

Why is America so dysfunctional? (from October 28, 2013)

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By Jim Nowlan

*I write a column for the Oriental Morning Post in Shanghai, one of China's leading newspapers. I try to explain our system to the paper's upscale readers. Here is my recent take on American political dysfunction. This is edited down, as the Chinese paper likes long columns.*

Political pundits in America are working overtime to explain the dysfunction that has infected American politics and government. The blame, or credit in the eyes of some, for the recent shutdown of much of American government, focuses on the informal minority in Congress known as the Tea Party. Yet the context is more complex.

First, conflict is natural in our system. Indeed, we wouldn't need a legislative branch if everyone were in agreement as to how to govern, how to distribute government tax revenues among programs for the nation's citizens.

Resolving that conflict is what we elect our lawmakers and president as well as state and local officials to do.

But since the 1960s, the conflict between basically "big government" versus "small government" supporters has become increasingly intense, indeed bitter.

The immediate focus is on the 30-40 Republican members of the U.S. House of Representatives (total of 435 members; Republicans hold 234 seats) who are associates of the informal Tea Party.

There are another 100+ Republicans who are almost as conservative and fear they would be targeted for defeat in next spring's primary elections if they failed to back the Tea Party position, which brought about the shut-down.

In this space in 2010, I did a column on the Tea Party based on my interviews with a several activists from the Moline-Rock Island area. Those I talked with were all white, polite, articulate and probably above average in income.

They expressed deep frustration with big government, which now takes about 40 percent of all income in national, state and local taxes, and deficit spending.

The Tea Party members want a revolution of sorts, based largely on the premise that government is a failure. They insist on tax reductions; elimination of special interests; the deportation of 11 million illegal immigrants, and the sacredness of gun ownership, among other positions.

I might agree with some of their core beliefs, but apostasy on any one of them means you are not a Tea Partier and must be exorcised from government office.

Tea Partiers and those sympathetic to them represent roughly one-third of the American electorate, but they are the majority in many southern and Rocky Mountain state congressional districts.

Many of America's political pundits think the issues that have bred such intense, non-negotiable conflict in our political system are larger than the Tea Party.

Steven Strauss of Harvard has written the most cogent assessment of the causes of American polarization that I have seen.

Strauss identifies several factors. First, the media have changed from a relatively few major newspaper and television sources that decades ago provided somewhat balanced news narrative.

Today, numerous cacophonous electronic outlets tailor their content to ideological audiences of the Right or Left, respectively. In other words, people can listen to news that plays to their biases, and this strengthens a person's commitments to either the Right or Left.

Second, the way states redistrict legislative seats every ten years tends to make most districts safe for either Republicans or Democrats.

This means that most members of Congress are less worried about attracting the moderate middle voter than they are protecting themselves from the ideological Right (Republicans) or Left (Democrats) within their respective parties.

Third, the U.S. Supreme Court in the recent *Citizens United* case confirmed that money is speech. Thus money cannot be limited in politics because of the free speech guarantee in the U.S. Constitution.

In part as a result of that decision, huge amounts of money, largely but not solely from wealthy individuals, has been pouring into new groups that support candidates and causes of the Right and the Left.

Finally, Strauss says that Americans today lack a "shared context." Earlier generations all suffered through the Depression of the 1930s or shared the sacrifices made in World War. Recently, however, only a relatively few Americans have participated in the all-volunteer armies sent to Iraq and Afghanistan.

What to do? Reform groups in several states are working to change the way legislative districts are drawn, so that candidates would be more likely to have to seek moderate votes in competitive districts.

A "grand bargain" between the political parties is needed to deal with the really big problems of debt, balancing the budget, Social Security and Medicare.

Without such action soon, America's decline at home and abroad will continue.