**Politics With Integrity**

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*Under democracy, each party devotes its chief energies to trying to prove that the other party is unfit to rule - and both commonly succeed, and are right.* - H.L. Mencken

*I don't make jokes. I just watch the government and report the facts.* - Will Rogers

Although Will Rogers said this some 90 years ago, he would have even more reasons to say it today. Sadly, our recent experience has moved far beyond a joke. After four years of an abysmal lack of integrity in the White House, on this inaugural day we have a new beginning. What are some additional things that could create more integrity in politics?

What is integrity? Typical dictionary definitions seem necessary but insufficient, e.g., “the quality of being honest and having strong moral principles; moral uprightness” or “adherence to moral and ethical principles; soundness of moral character; honesty.” A person could have strong adherence to questionable principles. It is possible to state honestly one’s beliefs in untruths or positions that violate accepted standards of morality. Carter (1996) adds requirements to augment honesty:

Integrity involves discerning what is right and what is wrong, acting on what you have discerned, even at personal cost, and saying openly that you are acting on your understanding of right from wrong.

He also reminds us that integrity requires fulfilling certain moral responsibilities, rather than choosing to avoid them. (Appendix A contains more of Carter’s thinking on integrity.)

What are some of the major obstacles to integrity in our politics?

**Polarization**

Mann and Ornstein (2016), both distinguished political scientists, observe that America's two main political parties have given up their traditions of compromise, endangering our very system of constitutional democracy. They discuss forces that are creating “a deep division across society on partisan, tribal lines, and that have poisoned and corroded national discourse while enabling extreme views.”

In a series of surveys between 1994 and 2014, Pew Research Center (2016) found that Republicans and Democrats were more divided along ideological lines than at any point in the previous two decades. In 2014, an overwhelming share of Republicans (93%) was more conservative than the median Democrat, while a nearly identical share of Democrats (94%) was more liberal than the median Republican. Two decades earlier, a much smaller majority of Republicans (64%) were to the right of the median Democrat, while 70% of Democrats were to the left of the median Republican.

In a 2016 poll (Krattenmaker 2017), 95 percent of Americans agreed that “people on opposite sides of an issue demonize each other so severely that they make finding common ground impossible.” Seventy-five percent felt that “it’s the extreme voices that get all the attention.”

A Pew Research Center survey (Gramlich, 2017) found: “An overwhelming majority (86%) of Americans say conflicts between Democrats and Republicans are either strong or very strong ... Ninety percent of Democrats and Democratic-leaning independents say there are strong or very strong partisan conflicts, as do roughly as many Republicans and Republican leaners (87%).” Another Pew poll (Pew 2020) found that 69 percent think divisions between Republicans and Democrats in this country today are increasing; only 8 percent thought they are decreasing.

The job performance of Congress has slipped from bad to worse, in the opinion of a group of academic experts from across the country who were asked to evaluate the institution by the Indiana University Center on Representative Government (2017). From a C-minus in 2015, Congress slipped to a grade of D for 2016. In the 2015 survey, only 15 percent of the experts said they thought polarization in Congress would increase. But in the 2016 survey, almost 40 percent predicted more intense polarization ahead.

Polarization has also reached the Supreme Court, not only in the way that the two nominees were handled during 2016 and 2020, but also much earlier. Dershowitz (2001), analyzing the 2000 presidential election, concluded “...in this case for the first time, the court’s majority let its desire for a particular partisan outcome have priority over legal principles.” He demonstrates vividly how the justices who gave George W. Bush the presidency contradicted their previous positions in order to do so.

Putnam (2020) gives data on various measures of polarization in the United States during the last century-plus, including economic inequality, cultural cooperation, race, bipartisan collaboration in Congress, cross-party conflict, presidential approval by party, interparty feelings, and ticket-splitting by voters. On every measure there was relatively high polarization in the early 1900s, decreasing steadily until the 1960s, then increasing steadily and seriously up to the present.

Two distinguished political scientists, Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt (2018) conclude, “Over the last quarter century, Democrats and Republicans have become much more than just two competing parties, sorted into liberal and conservative camps. Their voters are now deeply divided by race, religious belief, geography, and even ‘way of life.’” They observe that there has been a rise in a “dangerous phenomenon in American Politics: intense partisan animosity.”

**How Did We Get So Polarized and Why Does It Matter?**

Mettler and Lieberman (2020) argue that effectively functioning democratic systems need to have four key attributes: (a) free and fair elections, (b) the idea that all members of society, including those in government, must adhere to the rule of law, (c) the legitimacy of the opposition is recognized, and (d) the integrity of rights, including civil liberties. Levitsky and Ziblatt (2018a) add that, to function well, democratic constitutions must be reinforced by two basic norms: (a) mutual toleration, according to which politicians accept their opponents as legitimate, and (b) forbearance, or self-restraint in the exercise of power, i.e., not deploying one’s institutional prerogatives to the hilt, even if it is somewhat legal to do so.

Mettler and Lieberman (2020) studied five periods in history when democracy in the United States was under siege: the 1790s, the Civil War, backsliding in the 1890s, the Depression, and Watergate. They conclude that “these episodes risked profound—even fatal—damage to the American democratic experiment.” From this history, they identify four distinct characteristics of disruption: (a) political polarization, (b) racism and nativism, (c) economic inequality, and (d) excessive executive power. These, alone or two or three, have threatened the survival of the republic in these episodes. **“What is unique, and alarming, about the present moment in American politics is that all four characteristics now exist at the same time.”** (emphasis added)

Campbell (2016) suggests a number of explanations for increased party polarization: (a) more successful partisan gerrymandering, (b) increasing income inequality, (c) ideologically motivated party activists, (d) an ideologically driven political media, and (e) polarizing presidents. He argues that, while these five have contributed to polarization, they are not the principal causes. He believes that the two interrelated major causes were the increased polarization of the public and party realignments.

Campbell notes that the electorate was not very polarized in the 1950s and early 1960s, but became much more so in the late 1960s and 1970s, with further increases in the rest of the century. These changes were muted and obscured by the rather heterogeneous compositions of the parties at that period, with many liberals in the Republican Party and many conservatives in the Democratic Party. There was a slow realignment in the parties over decades, along more ideological lines and with more homogeneity. In the 1970s, congressional Democrats moved significantly to the left, while there was relatively little change in congressional Republicans. The Republican shift to the right came later, somewhat in parallel with the growth of conservatism in the public. According to his theory, “once polarization between the parties caught up with that of the public in the 1990s and early 2000s, the extent of the public's polarization became more evident.” This became a feedback loop, with polarization in the public and parties accentuating and fueling each other.

(Putnam, 2020) notes that “by the late 1960s bipartisanship was going out of fashion.” He observes that the polarization that had begun with civil rights spread quickly across many other issues, as the parties took opposing stances on issues that had not previously been partisan. He argues that “partisan identification is more a tribal affiliation than an ideological commitment, and that is a crucial part of the story of party polarization.”

