American citizens should find it disquieting, retired Supreme Court Justice David Souter observed in 2011, when their elected representatives speak so loudly against compromise - and in support of a "rigid absolutism of principle" born of their allegiance to one political party or the other.

Mickey Edwards agrees. The former U.S. Congressman from Oklahoma's 5th District (now the vice president of the Aspen Institute and co-founder of "No Labels") believes that our government is no longer an arena for deliberation and debate, but "a vehicle for partisan advantage-seeking."

In "The Parties Versus The People," he lays out a bold and bipartisan agenda for reducing the power of the two "private clubs" that reward loyalty, punish independent judgment and undermine democracy.

To contain partisan tribalism, Edwards proposes:

Open, integrated primaries, where every candidate appears on the same ballot and the top two finishers face off in the general election.

Independent, nonpartisan commissions to draw election districts

Free airtime on radio and television for all qualified candidates.

Fifty-five votes to cut off filibusters after 10 days - and 50 votes after 12 days.

A nonpartisan Speaker of the House (as in Great Britain and Canada), elected with a 60 percent vote.

Committee assignments filled by lot or seniority.

Guarantees that any amendment with at least 100 co-sponsors will receive a hearing, full discussion and a recorded vote on the House floor.

An end to pledges and oaths that bind candidates before they take office.

Edwards' analysis is not without problems. He does not account for the decades and decades in which the two-party system functioned effectively and promoted stability. Nor does he explain why, if party leaders now run the show, House Speaker John Boehner gave way, time and again, to Tea Party insurgents during budget negotiations with the Democrats.

Edwards deems the argument that voters find party labels useful in making their selections "offensive and insulting." In a world in which computers are ubiquitous, he claims, "finding out how a particular congressional candidate feels about foreign aid is not difficult."

In our political system, where elected representatives are "assumed to think for themselves" and "are mindful" of constituents' views, party labels "are of little use."

Perhaps. But many voters are not well informed about politicians' views of foreign policy. And relying on candidates to use "multiple forums to reach voters" without the "cues" provided by party labels is likely to magnify the already immense influence of money on elections.
Edwards' faith in state-based citizens' initiatives and popular referendums may be a bit naive as well. These options, too, are often hostage to individuals and organizations with axioms to grind and deep pockets.

And yet, despite all of these quibbles, Edwards' message remains important and urgent. Our government is dysfunctional. It does encourage partisan conflict. And members of Congress are not likely to support fundamental change.

It is time for the "thoughtful but concerned" to participate - and demand more, a lot more, from their elected representatives than a "lock step" march orchestrated by their political party.

THE PARTIES VERSUS THE PEOPLE: HOW TO TURN REPUBLICANS AND DEMOCRATS INTO AMERICANS
By Mickey Edwards
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