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Will Our Politicians Ever Do the Right Thing?

By Sol Erdman and Lawrence Suskind

Graphic insults can win elections. Sensible policy decisions often don't. At least, that's how American politics works today. Both Republican and Democratic lawmakers have clearly concluded that the surest way to win seats in November is to paint the other side as despicable. And soon after this election, most lawmakers will start to obsess about the contest in 2012. So no matter which party wins control, both parties will continue to publicly scorn the other's positions on our mounting deficit, on taxes, on energy policy and on creating jobs. Congress will therefore make little progress on these issues, though all are critical to America's future. Our country is thus destined to decline — for several more years at least.

To reverse that decline, we will have to get our lawmakers to negotiate in good faith over the issues on which they now mostly insult one another. How can we make that happen? To find a realistic answer, we need to look at ideological adversaries who have negotiated even-handed solutions to major national controversies. These episodes suggest how to coax Congress to resolve our problems sensibly: We have to significantly strengthen each lawmaker's connection to his/her constituents.

To see how that bond can drive political decisions, consider ideological adversaries who have crafted win-win solutions to divisive national issues. One case that could have benefited nearly every American occurred in the mid-1990s. A group called the Council on Sustainable Development — which included seven environmental leaders, six corporate

CEOs and five federal officials — met repeatedly over two-and-a half years to try to work out their intense conflicts over environmental policy. Despite their divergent interests and feelings of distrust, the members of this group eventually agreed on how to resolve the most prominent environmental disputes at a reasonable cost to all sides.

They basically proposed that the government require industries to clean up the environment far more thoroughly than to date but, at the same time, let companies largely decide how to meet those tougher standards. Businesses could then use their ingenuity to find the most efficient ways to cut pollution, saving the economy an estimated \$250 billion dollars per decade.

Each council member then pitched the plan to his/her allies in the outside world. The CEOs won the support of the relevant industry associations. The environmental members won endorsements from nearly every environmental group. And the government officials secured backing from the appropriate regulatory agencies.

Yet Congress has largely ignored the council's recommendations, opting instead to fight over nearly every environmental question.

Unfortunately, this is not an isolated episode. Representatives from across the political spectrum have developed a comprehensive plan for saving Social Security from bankruptcy while providing nearly every American a financially secure retirement (The National Commission on Retirement Policy Final Report). Another politically diverse group of advocates has devised a plan for reducing our consumption of foreign oil at minimal cost. And representatives from the Cato Institute, the Progressive Policy Institute, and other ideologically driven organizations (mostly from the right, but some clearly from the left and center) have unanimously agreed on a plan for restraining health care costs while boosting quality.

Yet Congress has repeatedly failed to reach agreement on every one of these issues.

What accounts for the difference? What is it about these ideological opponents that enabled them to resolve problems that politicians wouldn't?

- Each advocate was speaking for a large group of people who strongly backed his/her agenda. Each environmental leader at the Council on Sustainable Development, for instance, had hundreds of colleagues in the environmental community counting on him/her to advance their common

cause. Each corporate CEO had hundreds of colleagues throughout his industry counting on him to advance their corporations' interests.

- Each representative eventually realized that the most practical way to make real progress for his/her own camp was to strike a deal with their long-time opponents, a deal that the other side could accept as readily as his own.
- Each representative was then ideally positioned to explain to his fellow environmentalists or corporate executives how that deal with their long-time enemies was the most realistic way to advance their own cause.

Each member of Congress is, by contrast, in a far more difficult position. Every lawmaker represents scores of opposing groups, 700,000 people who disagree over nearly every issue. Each congressperson's district contains large blocs of young adults, the middle-aged and senior citizens; blue-collar workers, white-collar workers, business owners and the unemployed; singles, couples, families and one-parent households; liberals, conservatives and most points in between.

Each of these groups has its own values and interests — which collide head-on with other groups' values and interests.

