

Crossing the aisle: The most profound change

From the Editors in the [February 26, 2008](#) issue

Part of the success of Mike Huckabee's and Barack Obama's presidential campaigns has been their promise of transcending partisan politics. Huckabee talks of wanting to "make Americans, once again, more proud to be Americans than just to be Democrats or Republicans." Obama invokes a vision of "one nation" that is more than "a collection of red states and blue states." It's time, Obama repeatedly says, "to move beyond the bitterness and the pettiness and the anger that has consumed Washington."

Talk of reducing partisan wrangling may be little more than a pious campaign wish. Nevertheless, the task of reducing partisanship has become a political necessity in an era when neither party has a filibuster-proof or veto-proof majority. Without some advances in bipartisan legislating, the nation ends up tabling its most pressing problems, as it did recently when Congress failed to do anything to reform the immigration system or Social Security. A nation in which politicians are more interested in honing their reputation as hardline conservatives or liberals than in finding proximate solutions to crises in immigration, Social Security, the environment and health care is a nation that is in danger of becoming ungovernable.

Partisanship is now hardwired into the political system. Congress often meets for only a few days each week—not enough time for legislators to get to know the issues or one another in depth, as happened in previous eras. Single-issue advocacy groups skillfully press their causes and tolerate no deviations from their point of view. A 24-hour news cycle keeps the focus on politics as ideological warfare. And with most congressional districts jerrymandered to ensure that one party or the other has a firm grip on the seat, legislators have little incentive to reach across the aisle.

With this dismal pattern in mind, a group of former senators, Republicans and Democrats including such respected figures as David Boren, Sam Nunn and John

Danforth, convened in January to call for a “government of national unity.” Among their ideas for breaking the gridlock: ask presidential candidates to pledge that they will name figures from the opposing party to their cabinet. Think of a Democratic president appointing a Republican as secretary of state, or a Republican picking a Democrat to be secretary of health and human services.

As dramatic as such steps would be, overcoming the reflexive machinery of partisanship will require even more creative measures. Whoever becomes president in 2009 will probably have been subjected to months of vilification. The attacks will increase with every passing month of the new administration. If the next president is truly interested in bipartisan success, he or she will need to seize the weeks between Election Day and Inauguration Day to inject a new tone and start mobilizing a centrist coalition on key pieces of legislation. In a campaign year in which all the candidates tout themselves as agents of change, that change would be the most profound.