In a podcast, The Brookings Institute (2021) identified as contributors to polarizing (in some cases, both causes and effects): increased polarizing of the news media, essentially unrestricted social media, gerrymandering, the Electoral College with mostly all or none results from the states, money in politics with little transparency, and the filibuster in the Senate (which no longer requires anyone to talk). Also identified were three social and economic issues: income inequality, geographic disparities across the country, and systemic racism.

Levitsky and Ziblatt (2018a) conclude:

The intensity of partisan animosities in America today reflects the combined effect not only of growing ethnic diversity but also of slowed economic growth, stagnant wages in the bottom half of the income distribution, and rising economic inequality. Today's racially tinged partisan polarization reflects the fact that ethnic diversity surged during a period (1975 to the present) in which economic growth slowed, especially for those at the bottom end of the income distribution. For many Americans, the economic changes of the last few decades have brought decreased job security, longer working hours, fewer prospects for upward mobility, and, consequently, a growth in social resentment. Resentment fuels polarization.

They cogently express the threat of polarization to democracy:

When societies divide into partisan camps with profoundly different worldviews, and when those differences are viewed as existential and irreconcilable, political rivalry can devolve into partisan hatred. Parties come to view each other not as legitimate rivals, but as dangerous enemies. Losing ceases to be an accepted part of the political process and instead becomes a catastrophe. When that happens, politicians are tempted to abandon forbearance and win at any cost. If we believe our opponents are dangerous, should we not use any means necessary to stop them?

Sadly, we have experienced recently how extreme polarization causes breakdowns and threatens our democracy.

**Politics as Religion**

Alexander (2016) argues that professional politicians have been largely replaced by “ideological purists.” For them, compromise is a sin; the purity of their beliefs should reign supreme. Purists are more interested in the righteousness of their ideologies than producing wise policy from a utilitarian perspective. Former congressman Gary Ackerman observed, "you can't compromise between good and evil" (Tyrangiel, 2012). Sounding a similar warning earlier, Walter Lippmann (1950) wrote that a nation "divided irreconcilably on principle; each party believing it is pure white and the other pitch black, cannot govern itself."

Neal Gabler (2009) argued that:

Perhaps the single most profound change to our political culture over the last 30 years has been the transformation of conservatism from a political movement, with all the limitations, hedges, and forbearances of politics, into a kind of fundamentalist religious movement, with the absolute certainty of religious belief.

He doesn’t mean religious movement literally, although there has been a contribution from fundamentalist religious groups to this change. Rather, he argues that “what we have in America today is a political fundamentalism, with all the characteristics of religious fundamentalism and very few of the characteristics of politics.”

He maintains that American democracy has generally been based on give-and-take; negotiation; compromise; acceptance that the majority rules, with respect for minority rights; and an agreement to abide by the results of a majority vote. In contrast, religious or political fundamentalism, “rests on immutable truths that cannot be negotiated, compromised, or changed... When politics becomes religion, however, policy too becomes a matter of life and death, as we have all seen.” Among many examples are the recurring impasses over funding in the Federal government.

Gabler goes on to paint a pessimistic picture of the future of political discourse in our country. He observes that individuals who believe that theirs is the only true and right path, “true believers,” also have found that religious vehemence trumps reason and political tolerance:

Having opted out of political discourse, they are not susceptible to any suasion. Rationality won’t work because their arguments are faith-based rather than evidence-based. ...Improved strategies won’t work... Nothing will work because you cannot convince religious fanatics of anything other than what they already believe, even if their religion is political dogma.

He maintains that those with extreme fundamentalist positions will win many battles because they:

...will always be more zealous than main-stream conservatives or liberals. They will always be louder, more adamant, more aggrieved, more threatening, more willing to do anything to win. Losing is inconceivable. For them, every battle is a crusade - or a jihad - a matter of good and evil.

**Politics as Intransigence**

Edwards (2011), a former Representative from Oklahoma, argues that our political system, Congress in particular, is focused not on solving problems, but is “a struggle for power between two private organizations.” Our system has developed into one that “makes cooperation almost impossible and incivility nearly inevitable, a system in which the campaign season never ends and the struggle for party advantage trumps all other considerations.” Further, he argues that influence within parties is often dominated by a small set of party activists who are “often highly ideological and largely uninterested in finding common ground.”

Often, politicians drive a stake in the ground, claiming a moral imperative that must not be violated. However, too often, when politicians claim they are operating on principle they are merely holding on to a position.

Levitsky and Ziblatt (2018) highlight deterioration in the US of two norms, essential to a functioning democracy: mutual toleration and institutional forbearance.

But when societies grow so deeply divided that parties become wedded to incompatible worldviews, and especially when their members are so socially segregated that they rarely interact, stable partisan rivalries eventually give way to perceptions of mutual threat. As mutual toleration disappears, politicians grow tempted to abandon forbearance and try to win at all costs. ...When that happens, democracy is in trouble. (p.116)

Hirschman (1991) analyzed some major reasons for political and societal conflicts that remain and grow, especially one factor that he believes is often found in more advanced democracies: “the systematic lack of communication between groups of citizens, such as liberals and conservatives...” He was worried about this polarization and argued that there is “a long and difficult road to be traveled from the traditional internecine, intransigent discourse to a more ‘democracy-friendly’ kind of dialogue.” He identified three major types of rhetoric used in such ineffective communications, that are, in effect, “contraptions specifically designed to make dialogue and deliberation impossible.”

*- Perversity* thesis: any purposive action to improve some feature of the political, social, or economic order only serves to make it worse

- *Futility* thesis: attempts at social transformation will be unavailing; they will simply fail to “make a dent.”

- *Jeopardy* thesis: the proposed change or reform should be rejected because it endangers some previous, precious accomplishment.

**Politics as a Systems Problem**

Gehl and Porter (2020) argue that “we can have healthy competition in politics—results, innovation, and accountability—by redesigning how we vote to connect acting in the public interest with getting reelected.” In their new book, *The Politics Industry: How Political Innovation Can Break Partisan Gridlock and Save Our Democracy*, they maintain that problems with U.S. politics are not specifically a politician problem, a policy problem, or a polarization problem:

It is a systems problem. Far from being “broken,” our political system is doing precisely what it’s designed to do. It wasn’t built to deliver results in the public interest or to foster policy innovation, nor does it demand accountability for failure to do so. Instead, most of the rules that shape day-to-day behavior and outcomes have been perversely optimized—or even expressly created—by and for the benefit of the entrenched duopoly at the center of our political system: the Democrats and the Republicans (and the actors surrounding them), what collectively we call the political-industrial complex.

They present five key conclusions about the nature of U.S. politics and remedies for its dysfunctions:

● Although people tend to think of the American political system as a public institution based on high-minded principles and impartial structures and practices derived from the Constitution, it’s not. Politics behaves according to the same kinds of incentives and forces that shape competition in any private industry.