So, if a member of Congress advocates a detailed solution to a controversial issue, several large blocs of voters in his/her district are bound to oppose his stand, perhaps enough to throw him out of office. The typical lawmaker therefore has strong incentives to avoid proposing realistic solutions to controversial issues.

The members of Congress have found that it's far safer to blame the nation's severest problems on the other party. A typical legislator can, after all, win reelection just by convincing most voters that the other party is more untrustworthy, incompetent or corrupt than his own — a message that any politician can craft in vivid terms that voters will remember.

By contrast, imagine if some lawmaker tried to convince his district's many thousands of voters — from various age groups, income levels and family situations — that his myriad decisions on taxes, deficits, energy, health care and national security were serving their best interests. To each kind of voter, that legislator would need to justify each major decision differently. It would be an impossible task.

In effect, if any congressperson tries to work out cost-effective solutions to critical national

problems, he/she rarely benefits by it. He may even suffer. But if a legislator lets our nation's troubles fester and can pin the blame on the other party, he benefits greatly. A truly perverse set of incentives.

Voters, too, have incentives to do the wrong thing. In each district, after all, every voter — every young single, middle-aged parent, senior citizen, construction worker, teacher, salesperson, manager, conservative, liberal and moderate — has to share the same representative. Each voter has his/her own needs and expectations. Yet all 700,000 district residents have to share the same spokesperson in Congress.

So a typical voter cannot possibly get a spokesperson who shares his/her concerns on the issues that matter most to him. No wonder most voters feel politically alienated. No wonder 89 percent of voters never bother to find out how their representative has voted on any legislation.

Each representative can thus safely ignore most of his constituents' interests. Instead, most lawmakers cater to the groups that keep closest track of how they vote. On Medicare, Congress kowtows to seniors. On farm policy, most lawmakers pander to farmers. And so on.

How do we fix these perverse incentives? By heavily regulating campaign contributions? Redrawing districts? Term limits? Whatever advantages these popular measures might have, all the diverse voters in each district would still have to share the same representative. So a typical voter still could not get a spokesperson who shared his or her biggest concerns. And each representative would still represent so many different kinds of voters that he/she could not justify difficult decisions on controversial issues — which means Congress would keep avoiding difficult decisions.

How, then, do we goad our lawmakers to resolve critical problems so that the whole country benefits? What if each congressperson was in a similar position as each member of the Council on Sustainable Development? What if each lawmaker had exclusively constituents who backed his/her basic political agenda? Each legislator would then know that if he/she negotiated cost-effective solutions to tough issues, he could — at last — explain to his constituents how those deals were the most practical way to meet their needs.

If, in turn, nearly every American could get a representative who shared his basic political

outlook, every citizen would have a far stronger incentive than now to scrutinize congressional candidates, to vote and then hold his/her representative to account for his policy decisions.

Fortunately, it is possible to connect lawmakers and constituents this strongly without touching the Constitution. We would need to:

- Merge today's congressional districts into larger ones with, say, five representatives.
- Organize elections so that nearly every voter would get a representative near him/herself on the political spectrum.
- Provide each lawmaker with a vehicle for reporting regularly to his/her constituents to explain his decisions on major issues.
- Make getting on the ballot far easier than now, so if any lawmaker failed to report significant progress on the critical issues, at the next election several candidates near him on the political spectrum would court his voters and have a good chance to win his seat.

Complex as this arrangement may sound, it is doable. For details on how such elections would work, see GenuineRepresentation.org/Congress

Ambitious changes, to be sure. But they are feasible if they start at the local level. Many city councils and state legislatures are, after all, as dysfunctional as Congress. Indeed the winter issue of the National Civic Review will make a case to civic leaders in troubled cities that their communities need to make changes along the above lines. If just a handful of cities act on that advice and their city councils end up negotiating sensible solutions to long-festered problems, citizens across the country might demand that their cities adopt a similar process, then their state governments and, ultimately, Congress.

