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A House Divided

What Would We Have to Give Up to Get the Political System We Want?



Summary

Option 1:

Reduce dangerous, toxic talk.

The problem is that the way we talk is poisoning public life. The “outrage industry” rewards people for saying and doing the most extreme things. Public figures vie for attention on TV and online. Fringe groups feel empowered to spread their hate and conspiracy theories. The lines between news, opinion, and entertainment are erased. We don’t know whom to believe anymore. And if people say the “wrong thing,” they are attacked because they were not “politically correct.” News networks and social media must do much more to control hate speech. We need to stop rewarding outrage and bring back common sense.

A Primary Drawback

This gives media and internet decision-makers enormous power to determine what people can say about each other or about public issues. Who gets to decide what’s “outrageous” and what’s not?

POSSIBLE ACTIONS

Facebook and other social media platforms and internet service providers should kick out users who use slurs or profanity or threaten physical violence.

Require all television networks to provide opposing views on controversial issues.

Make websites and television stations liable for allowing ads that make unproven or false charges about political candidates.

Protect freedom of speech on college campuses by protecting professors, students, and speakers who espouse unpopular or “politically incorrect” views.

What else?

DRAWBACKS

Internet companies could become the “language police,” threatening people’s right to express themselves freely.

This reduces complex debates to “pro” and “con” voices and means that important voices may never be heard.

This would unleash a flood of lawsuits from every frustrated politician.

Students can’t learn and thrive in a disrespectful atmosphere where they feel threatened and undermined.

The trade-off?

Summary

Option 2:

Make fairer rules for politics and follow them.

The problem is that wealthy, powerful special interests game the political system, making it impossible to find compromise. Candidates play to their bases rather than trying to reach a broader range of people. The flood of money into campaigns and lobbying gives too much power to special interests. The major political parties redraw election districts to their advantage, which means more partisanship in Washington, DC. Elected officials leave Congress and join multimillion dollar lobbying firms, giving their clients access and power not available to ordinary people. It's time to reduce the power of money in politics, correct the flaws in our system that reward such extreme partisanship, and restore the tradition of compromise that has served this nation well in the past.

A Primary Drawback

This may do too much to limit the ability of Americans to fight for their principles and give too much power to those who don't seem to care enough to vote and participate. This option focuses on compromise and changing the rules, but doesn't our system need more fundamental changes?

POSSIBLE ACTIONS

Remove the burdensome registration and scheduling barriers that make voting difficult for so many Americans. Too many people are being shut out.

Revise the 1965 Voting Rights Act to forbid new laws or requirements that could make it harder for minorities or poor people to vote.

Create nonpartisan commissions to draw election districts based on population patterns so politicians don't design them to favor their own party.

Strictly limit how much outside groups and individuals can contribute to candidates and PACs, even by Constitutional amendment if necessary.

What else?

DRAWBACKS

This makes voting more like a choice than the duty it is. These requirements protect us against voter fraud and manipulation.

Limiting requirements like showing a photo ID could leave the voting system vulnerable to manipulation or fraud.

In some legislative districts, minority groups would lose power.

This would limit the ability of all kinds of groups and donors to participate, including those fighting for causes and candidates we ourselves support.

The trade-off?

Summary

Option 3:

Take control and make decisions closer to home.

The problem is that our most important decisions are being made too far away from home. And when the national government is embroiled in political infighting, problems go unsolved. It's time to put decision-making back in the hands of people who live and work closely together, share goals and values, and can act quickly. Communities across the nation, frustrated by inaction in Washington, already are moving to address problems they're familiar with at the ground level.

A Primary Drawback

This will result in different protections and standards across the country and produce a patchwork of rules on major national challenges such as infrastructure, environmental protection, and immigration. We are one country. Don't we need a united approach to urgent problems rather than a piecemeal one?

POSSIBLE ACTIONS

Dramatically reduce cumbersome federal regulations on the environment, energy, and transportation. Local residents have a much better understanding of what their communities need.

Give states money without restrictions for major federal programs such as Medicaid and education so states can adapt them to fit their own needs.

Local governments should rely much more on community groups, organizations, and churches to address issues like crime, health, and welfare.

Return full control and funding of K-12 public education to local communities and the states so residents can determine what's best for their own children.

What else?

DRAWBACKS

We will never get improvements in the environment, energy, and transportation with individual states going every which way.

Basics such as food, shelter, high-quality education, and essential health care should be available to all Americans, no matter where they live. This would turn these decisions over to local politicians.

Vulnerable Americans could suffer in communities that do not have the resources or willingness to take on these problems.

Federal grants help schools with low-income students, and some communities may have to raise property taxes to close the gap.

The trade-off?

The National Issues Forums

The National Issues Forums (NIF) is a network of organizations that bring together citizens around the nation to talk about pressing social and political issues of the day. Thousands of community organizations, including schools, libraries, churches, civic groups, and others, have held forums designed to give people a public voice in the affairs of their communities and their nation.

Forum participants engage in deliberation, which is simply weighing options for action against things held commonly valuable. This calls upon them to listen respectfully to others, sort out their views in terms of what they most value, consider courses of action and their disadvantages, and seek to identify actionable areas of common ground.

Issue guides like this one are designed to frame and support these conversations. They present varying perspectives on the issue at hand, suggest actions to address identified problems, and note the trade-offs of taking those actions to remind participants that all solutions have costs as well as benefits.

In this way, forum participants move from holding individual opinions to making collective choices as members of a community—the kinds of choices from which public policy may be forged or public action may be taken at community as well as national levels.

Forum Questionnaire

If you participated in this forum, please fill out a questionnaire, which is included in this issue guide or can be accessed online at www.nifi.org/questionnaires. If you are filling out the enclosed questionnaire, please return the completed form to your moderator or to the National Issues Forums Institute, 100 Commons Road, Dayton, Ohio 45459.

If you moderated this forum, please fill out a Moderator Response sheet, which is online at www.nifi.org/questionnaires.

Other Topics and Ordering Information

Recent topics in this series include the opioid epidemic, immigration, safety and justice, economic security, energy, and end-of-life issues.

For more information, please visit www.nifi.org.

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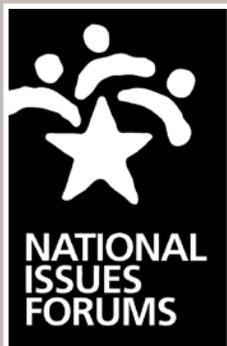
National Issues Forums Institute

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