● The dysfunctions of the politics industry are perpetuated by unhealthy competition and barriers to entry that secure the duopoly’s position regardless of results.

● Our political system will not correct itself. There are no countervailing forces or independent and empowered regulators to restore healthy competition.

● Certain strategic changes to the rules of the game in elections and legislating would alter incentives in ways that create healthy competition, innovation, and accountability.

● Business, in pursuing its short-term interests, has become a major participant in the political-industrial complex, exacerbating its dysfunction. The business community must reexamine its engagement model and throw its weight behind structural political innovation that would benefit both business and society in the long term.

Their recommended innovations for our political system involve reengineering the elections and legislative machinery. They propose a new approach for congressional elections: Final-five voting, which would (a) replace closed party primaries with open, nonpartisan primaries in which the top five finishers advance to the general election, and (b) replace plurality voting with ranked-choice voting in general elections. They believe this “is the most promising and effective way to create incentives for legislators to work in the public interest and to open congressional election fields to new and dynamic competition—the threat of which will hold elected officials more accountable to voters for results.”

For Congress operations, they propose zero-based rule making:

Put aside the Rules of the House of Representatives, the Standing Rules of the Senate, the Authority and Rules of Senate Committees, and more—all of which have been co-opted and weaponized over the decades to enable partisan control. And put aside customs that create separate podiums, separate cloakrooms, and separate dining rooms for Democrats and Republicans and that seat the chamber according to party. Then start with a blank slate.

They urge business leaders “to deploy their resources and influence to support these political innovations and, in parallel, reimagine business’s own practices for political engagement.”

Their recommendations are outlined in their paper (Gehl and Porter, 2020) and discussed in their book, mentioned at the beginning of this section.

**Politics as Ambiguous and Misleading Language**

It is well-known that political language and statements frequently are designed to elicit emotional reactions, rather than to communicate accurately and clearly. An indictment of this chronic characteristic is in George Orwell’s (1946) essay, *Politics and the English Language*, in which he observed that many words used politically had become effectively meaningless, e.g., *democracy, socialism, fascism, patriotic, justice, freedom, equality, progressive, reactionary,...*  He commented, “each of them have several different meanings which cannot be reconciled with one another.”

We could equally well add the labels *conservative* and *liberal* to the list of words that have become meaningless, in this case primarily through pejorative misuse. Two examples should remind us of many others: (a) “Conservatives don't belong in the 21st century; their thinking is outdated and detrimental to advancement, just look at the most conservative countries in the world for proof;” (b) “There are American-hating liberal terrorist sympathizers among us who have a secret plot to turn your church into a drive-through abortion clinic.”

“Conservative” derives from the Latin *conservare*: to keep, guard, preserve. It became a political term in the late 18th century, applied to Edmund Burke’s opposition to the French Revolution. He believed that custom, tradition, experience, and prudence, rather than abstract logic or ideals, provide the only sure guide to political action. His definition of conservatism was “a disposition to preserve, and an ability to improve.” Although social change was inevitable, he thought, it should ideally be carried out in an organic rather than a revolutionary fashion.

“Liberal” comes from the Latin *liberalis*: noble, generous, pertaining to or befitting a free man, ultimately going back to *fiber*, or free. Traditionally, to be liberal was to be generous and open-minded, concerned with the liberties of others. For example, in 1790 George Washington expressed, “As mankind becomes more liberal, they will be more apt to allow, that all those who conduct themselves as worthy members of the community are equally entitled to the protection of civil government. I hope ever to see America among the foremost nations in examples of justice and liberality.”

In much of the rest of this essay, I will use the labels “C” and “L”, not as abbreviations, but as placeholders for the ambiguous clusters of meanings assigned to the labels *conservative* and *liberal*.

**An Alternative Way of Considering the Range of Political Views**

Rather than considering the range of political views as a binary, blue and red, or a spectrum, left to right, we could place the range of political views around a circle (Figure 1). Individuals with positions near the upper middle1 of the circle could be considered to give high importance to values such as: openness, freedom2 (independence, free choice, free will, free agency), honesty, integrity, responsibility, justice, fairness, tolerance, trust, knowledge, understanding, truth, respect, empathy, kindness, forgiveness, caring about others, friendship, love, self-respect, equal opportunities to learn and progress, and hope.

– Insert Figure 1 about here (now is at end) –

As we move in either direction around the circle from this middle zone, there is a decrease in actions that demonstrate these values, especially relative to openness, understanding and tolerance (of different views), trust (in persons with different views), respect and empathy (for those with different views), truth, honesty, integrity, freedom, forgiveness, and kindness. The decreases in ***actions*** are in sharp contrast to typical public ***statements*** espousing the importance of these values. The rate of decrease in actions related to some of these characteristics is not the same in each direction.

As we move around the circle a quarter-turn or so clockwise (increasing “C”), we tend to see an increasing emphasis on loyalty (to group, party, nation, etc.), respect for authority, and “moral purity” - three characteristics identified by the research of social psychologist, Jonathan Haidt (2008). As we move around the circle a quarter-turn or so counter-clockwise (increasing “L”), there is an increasing emphasis on such values as caring about others, and providing more equal opportunities to learn and progress. These two zones, marked “X” and “Y” in Fig. 1, represent political views diametrically opposite each other, making it difficult to have constructive dialogue or joint action.

Political positions become still more extreme as we move beyond points X and Y toward the bottom of the circle. There is further reduction in actions that demonstrate the kinds of values typical of the upper middle. These two ranges of political views meet at point Z, which is characterized by neglect of or opposition to most of those values (except for an extreme version of loyalty and respect for authority). When the C and L ideologies are pushed to their furthest extremes, they ironically coalesce to form similar abysses of totalitarianism, whether communist or fascist, in which the freedom required for human improvement and flourishing, including meaningful political discourse and developing common purpose and initiative, disappear. We have seen various ruinous examples of both forms during the last century.

**Some Potentially Helpful Initiatives**

*The Congressional Management Foundation (CMF)*

...”is perhaps one of the most impactful organizations you have never heard of. And yet, their relationship with the US Congress may be closer than any other institution in America” (Cyr 2017) This nonprofit organization was founded in 1977 by congressional staff members seeking management support. Their web site ( http://www.congressfoundation.org/ ) says:

The Congressional Management Foundation (CMF) is a 501(c)(3) nonpartisan nonprofit whose mission is to build trust and effectiveness in Congress. We do this by enhancing the performance of the institution, legislators and their staffs through research-based education and training, and by strengthening the bridge and understanding between Congress and the People it serves.”

Since 1977, CMF has worked internally with Member, committee, leadership, and institutional offices in the House and Senate to identify and disseminate best practices for management, workplace environment, communications, and constituent services. CMF also is the leading researcher and trainer on citizen engagement, educating thousands of individuals and facilitating better understanding, relationships, and communications with Congress.

