



Civic Caucus

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America's Political Process Position Report

## AMERICA'S POLITICAL PROCESS IS IN GRAVE DANGER

America's widely admired democracy is showing signs of serious decay at the very time the US is working to assist in promoting democratic societies throughout the world and especially in Islamic nations. What these other nations are seeing in the US threatens to undermine our basic foreign policy and, even more importantly, the fundamental democratic system in the US.

Those who have been following the U.S. political process have ample justification to be alarmed at the trends. This, for example, is what we are seeing:

**1. Voter turnout is low**— Voter turnout in elections has been declining steadily since the 1960s.

Turnout was nearly 65 percent of the adult population in the 1960 presidential election and stood at only 51 percent in 2000. In 2002, turnout was 39 percent in the November election and a mere 18 percent in the congressional primaries. This negative trend was reversed in the 2004 presidential election. Nevertheless, dramatic differences in voter turnout in 2004 were evident in different segments of the population. For example, fewer than one-fourth of persons with less than a 9th grade education voted, compared to three-fourths of persons with college degrees.

**2 . Citizen interest in elections is dropping**— Fewer and fewer potential voters are watching presidential debates on TV, dropping from 60 percent of US households in 1960 to below 30 percent in 2000. None of the presidential debates in the 2000 presidential election was broadcast in prime time with the result that fewer than two million viewers watched the average debate, which is only a fifth of the audience of a typical prime-time broadcast program.

**3. Negative advertising is increasing**— Negative advertising in campaigns has nearly tripled since 1960, accounting for more than half the ads featured in most presidential and congressional campaigns.

**4. Press coverage is more negative** —When John F. Kennedy and Richard Nixon sought the presidency in 1960, 75 percent of their coverage was favorable. By the late 1980s, presidential

coverage was mostly unfavorable and has remained so. On evening newscasts during the 2000 election campaign, George W. Bush's coverage was 63 percent negative while Al Gore's was 60 percent negative.

**5. The nature of journalistic reporting has changed** — The descriptive style of journalism, in which journalists told the audience what newsmakers had said and done, was poorly suited to television. By the 1980s interpretative reporting, in which journalists explained the "why" not just the "what" of events, had displaced descriptive reporting. This change inevitably produces expression of opinion by writers and broadcasters.

**6. Political party platforms have changed** — Political party platforms formerly consisted of broad statements of principle. For example, the 1948 Democratic and Republican party platforms were less than 3000 words in length. By the 1980s they had exceeded 20,000 words, catering to nearly every voting group.

**7. Campaigns are too lengthy** — The length of modern day campaigning is turning voters off. In earlier years the candidates normally began campaigning following the party conventions. Voter polls show that voters regard campaigns today as theater or entertainment rather than something to be taken seriously. Most political messages far in advance of an election are targeted at voters not yet ready to seriously tune in.

**8. Current approaches for establishing boundaries of congressional districts give enormous advantages to incumbents** — The power of congressional incumbency has become all but impossible to overcome. The number of competitive districts in the US House of Representatives has been reduced to fewer than 10 percent. In the 2004 election only seven congressional incumbents were defeated. And four of these were in gerrymandered districts. The result is the effective disenfranchisement of more than 90 percent of the voters. In most states the process of setting district boundaries enables US House members to choose their voters, rather than voters choosing House members. A few states have assigned the reapportionment responsibility to judicial commissions. Such a proposal is on the California ballot this fall.

**9. The nominating process is more and more automatic** — The political party process for nominating candidates for Congress has become increasingly automatic. The participation level, the financial advantage of incumbency, and the need for party endorsement have all but made it impossible to replace a member of Congress and have rendered the independent voter all but powerless.

**10. Extreme views on the left and right are dominant** — Trends in the political process all but preclude the nomination and election of candidates other than those with views on either the far right or the far left, making compromise all but unattainable, and resulting in increased and dangerous polarization and paralysis of the legislative process. This produces congressional incumbents who cater to single purpose and special interests to the detriment of the general interest.

**11. Expenses for political campaigns have increased dramatically** —In 2004 the total price of presidential and congressional elections was at least \$4 billion, according to the Center for Responsive Politics, a non-partisan research group that tracks money in politics and its effect on elections and public policy. In 2000, the price was \$3 billion; in 1996, \$2.2 billion, and in 1992, \$1.8 billion. The more money that is involved in running for office, critics say, the more influence that interest groups and wealthy individuals have over elected officials and public policy.

**12. Political Action Committees (PACs) have proliferated**— The influence of Political Action Committees (PACs) has grown dramatically to the point of approaching domination of political campaigns. The number grew, for example, from 400 to 4,000 within a decade, with up to 85 percent of PAC money ending up in the campaign funds of incumbents.

**13. Congressional staffs have grown**— Congressional staffs have grown significantly over the years with an estimated more than 50 percent devoted to public relations, constituency service and other activities that serve primarily to keep congressmen in office.

**14. Earlier primaries are diminishing the role of most voters in selecting nominees**— The trend to earlier and earlier presidential primaries has effectively disenfranchised the majority of voters as well as negatively influencing upcoming congressional races. Key early primaries effectively determine the outcome, making subsequent primaries of little significance. Not since 1980, for example, has a presidential candidate who raised the most money before the New Hampshire and Iowa primaries lost the nomination. Correspondingly, turnout in the later primaries was a third lower than in the earliest primaries.

**15. Elected office is becoming lifetime office**— In contrast to earlier years in our democracy, when individuals first established their careers and then gave part time later years to public service, today we are seeing a dramatic increase in full time service together with lifetime careers as members of Congress. Although we have term limits for President and for many governors, we have none for Congress. This trend of full and long time service has caused multiple inadequacies in our system. Statesmanship has become the exception rather than the norm.