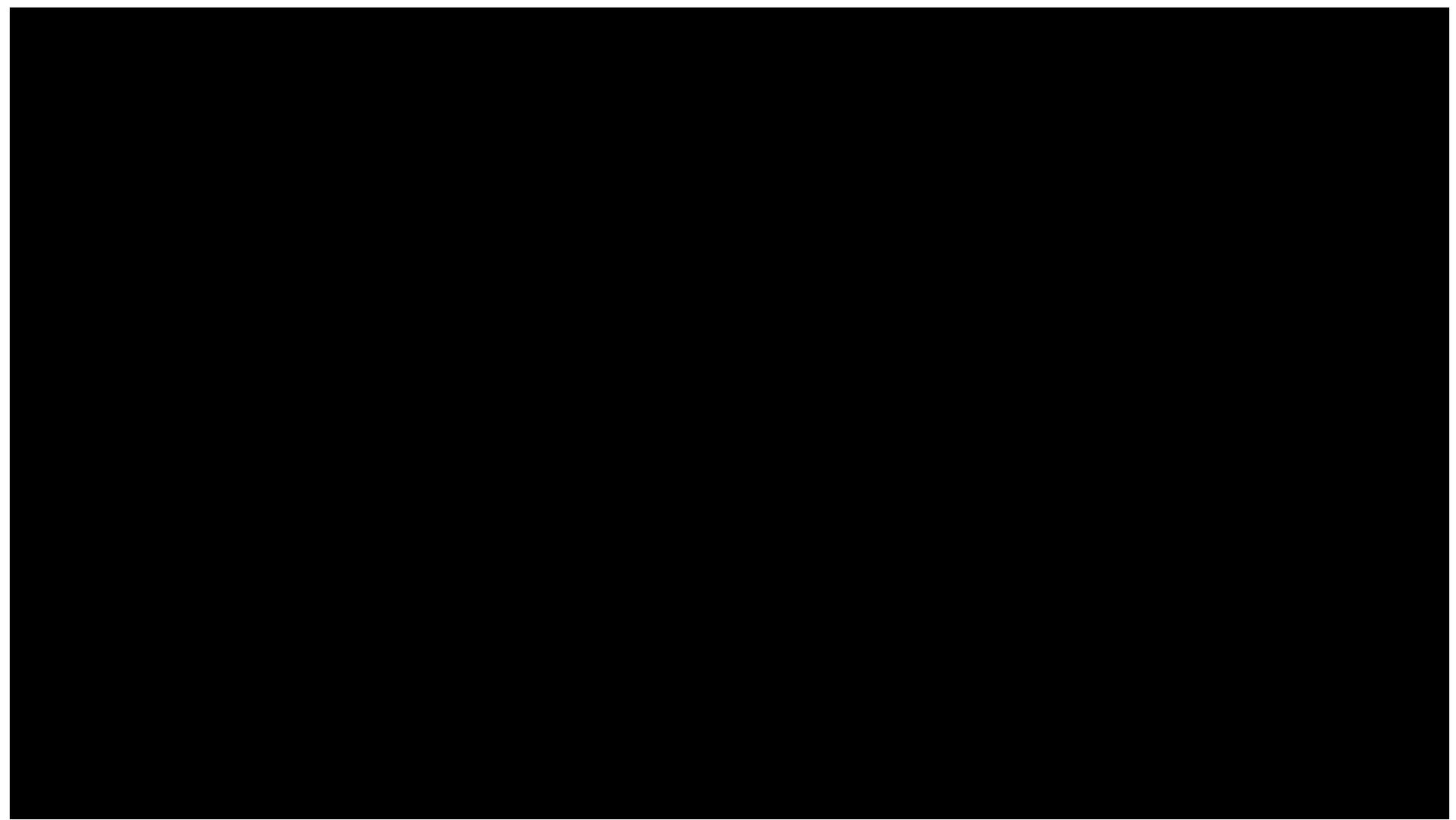
A long road, but until we start making this kind of change, our lawmakers will have far stronger incentives to fight over our gravest problems than to solve them. To reverse America's decline, we must change those incentives.

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