The *Bipartisan Policy Center* (BPC)

...was founded in 2007 by former Senate Majority Leaders Howard Baker ® Tom Daschle (D), Bob Dole ® and George Mitchell (D). It is a non-profit organization, self-described on its web site (http://bipartisanpolicy.org/):

The Bipartisan Policy Center is a Washington, DC-based think tank that actively fosters bipartisanship by combining the best ideas from both parties to promote health, security, and opportunity for all Americans. Our policy solutions are the product of informed deliberations by former elected and appointed officials, business and labor leaders, and academics and advocates who represent both sides of the political spectrum. BPC prioritizes one thing above all else: getting things done.

BPC works to reconcile the competing aims of highly interested advocates, corporations, and policy experts and design politically viable consensus solutions.

*No Labels*

This non-profit organization, founded in 2010, is described on its web site (http://www.nolabels.org/) as:

...a groundbreaking movement led by Americans who embrace the new politics of problem solving and are collaborating to find commonsense, nonpartisan solutions to our toughest challenges.

We are citizens first. Democrats, Republicans and independents – Americans working to bring our political leaders together to solve our country’s toughest problems and make our government work for you.

In January 2017, they created the Problem Solvers Caucus, a bipartisan group in the United States House of Representatives that includes 50 members, equally divided between Democrats and Republicans, who seek to foster bipartisan cooperation on key policy issues.

*Legislative Branch Capacity Working Group*

New America and the R Street Institute launched this group in Spring 2016. The impetus for establishing the group was “the widespread perception that Congress is dysfunctional.” The objectives of the group (from their web site http://www.legbranch.org) are: (a) To create an enduring, bipartisan space to assess the capacity of Congress to perform its constitutional duties; and

(b) To collaborate on ideas for improving the legislative branch’s performance in our separation of powers system.

Monthly meetings are open to Capitol Hill staff, academics, and anyone who cares about the well-being of America’s legislative branch. The organization also hosts a blog where congressional academics and practitioners post about a diverse range of issues connected to Congress.

*Joint Committee in Congress*

Four times in the 20th century, Congress has formed a special committee to study its processes, sometimes called Joint Committee on the Organization of Congress and, most recently by the 117th Congress, called the Select Committee on the Modernization of Congress. According to a 2020 report by the Congressional Institute https://www.congressionalinstitute.org/2020/11/02/build-on-the-success-of-the-select-committee-on-the-modernization-of-congress/

...this current committee was created “amid a widespread concern among Members and the public that the Legislative Branch needed to reform, modernize, and more effectively carry out its constitutional responsibilities. Given wide public dissatisfaction, it’s no surprise that the House overwhelmingly voted to create the Select Committee.” The report cites:

The Select Committee took this task and succeeded in issuing 97 recommendations. These recommendations touched on areas like how Congress can discharge its constitutional duties more effectively, how it can make better use of technology, how it can create a more meaningful budget process, and how the Legislative Branch can be more transparent with the public. The Select Committee deserves recognition for being the first congressional reform committee to see any of its recommendations adopted while the committee was still meeting.

**Some Proposals to Improve Politics**

Last June, the American Academy of Arts and Sciences (2020) published the civic equivalent of the 9/11 Commission Report: a blueprint for avoiding another political catastrophe. The project began in 2018, with a bipartisan search for ways to revitalize modern democracy. The academy convened listening sessions across the country, and gathered a mountain of technical advice on ways to “birth for ourselves a sense of shared fate.” The result was *Our Common Purpose*, a set of six strategies and 31 proposals (https://www.amacad.org/ourcommonpurpose/report), chosen with an eye for what could be plausibly achieved by 2026. Some of the proposals would require moves by Congress or state legislatures, but others could be achieved with no legal changes. The six strategies are:

● Achieve equality of voice and representation

● Empower voters

● Ensure the responsiveness of political institutions

● Dramatically expand civic bridging capacity (places and opportunities for people to interact)

● Build civic information architecture that supports common purpose

● Inspire a culture of commitment to American constitutional democracy and one another

We can advocate for and urge that many of the proposals will receive action.

Galston (2016) offers a summary of many congressional, budgetary, and electoral reforms that have been proposed by people of various political persuasions:

1. To improve the effectiveness of Congress, proposed reforms would, for example:

• Create incentives to shorten the appropriations process, require prompt action on presidential nominations, curtail obstructionist filibusters and allow bipartisan majorities to bring bills to the floor of the House and Senate over the objections of committees and party leaders.

• Require that members work in Congress three five-day weeks out of every four, and coordination of House and Senate schedules.

• Promote constructive discussion between Congress and the administration, in full view of the American people, via television.

• Discourage legislators from taking any pledges except the Pledge of Allegiance and their formal oath of office, establish regular off-the-record bipartisan meetings, institute bipartisan seating in full sessions as well as committees, create a bipartisan leadership committee, and discourage negative campaigning against fellow members.

2. Other proposals would specifically address the broken congressional budget process by:

• Establishing five-year budgets for mandatory programs, coupled with enforcement mechanisms to align those programs’ revenues and obligations, and provide increased transparency.

• Undertaking wholesale reform of the congressional committee structure to eliminate the increasingly meaningless distinction between authorizing and appropriating committees and to remove the major mandatory programs from the jurisdiction of the tax-writing committees.

• Giving proposed presidential spending reductions expedited congressional consideration.

• Using the bipartisan compromise Budget Enforcement Act of 1990, which contributed to better fiscal outcomes for nearly a decade, as a model of process reform.

3. Recognizing that the current level of political polarization will make it difficult for even

the best new rules to succeed, proposals have been advanced to tackle a key underlying

cause of excessive partisanship, the structure of the U.S. elections process. Election reform would undoubtedly be slow and difficult; however, the most promising reform options would encourage states to:

• Adopt non-partisan systems for congressional redistricting and institute more “open primaries,” in which independent voters as well as registered party members can participate.

• Adopt innovative voting systems, such as instant runoff voting, in order to give candidates incentives to reach beyond their current base.

• Expand the electorate through various means, in order to bring less committed swing voters into the process.

Following are some more specific proposals. Grainger (2015) writes about reforming how congressional districts are designed. Many have hoped for changing campaign financing. Weintraub (2016) writes about how this could make members of congress more accountable to voters.

Shedding this telemarketing burden will go a long way toward giving members of Congress the capacity to build more constructive relationships with each other, with their constituents and with the executive branch. And what single reform can do all this? Bringing a voluntary system of public campaign financing, which has been successful at the state and local levels, to congressional races.

She elaborates, noting that most public campaign financing programs involve a match of contributions raised by candidates, with a lid on the size of contributions that are allowed. They require candidates to collect a substantial number of small-dollar contributions to qualify. “And typically, contributions must come from registered voters in the candidate’s jurisdiction. Not corporations, not unions, not PACs. People! Voters! Constituents!”

