of contention. So, most lawmakers bash the opposing party at every opportunity.

Most troubling of all, these verbal attacks succeed. Over the last decade, as our lawmakers have relentlessly blamed one another for our nation's troubles, while allowing those troubles to grow worse, 97 percent of those lawmakers who've run for reelection have held onto their seats. Nearly every member of Congress has thereby seen firsthand that he or she can win election after election just by spotlighting the other party's failures.

So, as long as our elections work as they do today, our lawmakers will undercut one another every chance they get. Our chronic problems will therefore continue to plague us. Our energy and health care costs will keep on soaring. Our government will continue to spend recklessly. Most of our kids will continue to receive mediocre educations. And so on.

Many of us believe that we could avoid this grim future if our fellow citizens would just choose the right president. But even the most eloquent and politically astute president could not overcome the perverse incentives in our

congressional elections that drive our lawmakers to sabotage one another. So, no matter who is president, Congress will continue to bungle issue after issue—until we design its elections differently.

The obvious question is: Can we structure our elections so that, to win, a lawmaker would have to negotiate genuine solutions to our urgent problems? In this book, you'll see that the answer to that question is yes.

We first realized that goal was within reach after years of watching ideological opponents hammer out practical solutions to issues they had spent their careers fighting over. From these experiences, we saw what it would take to coax elected politicians to work in the very same way. We saw how to organize elections so that each politician would want to resolve his or her differences with opposing camps as sensibly as he or she could.

The core concept is simple: Now, one Republican and one Democrat compete head-on to fill each district's one House seat. Imagine, instead, if each district had several House seats, with three or more liberal candidates competing to represent the district's liberal voters, while at least three conservative candidates competed to represent the district's conservative voters, several moderates competed to represent the moderates, and so on. In that kind of election, each lawmaker would no longer have to defeat a challenger on the opposite end of the spectrum. So he or she would have no reason to bash lawmakers opposite him or her on the spectrum. On the contrary, to keep his seat, each lawmaker would have to convince his voters that he'd accomplished more of their agenda than would the two other candidates ideologically closest to him. And to back up that claim—to be able to report *anything* significant to constituents—a lawmaker would have to negotiate creative deals with lawmakers from other camps. The most skillful negotiators would, in fact, have the most progress to report to their own voters and would therefore have the highest odds of winning reelection.

This scenario, optimistic as it sounds, is exactly how most negotiations we've witnessed have played out: Representatives for the various sides realized that to make any progress for their own causes they had to negotiate with one another. Each one then sold the deal to his or her own side.

Even so, whenever we suggest that Congress could work this way, we get barraged with questions. We promise to answer them in this book. For now, we want to briefly respond to two doubts. First, our proposed changes are entirely consistent with the Constitution. In fact, as you will see, America's founders

wanted to create the kind of bond between lawmakers and their constituents that our changes would create.

Second, we realize that many voters don't fit neatly into a political category: liberal, conservative, *or* moderate. So, in the elections we'll propose, voters would not have to choose a category. Each voter would in fact be freer than ever to define him- or herself politically.

Still, many people will wonder whether such dramatic changes are possible. We will answer those doubts too. You will see that by a series of modest steps our elections can be overhauled, with the end result that Congress would resolve major national problems sensibly. To make that case, we just need to lay out the key pieces of the puzzle in the right order.

To start, in part I, you will see what it would take for our country to develop practical solutions to nearly every major issue, solutions that all sides would support. We'll put you in the same room with liberals and conservatives, environmentalists and industrialists, moguls and labor union leaders who have hammered out unanimous agreements on some of today's most contentious issues, including how to slash our consumption of foreign oil, how to repair Social Security, and how to preserve the environment at the least cost to everyone. In each case, you'll see exactly why fierce advocates worked so hard to strike constructive agreements with their long-standing enemies.

In part II, you'll see exactly why our elected politicians so rarely do the same. You'll witness a concerned citizen win a seat in Congress, determined with all his heart to do the job well. But *two* basic features of our elections undermine all his efforts, virtually compelling him to fight over problems rather than resolve them. And with every lawmaker mired in that predicament, Congress consistently mismanages the major challenges of our time.

In part III, you'll see how we, the American people, can turn our bickering lawmakers into the kind of problem-solvers you met in part I. You'll see that we can restructure our elections so that the lawmakers who negotiate genuine solutions to our nation's troubles will win reelection, while those who just posture and bicker will be weeded out.

If you still doubt that our politicians will ever tackle our major problems sensibly, just keep in mind that politicians are flesh and blood. They're human beings like the rest of us. They respond to rewards and incentives like the rest of us. We just need elections that will give our politicians the right incentives. Then, at last, they will start to craft genuine solutions.