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## Pols Apart

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*Review of "The Spirit of Compromise: Why Governing Demands It and Campaigning Undermines It." By Amy Gutmann and Dennis Thompson. Princeton University Press. 279 pp. \$24.95*

Compromise, George Santayana once wrote, "is odious to passionate natures because it seems a surrender and to intellectual natures because it seems a confusion."

In Washington, D.C., where legislators used to be advised to "go along to get along," compromise has become compromised. "You're saying I want common ground, but I'm not going to compromise," *60 Minutes* reporter Leslie Stahl told John Boehner, as he was about to become Speaker of the House in 2011. "'I reject the word,' Boehner replied.

These days, many politicians reject "the mindset" of compromise as well. According to Amy Gutmann (the president of the University of Pennsylvania, where she is also a professor of political science) and Dennis Thompson (a professor of political philosophy at Harvard University), elected officials exhibit what they deem to be a "principled tenacity, which rejects the sacrifice that compromise entails, and mutual mistrust, which inflates the willful opposition that compromise involves." The result, of course, is polarization -- and dysfunction -- throughout the institutions of the government of the United States.

In *The Spirit of Compromise*, Gutmann and Thompson point out that on issues ranging from health care to taxes to the debt ceiling the dangerous new normal of the 21 century "biases the political process in favor of the status quo and stands in the way of desirable change." And they explain why it will be difficult to get partisan politicians to cross the aisle as long as continuous campaigning (which pushes politicians to start running for re-election on the day they take the oath of office) dominates governing -- by promoting the articulation of sharp policy differences, "horse race" coverage by the mass media, and the influence of money.

In their zeal to be non-partisan, Gutmann and Thompson let the Republicans off a bit too easily. "It would be a mistake," they suggest, "to dwell on who is most to blame at the moment." Perhaps. But at the moment, as Thomas Mann and Norman Ornstein pointed out in a recent op/ed in *The Washington Post*, Republicans (far more than Democrats) are "ideologically extreme; scornful of compromise; unmoved by conventional understanding of facts, evidence and science; and dismissive of the legitimacy of the political opposition... making it nearly impossible for the political system to deal constructively with the country's challenges."

Gutmann and Thompson are also a bit too eager to endorse President Obama's compromises. His willingness to extend the Bush tax cuts for the wealthy and reductions in the estate tax, they argue, facilitated passage of a one-year payroll tax cut, an extension of unemployment benefits, and a substantial package of tax breaks for middle-income Americans. The bi-partisan bill, they claim, unpersuasively, made the prospects of a comprehensive deal on taxes and entitlement reform "less bleak" than they otherwise would have been. And the authors' assertion that the president had to back down on "the public option" to secure majority support in the Senate for a comprehensive health care bill fails to engage the criticism that Obama's abandonment of this important provision was premature, undercut his allies in Congress, and actually got him nothing in return.

Nonetheless, Gutmann and Thompson are right to step back and focus our attention on the structural and cultural impediments to the spirit of compromise. Perhaps surprisingly, "gerrymandering" is not one of them. The assertion that making congressional election districts "safe" for one party produces polarization, they indicate, is not well supported by the evidence. It is clear, however, that primaries, which tend to be dominated by activists who hold positions far from the center of the political spectrum, force candidates "to maximize their uncompromising stands" by, for example, pledging never to raise taxes for any reason, to reject Sharia Law, to cut off funding for abortions, and to oppose same-sex marriage. It is equally clear that big donors, who play an ever larger role in the era of the perpetual campaign, "expect candidates to take hardline positions and hold to them."

Although they insist that the situation is not hopeless, the authors' list the obstacles to enacting reforms that can partially insulate governing from campaigning while preserving space for a robust opposition. The filibuster, they acknowledge, won't disappear nor will campaigns be publically financed anytime soon. Neither party is likely to reduce the role of primaries in choosing nominees for office. And term limits may well make things worse by reducing opportunities for trust-building interactions.

"We seem to confront a Catch-22," Gutmann and Thompson conclude: the institutional changes needed "to cultivate more compromising mindsets will not be adopted without the change in mindsets that is the very aim of the institutional changes." Strengthening the civic education of the next generation of Americans through exercises in which students have to agree on controversial issues might help. But that will take time. And we can't afford to wait.