No Labels (https://www.nolabels.org/making-government-work/ ) provides a series of proposals including: Make Government Work, Make the Presidency Work, and, especially relevant here, Make Congress Work with these twelve proposals:

https://2o16qp9prbv3jfk0qb3yon1a-wpengine.netdna-ssl.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/MCW.pdf

1. No Budget, No Pay - If Congress can't pass a budget and all annual spending bills on time, members of Congress should not get paid.

2. Up or Down Vote on Presidential Appointments - All presidential nominations should be confirmed or rejected within 90 days of the nomination.

3. Fix the Filibuster - Require real (not virtual) filibusters and end filibusters on motions to proceed.

4. Empower the Sensible Majority - Allow a bipartisan majority of members to override a leader or committee chair’s refusal to bring a bill to the floor.

5. Make Members Come to Work - Make Congress work on coordinated schedules with three five-day work weeks a month in DC and one week in their home district.

6. Question Time for the President - Provide a monthly forum for members of Congress to ask the president questions to force leaders to debate one another and defend their ideas.

7. Fiscal Report to Congress: Hear it. Read it. Sign it. - A nonpartisan leader should deliver an annual, televised fiscal update in-person to a joint session of Congress to ensure everyone is working off the same facts.

8. No Pledge but the Oath of Office - Members should make no pledge but the pledge of allegiance and their formal oath of office.

9. Monthly Bipartisan Gatherings - The House and Senate should institute monthly, off-the-record and bipartisan gatherings to get members talking across party lines.

10. Bipartisan Seating - At all joint meetings or sessions of Congress, each member should be seated next to at least one member of the other party.

11. Bipartisan Leadership Committee - Congressional party leaders should form a bipartisan congressional leadership committee to discuss legislative agendas and substantive solutions.

12. No Negative Campaigns Against Incumbents - Incumbents from one party should not conduct negative campaigns against sitting members of the opposing party.

Edwards (2011), a former Representative from Oklahoma, offers some suggestions designed to change our political system so that “people, not parties, control our government.”

1. Break the power of partisans to keep candidates off the general-election ballot, by having an open primary.

2. Turn over the process of redrawing congressional districts to independent, nonpartisan commissions.

3. Allow members of any party to offer amendments to any House bill and—with rare exceptions—put those amendments to a vote.

4. Change the leadership structure of congressional committees, by having a chairman from the majority party and a vice chairman from the minority; each with the authority to bring a bill forward and to invite expert witnesses to offer testimony.

5. Fill committee vacancies by lot, from among those seeking appointment, from *both* parties.

6. Have committee staff members selected by a nonpartisan House or Senate administrator, solely on the basis of professional qualifications, and obligated to serve all committee members equally without regard to party agenda.

These suggestions make a lot of sense. Unfortunately, Edwards does not deal with the Herculian task of how to get those in power to give it up. A necessary prerequisite would be to somehow create major changes in political financing (campaign, lobbying, etc.), although this brings to mind cleaning the Augean Stables. The present abysmal state of political financing is significantly a result of the 2010 Supreme Court decision (*Citizens United v. Federal Elections Commission*) that invited corporations to buy politicians and the government; however, financing was dysfunctional even before that decision (see, e.g., Francis Megahy’s 2009 film, *The Best Government Money Can Buy*).3

Edwards closes his article with an optimistic wish:

In a democracy that is open to intelligent and civil debate about competing ideas rather than programmed for automatic opposition to another party’s proposals, we might yet find ourselves able to manage the task of self-government.

Matthews (2013) draws four useful characteristics from the example of Democrat Speaker Tip O’Neill and Republican President Ronald Reagan, who worked together to preserve Social Security, enact tax reform, and enable the Anglo-Irish Agreement of 1985:

1. Both had real respect for voters

2. Each had respect for the other

3. Both believed in compromise

4. They were unafraid to talk and to agree

Campbell (2016) advocates and wishes for a new “approach and commitment to civics” that embodies these factors:

• Polarized Americans need to learn more restrained and respectful ways of engaging in political disagreements

• They need a bit more humility in their own views, understanding that they may not be 100% right all of the time and that well-intentioned, informed, and intelligent people may disagree with them.

• They should try to understand how the other side sees things

• They need a more accurate understanding that their views (and the views of many they associate with) may not be representative of the broader public

• They need to understand that compromise is a necessity in a popular government that is trying to represent millions of people with almost as many different views about public policies.

He recognizes that “getting people to handle political disagreements in even a slightly more mature way will not be easy. It may not even be possible.” He suggests that the most plausible vehicles for any success in this are the nation's mediating institutions—particularly those in journalism and education.

American politics could benefit greatly from more constructive mediating institutions that have credibility across the spectrum of mainstream political views and a renewed commitment to conveying and exhibiting proper perspectives on how to deal with political differences. In their present conditions, these mediating institutions have too often served as instruments and reinforcers of polarization and amateurish political dispositions.

Mann and Ornstein (2016) caution: “Finding a way to return to normality–two parties with distinct views and visions who operate with respect for political institutions, seeing the other side as worthy adversaries not enemies within, while battling tooth and nail over the nation’s direction, and finding, when problems loom, ways to get to yes–will not come easily or quickly.”

Levitsky and Ziblatt (2018) advocate:

We think it would be more valuable to focus on two underlying forces driving American polarization: racial and religious realignment and growing economic inequality. Addressing these social foundations, we believe, requires a reshuffling of what America's political parties stand for.

To save our democracy, Americans need to restore the basic norms that once protected it. But we must do more than that. We must extend those norms through the whole of a diverse society. We must make them truly inclusive. ... Now those norms must be made to work in an age of racial equality and unprecedented ethnic diversity. Few societies in history have managed to be both multiracial and genuinely democratic. That is our challenge. It is also our opportunity. If we meet it, America will truly be exceptional.

**What, Then, Might Individuals Do?**

I believe it is a waste of time to try to debate key political or social issues with “true believers,” i.e., individuals who believe their positions are the only ones that could possibly be correct. Dillard (2010) voices a similar view, noting that “the problem is that they have their minds made up and any alternative world view threatens theirs.” He concludes that trying to change opinions of such individuals “generally amounts to self-delusion, wasted time, and wasted effort.” Yet, the effects of such individuals and groups on elections and legal and political decisions are serious and can not be ignored. What to do? As Herbst (2011) says, “If we are to try and reform our political discourse ...we must develop a new model.” Here are a few preliminary ideas.

First and centrally, I believe it is important for each person to seek reliable facts and information about key issues and attempt to reach conclusions grounded in the data, using good critical thinking skills (some suggestions for obtaining good facts are given in Mitchell, 2020). Such conclusions should be verifiable and modifiable, open to new information and reexamination. Second, I believe it is important to have ongoing dialogue about key issues with others who care about valid information and seek to understand, rather than preach, proselyte, criticize, or demonize. In seeking participants in such dialogue, it is important to have a broad, vigorous range of points of view and to work continually to minimize *confirmation bias*4, the common tendency to seek out and favor sources and information that confirm our beliefs and positions.

