

Partisan politics will break the Washington gridlock

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Ross Perot's abrupt exit from the 1992 presidential campaign may cheer George Bush and Bill Clinton, but it leaves the electorate with one less option. How now are we to do something about the logjam in Washington? By staying home on Election Day? Drafting Norman Schwarzkopf?

Actually, the solution is simpler than that, and a lot less original: Vote the party line.

There's no doubt that the American electorate is enormously unhappy with Washington. Consider the following:

- Where just over a year ago George Bush's approval ratings were the highest for any president since polling began, they have just hit a low similar to those of Richard Nixon's during the Watergate scandal.

- No fewer than four outsiders — Jerry Brown, Pat Buchanan, Perot and David Duke — entered the 1992 political campaign and the first three enjoyed a moment of glory.

- Where only two years ago pundits complained that 96 percent of congressmen seeking re-election won seats, in 1992 Congress' approval rat-

In 1990, 96 percent of Congress who sought re-election won; in 1992, approval ratings are so low that a record number are not running.

ing has fallen to record lows and as a result may also mark a record number of representatives not seeking re-election.

Deadlock in the capital lies behind this discontent; nothing much gets accomplished. While polls show that the American electorate blames politicians for this unhappy state of affairs, the problem actually is less with politicians than with electorate behavior. And it concerns the seemingly innocuous habit of ticket-splitting, choosing Republicans for president and Democrats for Congress. While Republicans have won the presidency in five out of six elections since 1968, Democrats have controlled one or both houses of Congress since 1954.

This is a comparatively recent phenomenon. Until the 1950s, every president since Abraham Lincoln enjoyed the advantage of having his party control one or both houses of Congress at least once during his

term. Our most admired executives (Jefferson, Jackson, Lincoln, both Roosevelts and Kennedy) enjoyed uninterrupted control of Congress by their own parties.

At the turn of the century, voters maintained party loyalty; less than 5 percent of congressional districts split votes for president and Congress. But after World War II, this practice spread rapidly, to the extent that almost half the nation's 435 districts split their votes in recent elections.

In 1988, for example, Bucks County's Eight Congressional District favored George Bush for president and Democrat Peter Kostmayer for Congress. Similarly, Northeast Philadelphia's Third Congressional District favored Bush and Democrat Robert Borski.

The Constitution established a system of government that requires the executive, legislative and judicial branches to share power. The Ameri-

can electorate has created a checks-and-balances of its own by dividing branches of government across party lines. Unlike the original division of branches, this doesn't work. Instead, it leads to deadlock where neither executive nor legislative branch can pass initiatives; neither president nor Congress can govern.

Instead, politicians wage endless war on each other with such unpleasant tactics as mudslinging television commercials, public inquisitions (think of Anita Hill vs. Clarence Thomas), leaks of sensitive information to the press and criminal indictments (such as that of Caspar Weinberger). Public disgust is the natural result.

No outsider, not even a can-do billionaire, could fix this problem. For all his bravura about riding roughshod over Congress, Perot would have had to deal with Republicans and Democrats there. Unable to rely on his own party, Perot would have been even more hamstrung than Bush and conceivably could have even further paralyzed Washington.

While the two major parties have become too weak and diffuse to retain the partisan loyalties of decades past, they do retain distinct identities. On defense policy, for example, Republicans are prepared to use

force; Democrats are not. On economic issues, Republicans are free-market oriented while Democrats sometimes favor government intervention. Republicans stand for social conservatism; Democrats for inclusion. The former reads the Constitution strictly; the latter interpretatively.

Voters who wish to "clean up the mess in Washington" should take mops and buckets in hand. They should stop splitting tickets and vote for parties instead of personalities. If you like the Democratic philosophy, vote for Bill Clinton and your local Democratic congressional candidate. If you prefer Republicans, then give Bush a Republican Congress to implement his agenda.

Restoring partisanship to voting would have the ironic effect of making government less partisan — and more productive.

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