

[Opinion](#)
[NCR Voices](#)



President Joe Biden delivers the State of the Union address to a joint session of Congress at the U.S. Capitol ON Feb. 7, 2023, in Washington. (RNS/AP/Patrick Semansky)



Thomas Reese

[View Author Profile](#)

Follow on Twitter at [@thomasreeseSJ](#)

Religion News Service

[View Author Profile](#)

[Join the Conversation](#)

February 27, 2024

[Share on Facebook](#)[Share on Twitter](#)[Email to a friend](#)[Print](#)

Bipartisanship is presented as an ideal by many American commentators and religious leaders, but it has a checkered history in American politics. Programs like Social Security and Medicare are bipartisan now but were bitterly opposed by Republicans before their enactment. And issues that have bipartisan support among voters can still have trouble getting through Congress.

The ink on the American Constitution was hardly dry when factionalism broke out and the citizenry was divided into Federalists and members of the Democratic-Republican Party. We have had parties fighting each other ever since.

When division over slavery became very intense, we had a civil war that freed slaves but set the stage for Dixiecrat rule in the South. There was a bipartisan consensus to ignore racism until the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s.

Party leaders have no power or willingness to defuse partisanship or to change a system that has brought them to power. Many religious leaders are committed partisans, so there is not much hope there.

[Tweet this](#)

Before then, Southern Democrats played an outsize role in congressional politics. In a system based on seniority, they often were chairs of important congressional committees. They were also the swing votes on major legislation, which could pass or fail depending on whether they voted with northern Democrats or with Republicans.

They often voted with Republicans on legislation dealing with taxing, spending and welfare. They voted with Republicans so often that political scientists invented the term "conservative coalition" to describe this type of bipartisanship. The coalition preferred lower taxes, smaller government, fewer social programs and more military

spending than did northern Democrats.

As a result, even when the Democrats had a majority in Congress, they could rarely pass progressive legislation. President Lyndon B. Johnson was able to pass major legislation because, after the 1964 election, he had a supermajority in Congress. This did not last. Opposition to Johnson's support for civil rights drew white Southerners into the Republican Party.

When Southern whites abandoned the Democratic Party to become Republicans, what had been the conservative coalition became the Republican Party, which sometimes had enough votes to take over the House or the Senate.

Meanwhile, the power of political party bosses was being gutted by progressive Democrats and liberal activists. With the multiplication of primaries, party leaders lost control of party nominations. Other "reforms" limited their control over political contributions.

As a result, candidates could ignore political leaders as long as they could raise their own money and attract the votes of the extremists who turned out for primaries.

[Related: The Catholic Church needs to play a positive role in this year's election](#)

Political gerrymandering accentuated this problem as politicians in state legislatures were more interested in protecting incumbents than in having competitive districts. Prior to the 2022 election, [CNN](#) estimated that fewer than 10% of the House districts were competitive. Candidates only had to win the primary to get elected to Congress.

Thus, the unintended consequence of the "reforms" was extreme candidates who were beholden to donors and primary voters rather than moderate candidates who would have been chosen by party leaders who want to win competitive elections. These extreme candidates saw no value in bipartisanship.

Other "reforms," such as eliminating congressional junkets and political pork, also decreased bipartisanship.

During the Bill Clinton presidency there was another attempt to be bipartisan. He embraced Republican policies like balancing the budget, reforming welfare and free trade. Because of this, some liberals referred to him as the best Republican president ever elected.

On the other hand, he and Hillary embraced the liberal side of the culture wars.

All this set the stage for Donald Trump to be the opposite of the Clintons. He took up the conservative side of the culture wars and abandoned the traditional Republican ideals of free trade and welcoming immigrants as cheap labor.

Republican leaders since the time of President Richard Nixon had played on racial fears, which dovetailed with their Southern strategy. Most leaders did this not because they were racists but to win elections so they could pass traditional Republican programs like tax cuts and lower spending. The leadership would flirt with the "rabble" as long as they were still in control.

Today, the "rabble" has taken over the Republican Party with Trump as its undisputed leader. Wall Street, the business community and the professional classes lost control. The chaos and instability that comes with Trump is so great a threat to the status quo that these institutionalists are now flirting with Democrats.

Foreign policy has traditionally been an area of bipartisanship. Although isolationism has been a frequent temptation, Americans rally around the flag in times of conflict, first against Germany, then against communism and most recently against Islamic terrorists.

Although Republicans prided themselves on being anti-communist, Nixon was able to recognize Red China and open investment and trade for the business community. He also wanted to separate China from Russia, which he saw as the more dangerous foe. Today, Nixon, Ronald Reagan and their contemporaries have to be turning over in their graves at the sight of Republicans abandoning Ukraine and NATO and making nice with Vladimir Putin and Russia. Such actions would have been inconceivable in the old Republican Party.

Where does bipartisanship go from here? Because of the filibuster, bipartisanship is normally required to get anything done in the Senate. President Joe Biden was able to get through the infrastructure bill with Republican votes, but his green energy bill (the Inflation Reduction Act) barely passed in the Senate.

Advertisement

Recently, Biden tried a bipartisan (mostly Republican) approach to immigration in the hope of getting Republican support for aid to Ukraine, but that proposal was killed by Trump, who did not want to give Biden a win before the November election.

Congressional gridlock has become normalized. Partisanship has even infected the U.S. Supreme Court.

For those on the far left and far right, bipartisanship and compromise are dirty words. Meanwhile, Biden is being attacked for not delivering on his campaign promises to the Black and Hispanic communities, even though Republicans are making it impossible for any of these programs to pass in Congress.

Political campaigning should push candidates to the center as they compete for moderate and independent voters, but most Americans vote a straight party ticket, even when they claim to be independent. Undecided citizens are less likely to vote. It takes a lot of campaign money to convince an undecided or truly independent voter to vote for your candidate. It's much more cost effective to get your base to the polls. Today, riling up the base is the preferred campaign strategy, something that makes bipartisanship even more difficult.

Progressives have proposed proportional representation and/or ranked voting (preferred voting or rank-choice voting) as solutions to our current problems. Granted the negative impact of earlier reforms, these liberals should have some humility in proposing new reforms. In Europe, proportional representation has led to multiparty systems that have their own problems. The consequences of ranked voting are not clear, but experimentation at the state and local level might be worth trying.

Partisanship is baked into our political system because of gerrymandering, primaries and campaign financing. True reform must look at these systemic issues. Added to these structural issues are the cultural and economic conflicts that feed partisanship.

Party leaders, what is left of them, have no power or willingness to defuse partisanship or to change a system that has brought them to power. Many religious leaders are committed partisans, so there is not much hope there. Wishing partisanship away is not going to work. Short of a miracle or a national catastrophe, partisanship is here to stay.