Here are some suggestions for such dialogue, grounded in the pattern of reasoning and action designated as Model II by Argyris & Schön (1996).

1. Adopt as governing variables for the dialogue: (a) see others as striving to act with integrity, thinking in ways I may not understand, but, if I did, I might learn from; (b) promote exchange of relevant, valid information; (c) optimize free and informed conclusions and choices, plus continual monitoring of their validity.

2. Use as action strategies: (a) discover more productive ways of working together, building trust, improving communication, cooperation, and accountability; (b) optimize the exchange of: different relevant opinions and relevant facts, in ways that clearly separate facts and opinions; (c) ensure accountability and relevant, timely feedback.

3. Make use of practices such as: (a) encourage others to challenge my thinking and facts; (b) strive to understand others' concerns, doubts, and questions about my point of view; (c) help others articulate the thinking and facts behind their points of view; (d) share my concerns, doubts, and questions about other points of view, articulating my thinking and facts; (e) strive to do this in ways that minimize defensiveness without compromising clarity and completeness; (f) articulate disagreements, differences in thinking, facts, and dilemmas that need to be resolved before more cooperation is possible; (g) jointly search for ways to resolve disagreements, rectify differences in thinking and facts, and resolve dilemmas.

4. Use good critical thinking skills (see Appendix B)

5. Develop and use effective communication skills, particularly: (a) balancing advocacy with honest inquiry (see Appendix C for suggestions); (b) separating facts from opinions (Appendix D); and (c) giving and receiving feedback effectively (Appendix E).

Some of the consequences of dialogue of this quality are: (a) statements and processes are examined regularly and can be disconfirmed and corrected, (b) theories are tested publicly, (c) double-loop learning5 occurs, and (d) long-term effectiveness improves.

In addition, it is especially important to value and strive to act with integrity. This requires honesty, but much more, particularly doing the ongoing hard work of examining and reflecting on one’s beliefs and positions to discern what is morally “right.” This examination needs to consider the potential effects on others, and to avoid pursuing one’s self-interests at the expense of others; in other words, trying to live according to the classical dictum, “do no harm.” Integrity also requires courage to act on what one has finally discerned, even if personally difficult (see Appendix A for further discussion of integrity). Political discourse and decisions would be greatly enhanced if all parties did their best to act with integrity, in the sense used here, rather than merely espouse this.

Herbst (2011) offers the following suggestions that augment the preceding ones; it is worth reading her full article and related book (2010) for more depth:

1. Create a culture of listening. One of the things we seem unable to do is to listen, and truly open ourselves up, with the patience it takes to process information. Everyone wants to talk at once and be heard!

2. Advocate for rules of evidence. The single most problematic aspect of the internet, and our ability to be heard without gatekeepers, is the lack of argumentation rules. It seems that anyone can say anything, and have that picked up and repeated over and over, without critical oversight.

3. We need courage. ...being a citizen in a democracy has always demanded a sort of courage that few of us ever come to know. ...We want it to be easy, which is why social scientists find that most people hang out with those who share their beliefs. Few people argue with or seek others who might disagree.

She believes that at least part of a solution is to focus on younger generations, through education and other means. She suggests that, although older generations could possibly change, “it is far more likely that the high school and college students of today will navigate the new waters and develop the sort of discourse that might make America seem the humane, lively democracy envisioned so long ago.” However, it is unrealistic to hope that such changes would occur spontaneously. One of the difficult questions such a focus raises is, how would our educational systems need to change in order to help produce such a result?

I believe all of these suggestions can have benefits to individuals, even if the politics around them do not change. I have experienced benefits on a local scale from trying to use these suggestions in groups. One example is a small learning group that has been meeting a day each month for 25 years, with the same members. Although there is a wide range of political positions represented by the members, the vigorous dialogue and longevity are indications of value to the individuals and their thinking. If these suggestions can be effective on a local scale, is it practicable to create improvements on a larger, even national, scale? Is it possible to create and maintain a meaningful political space and processes that are governed by openness, freedom, and the kinds of other values represented by the upper middle of the political circle construct discussed earlier ?

It seems clear that this would require somehow transcending the ideologies at either extreme of the political spectrum. As the Democrat and Republican parties today become increasingly polarized, both becoming the advocates of expanding special interests, it is easy to become disillusioned by the lack of common purpose and lack of creative solutions for the central problems. We might be tempted to withdraw from public matters, relegating the fundamental responsibilities of democratic life to someone else. However, the need to transcend the ideological fixations of extreme political positions means that we must stay involved.

One way to stay involved is for various individuals and groups to create, initially on a local scale, entities in which human beings engage with each other in authentic, meaningful dialogue and debate, in which conflicts are managed effectively, and in which creative, integrative solutions are developed through collaboration by parties with differing interests and priorities. Within such groups, individuals could help each other act with integrity to create common purpose and joint action to manage issues. Nichols (2006) advocates a similar approach and suggests that “perhaps by seeking out such places of genuine community, authentic substructures within the necessarily inauthentic global totality, we can find opportunities to discover and nurture the genuine humanity within ourselves and our "neighbors" as a possible ground for engaging humanity on a universal, global scale.”

Hopefully, such localized entities could expand and eventually coalesce to have effects on a larger scale. This would require creating an organization with the ability to promote and support such learning and dialogue groups on a large scale. Doing so would be very challenging; however, if several highly respected leaders and/or organizations joined together in such an project, it could be possible. Such an organization would require private funds, and would need to develop models and best practices for productive group interactions, provide training for facilitators of local groups, and create structure to support and integrate local programs into a coherent, impactful movement.

I hope it is not overly optimistic to believe that such a movement will occur. In any event, we must try, for, as Herbst (2011) argues “self-rule is impossible without the bravery it takes to express opinions and do so civilly. The abilities to argue, to listen and create the nation together, are both foundational and non-negotiable.”

From Graziano (2016): The beauty of our democracy, our republic really, is that it is in our hands, the people, to ensure its survival and longevity. If we continue a trend of apathy and a blasé attitude towards our political process our democracy, our constitution, and our guiding principles will slowly be swept away under our noses and without a care because we allowed it to happen. America is an idea, and despite its flaws, we owe it to the idea, to the experiment, to continue the lifeblood of the quest of liberty and justice for all peoples. But this just doesn’t happen, the survival of our country and the ideas it is meant to stand for are not a sure thing. The people must ensure that it survives, and if the people want it to then they must vote. They must be involved in the poetical process, they must petition and write their congressmen, they must demand justice when they see otherwise. And when there is inaction, the response of the public must be so overwhelming that no official, no lobby, no corporate power anywhere will be able to deny the sheer strength and will of the people of this country.