**16. Committee chairs are enormously powerful**— The length of service as committee chairs in congress had made for an imbalance of power and has all but rendered junior members powerless. Their impact too frequently is primarily related to rewards for following the leadership.

**17. Special interest legislation is growing rapidly**— The degree of so called "pork" legislation—rewarding members of congress for projects in their home districts in return for party loyalty— has grown by leaps and bounds in recent years to the point where it becomes a trading device and has contributed to excessive governmental expenditures for less than worthy projects. For example, the 2006 transportation legislation totaled \$24 billion dollars, up dramatically from earlier years. "Pork" legislation totaled \$6.4 billion in 1998 and \$9.4 billion in 1999.

**18. Numbers of single-issue voters are growing—** The Federal government has so broadened its scope and impact over the years that today a high proportion of voters have a significant pecuniary interest in the decisions of congress. This dependence has promoted a tendency to become single issue voters, supplemented by the formation of political organizations who lobby for these special interests. Passage of unencumbered general purpose legislation has become the exception rather than the rule.

**19. Balanced budgets in the federal government are disappearing—** The above cited pressures and trends have made it exceedingly difficult for the President to present a balanced budget and even more challenging for Congress to adopt one. Most people now consider our total federal deficit, and the recent trends, to be unsound and leading to serious problems in the future.

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At the very moment of greatest urgency our public leaders appear oblivious to the problem or they are paralyzed to do much about it. It is imperative that someone must "seize the moment" by placing priority on this vital issue. Common Cause, a national citizens organization, has been pushing for change. Yet, we see little evidence that other organizations are doing much to build momentum for the urgently needed improvements in the process.

It is in this vein that the Civic Caucus will be placing its highest priority over the coming months on creating a sense of understanding, urgency and momentum for improvement of the national government. Many of the problems also apply to state and local government.

We have developed the preceding preliminary list of the key symptoms causing concern and the adverse impact they appear to be having on our democratic process. The potential cures listed below include those most commonly suggested. We intentionally have not yet given them consideration nor drawn conclusions.

We will begin our process over the next several months by hearing from experienced thought leaders, primarily former public officials from both political parties.

This document is being prepared for the purpose of stimulating thought and directing the focus of these sessions. The document, currently in preliminary form, will be sent in advance to each invited thought leader, seeking their views on the critical areas most in need of improvement, the degree of urgency, the practicability of implementation and whether these thought leaders will join in this initiative. We then will consider next steps for the Civic Caucus.

## THE POTENTIAL CURES

Many cures have been proposed in recent years. We list below, in no particular order, the most prominently mentioned of these. It is important to stress that we as a caucus have not begun to select and prioritize among the potential cures. Following is a list of the most mentioned:

- 1. Shift responsibility for redistricting?**— Congress could require states to create independent judicial commissions to redraw Congressional districts once each decade. It is intolerable that those directly impacted by the result likewise have the greatest influence on the decision.
- 2 . Limit frequency of redistricting?** —Redrawing boundaries more frequently than once every ten years could be prohibited.
- 3. Require more competitive districts?** —To reduce the advantage that incumbents currently have over challengers, a key criteria in redistricting could be to create as many competitive districts as possible.
- 4. Add new provisions to redistricting?**— Proportional representation and multimember districts could be allowed when redrawing congressional districts.
- 5 . Set time limits on campaign spending?**— A time limit could be placed on the number of days before an election that campaign advertising and promotion dollars can be spent.
- 6. Limit dollars spent on campaigns?**— A dollar limit could be placed on how much candidates, political parties, and committees can spend during the permitted time period.
- 7. Limit special interest political spending?**— The amount of money that special interest groups can spend on political activities could be significantly restricted.
- 8. Extend House terms?**— House of Representative terms could be extended to four years, with one-half of the House being up for election every two years (just as one-third of the Senate is now).
- 9. Impose term limits?**— The number of terms a person can serve as a member of Congress could be limited.
- 10. Change Congressional fringe benefits?**— Congressional health and retirement benefits could be changed to mirror those of other persons on the federal payroll.
- 11. Establish a national presidential primary?** —A national primary could replace the existing systems of primaries and caucuses used in the various states to select delegates to the national conventions.
- 12. Require proportional distribution of electors?**— The system of choosing Presidential electors could be changed from winner-take-all in a state to a proportional distribution of electors based on the actual vote.

**13. Enact direct election of the President?**— The system of choosing electors could be replaced by direct election.

**14. Permit same day registration?**— Voters could be allowed to register near or on the same day as they vote, as several states now permit.

**15. Enact second choice voting?** —Voters could be allowed to indicate their second choices.

**16. Allow stay-at-home voting?** —Voters could be allowed to vote from home by computer or phone.

**17. Eliminate or modify cloture?** —A Senate rule requiring a 60 percent majority to agree to vote on a given piece of legislation or Presidential appointments could be eliminated or modified.

**18. Restrict actions of committee chairs?** —Actions that a chair can take without approval of a majority of the committee could be limited.

**19. Give some subpoena authority to the minority?** —Minority members of congressional committees could be given some authority to subpoena witnesses.

**20. Require a balanced budget?** —Congress could be required to adopt a balanced budget each year. Exceptions to a balanced budget could be limited to times of war or national recession, with a two-thirds vote being required in both Houses to approve such deviations.

Even more effective and creative cures can be found to again assure that our democratic process becomes an inspiring witness to how a free society should function. We are confident, that, out of this process, they will come.