**End Notes**

1. Speaking of the middle of the circle should not to be confused with charting a “middle road” politically.

2. It should be recognized that many of these terms have wide variations in meanings, as used by various individuals.

3. The problems with political financing have been addressed by many, including these books: *The Best Congress Money Can Buy* by Philip M. Stern (1988, rev. 1991), *The Best Democracy Money Can Buy* by Greg Palast (2004, rev. 2016), and *The Best Government Money Can Buy: Selling Out America* by Ernie Webb and Dorothy Hardy (2011).

4. “Confirmation bias,” a phenomenon studied by psychologists and cognitive researchers, is the common tendency of each of us to actively seek out and assign more weight to statements and data that confirm our beliefs and positions, and ignore or underweigh statements and data that could disconfirm these beliefs and positions.

5. The term “double-loop learning” was used by Argyris to contrast with “single-loop learning.” When there is a mismatch between intentions and the outcomes of some action, single-loop learning involves merely trying a different action and seeing whether there is a different outcome. Double-loop learning occurs when mismatches are corrected by first examining and altering the “governing variables” and then selecting new actions. Governing variables are the underlying beliefs and values that drive and guide individuals’ actions. They are often not the beliefs and values people espouse, but are the variables that can be inferred by observing their actual actions.

Argyris uses the illustration of a thermostat, which is a single-loop learner. It detects “too cold” or “too hot” and corrects the mismatch by turning the heat on or off. If it could explore why it was set at 68 degrees, or search for a more efficient way to maintain an appropriate temperature in the room, it would be engaged in double-loop learning.

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**Appendix A: Acting with Integrity**

This section is a brief summary of points made by Stephen Carter, in his excellent 1996 book and article. He believes that honesty is necessary but not sufficient for integrity. He argues that integrity requires three additional steps: discerning what is right and what is wrong; acting on what you have discerned, even at personal cost; and saying openly that you are acting on your understanding of right and wrong. (The rest of this appendix is in Carter’s words.)

The first criterion captures the idea that integrity requires a degree of moral reflectiveness. The second brings in the ideal of a person of integrity as courageous and steadfast, a quality that includes keeping one's commitments. The third reminds us that a person of integrity can be trusted and tries to do no harm.

The first point to understand about the difference between honesty and integrity is that a person may be entirely honest without ever engaging in the hard work of discernment that integrity requires: she may tell us quite truthfully what she believes without ever taking the time to figure out whether what she believes is good and right and true. If forthrightness is not preceded by discernment, it may result in the expression of an incorrect moral judgment. In other words, I may be honest about what I believe, but if I have never tested my beliefs, I may be wrong, i.e., the position in question is wrong if I would change my mind about it after hard moral reflection.

The problem that the manager faces is an enormous one in our practical politics, where having the dialogue that makes democracy work can seem impossible because of our tendency to cling to our views even when we have not examined them. As Jean Bethke Elshtain has said, borrowing from John Courtney Murray, our politics are so fractured and contentious that we often cannot even reach *disagreement.* Our refusal to look closely at our own most cherished principles is surely a large part of the reason. Socrates thought the unexamined life not worth living. But the unhappy truth is that few of us actually have the time for constant reflection on our views - on public or private morality. Examine them we must, however, or we will never know whether we might be wrong.

None of this should be taken to mean that integrity as I have described it presupposes a single correct truth. It is the case not that there aren't any right answers but that, given human fallibility, we need to be careful in assuming that we have found them

A further problem with too great an exaltation of honesty is that it may allow us to escape responsibilities that morality bids us bear. If honesty is substituted for integrity, one might think that if I say I am not planning to fulfill a duty, I need not fulfill it. But it would be a peculiar morality indeed that granted us the right to avoid our moral responsibilities simply by stating our intention to ignore them. Integrity does not permit such an easy escape.

That some societies in the world have worked out evidently functional structures of obligation without the need for promise or consent does not tell us what we should do. However, it serves as a reminder of the basic proposition that our existence in civil society creates a set of mutual responsibilities that philosophers used to capture in the fiction of the social contract. Nowadays, here in America, people seem to spend their time thinking of even cleverer ways to avoid their obligations, instead of doing what integrity commands and fulfilling them. And all too often honesty is their excuse.

**Appendix B: Critical Thinking**

“Critical thinking” involves being able to build and/or understand a reasoned argument, apply critical analysis and synthesis to communications (our own and those of others), consider and respond to alternative points of view, and develop a solid foundation for making personal choices about what to accept and what to reject.

Critical thinking is a complex set of skills that reverses what is natural and instinctive in human thought. The uncritical mind is unconsciously driven to identify truth in accordance with the following tacit maxims:

• “It’s true if I believe it.”

• “It’s true if we believe it.”

• “It’s true if we want to believe it.”

• “It’s true if it serves our vested interest to believe it.”

The critical mind consciously seeks the truth in accordance with the following

instinct-correcting maxims:

• “I believe it, but it may not be true.”

• “We believe it, but we may be wrong.”

• “We want to believe it, but we may be prejudiced by our desire.”

• “It serves our vested interest to believe it, but our vested interest has nothing to do with the truth.”

It is important to use good critical thinking when creating, sending, and receiving communications. Here are 12 questions that can help:

1. What is presented as data, what is analysis of data, and what are conclusions and/or opinions?

2. How good is the data (who/what are the sources)?

3. What are the reasons supporting the conclusions and opinions?

4. Are there any fallacies in the reasoning (see a list of some common types below)?

5. What are the assumptions, explicit and implicit?

6. What significant information is missing?

7. From whose point of view is this being reported?

8. What are the implicit value priorities and assumptions?

9. Which words or phrases are ambiguous, stereotypical, and/or emotionally loaded?

10. Are the statistics deceptive or misleading?

11. Are there rival causes, i.e., other explanations or interpretations of the evidence?

12. What other reasonable conclusions are possible (there may be multiple, competing possibilities and/or need for qualifiers)?

Some Common Fallacies To Avoid in Thinking and Advocating:

1. *Slippery Slope*: making the assumption that a proposed step will set off an uncontrollable chain of undesirable events, when procedures exist to prevent such a chain of events

2. *Insisting on a Perfect Solution:* falsely assuming that because part of a problem would remain, the solution should not be adopted

3. *Equivocation:* a key word is used with two or more meanings in an argument such that the argument fails to make sense once the shifts in meaning are recognized

4. *Appeal to Popularity (Ad populum):* falsely assumes that something favored by a large group is desirable

5. *Appeal to Questionable Authority:* citing an authority who lacks special expertise on the issue at hand

6. *Appeals to Emotions:* using emotionally charged language to distract from relevant reasons and evidence

7. *Straw Person:* distorting one’s opponent’s point of view so that is it easy to attack

8. *Attacks:* attacking a person or a person’s background, instead of the person’s ideas

9. *Either-Or:* assuming only two alternatives

10. *Wishful Thinking:* making the faulty assumption that, because we wish X were true or false, then X is indeed true or false

11. *Explaining by Naming:* falsely assuming that because you have provided a name for some event or behavior that you have also adequately explained the event

12. *Glittering Generality:* use of vague emotionally appealing virtue words that dispose us to approve something without closely examining the reasons

13. *Red Herring:* an irrelevant topic is presented to divert attention from the main issue

14. *Begging the Question:* an argument in which the conclusion is assumed in the reasoning.

15. *Hasty Generalization:* drawing a conclusion about a large group based on experiences with only a few members

16. *Source Cultural Bias:* ignoring the inherent cultural differences in what is considered important information, what should be stressed, and what should be omitted.

17. *Faulty Analogy:* using an analogy in which there are important relevant dissimilarities

18. *Causal Oversimplification:* explaining an event by relying on causal factors that are insufficient to account for the event or by overemphasizing the role of one or most of these factors

19. *Confusion of Cause and Effect:* confusing the cause with the effect of an event or failing to recognize that the two events may be influencing each other

20. *Neglect of a Common Cause:* failure to recognize that two events may be related because of the effects of a common third factor

21. *Post Hoc:* assuming that a particular event, B, is caused by another event, A, simply because B follows A in time.

\* The preceding points in this section were adapted from (a) Browne & Keeley (2012), Elder & Paul (2008), Paul & Elder (2004), and FAIR (2012).

A complement to these fallacies in reasoning is provided by Albert Hirschman (*The Rhetoric of Reaction*, Harvard University Press, 1991). He identified the major polemical postures typically used by those opposed to changes, and categorized them under three principal reactionary theses, which were introduced early in this essay::

*- Perversity* thesis: any purposive action to improve some feature of the political, social, or economic order only serves to exacerbate the condition one wishes to remedy

- *Futility* thesis: attempts at social transformation will be unavailing; they will simply fail to “make a dent.”

- *Jeopardy* thesis: the cost of the proposed change or reform is too high as it endangers some previous, precious accomplishment.

Later in the book (which Hirschman wanted to rename *The Rhetoric of Intransigence*), he expands these theses to pairs of extreme statements in a highly polarized debate, that are “badly in need, under most circumstances, of being qualified, mitigated, or otherwise amended.” We can see some of these positions in current political battles.

*Perversity-Reactionary:* The contemplated action will bring disastrous consequences.

*Perversity-Progressive:* Not to take the contemplated action will bring disastrous consequences.

*Futility-Reactionary:* The contemplated action attempts to change permanent structural characteristics ("laws") of the social order; it is therefore bound to be wholly ineffective and futile.

*Futility-Progressive:* The contemplated action is backed up by powerful historical forces that are already "on the march"; opposing them would be utterly futile.

*Jeopardy-Reactionary:* The new reform will jeopardize an older one.

*Jeopardy-Progressive:* The new and the old reforms will mutually reinforce each other.

**Appendix C: Advocacy & Inquiry**

Unfortunately, most of us, most of the time, communicate in ways that are prone to error and that do not provide ways of detecting or correcting the errors. There seldom is sufficiently complete, precise, relevant, timely, verifiable communication about important issues - among the individuals who need to deal with the issues.

Reliable, productive communication requires a combination of ***advocacy*** and ***inquiry***, plus skill in using each effectively. “Advocacy” is used here to mean advocating a position, arguing for it, and arguing against other positions or points of view. “Inquiry” refers to asking questions with a sincere desire to understand another person’s position or point of view, its implications, as the other person sees it, and his/her reasons for that position. Inquiry is *not* asking perfunctory or rhetorical questions for effect, or trick questions to put the other person on the defensive

One of the primary causes for communication errors is that we tend to devote most of our talk to advocating a position and repeatedly arguing for it against competing positions, and do relatively little inquiry regarding the meanings and reasoning of others. We also tend to do too little inquiry regarding reactions to our own comments, to ensure that we and the others in a dialogue share the same understanding about what is being communicated, and to provide a basis for dealing with differences in positions. Increasing the amount and effectiveness of honest, sincere inquiry is a very important way of reducing errors in and improving the effectiveness of two-way communication.

**Appendix D: Separating Facts from Opinions**

It is important in any group and/or organization to establish and maintain a reliable exchange of valid and verifiable information about important problems and issues. This requires the ability to distinguish between facts and opinions. Communication errors occur when (a) opinions are given that are not accompanied by facts, (b) opinions are treated as facts, or (c) facts are treated as opinions.

Facts are data and accurate observations. A *description* of an observation is a (hopefully objective and reasonably accurate) report of what was said and done during a particular event or experience. Opinions explain, predict, evaluate, infer, and attribute things about events or behavior. An *inference* is a conclusion about what happened, derived from beliefs or what are thought to be facts. An *attribution* is an ascribed, inferred, or assumed cause, characteristic, or motive of another person. An *evaluation* is a judgment about the value or "goodness" of a statement or action by another person (and frequently takes the form of a generalized evaluation of the value or goodness/badness of that person).

Individuals select and process certain aspects of an event or issue, and introduce external elements or opinions into their processing, with the result affecting their thinking, feeling, and interactions. These external elements lead to inferences, attributions, and evaluations that may have considerable error relative to facts about the issue and/or objective descriptions of the specific events. The further an individual moves or extrapolates from the facts, the greater is the potential error.

Separating opinions from facts can help individuals recognize the kinds of inferences they are making, the assumptions implicit in these inferences, the conclusions they lead to, and the effects that acting on these assumptions and inferences have in specific situations. Doing so can help individuals improve their interactions as they send and receive communications.

**Appendix E: Effective Feedback**

Feedback can provide learning opportunities for each of us if we can use the observations and reactions of others to become more aware of the consequences of our behavior. Personal feedback can help us become more aware of what we do, how we do it, and how it affects others - which can help us modify behaviors and become more effective in our interactions with others. Giving and receiving feedback requires understanding, courage, skill, and respect for self and others.

We will be more effective in giving feedback when we:

1. Are specific, rather than general

2. Deal with descriptions of observed behavior of the receiver, rather than inferences, attributions, or evaluations (and focus the descriptions in terms of "more or less" rather than "either-or")

3. “Own” the feedback by reporting our reactions and the impact on us, rather than labeling the characteristic or attributing intentions of the receiver (e.g., use "I-statements," e.g., “When you (said or did)\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_, I felt \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_, because \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_”)

4. Provide feedback that is verifiable (e.g., include specific examples) to allow the receiver to verify whether the feedback data accurately represent events and behaviors

5. Acknowledge the receiver's freedom of choice about making changes, rather than pressure her/him to accept the feedback and change

6. Check to make sure the receiver understands your message in the way you intend it. Use an effective communication process that checks for understanding by the receiver

7. Sincerely intend to be helpful, rather than to correct, belittle, or punish.

***Some suggestions when receiving feedback***:

\* Try to hear, inquire, and understand the feedback you receive - and resist the natural tendency to explain or rationalize the behavior at issue

\* Summarize your understanding of the feedback you receive and verify that you understood what the other person meant

\* Share your thoughts and feelings about the feedback

