

Virtue politics

by [John Buchanan](#) in the [November 25, 2015](#) issue



Former U.S. senator John Danforth. Thinkstock.

When former Republican senator John Danforth came to Chicago recently, I was part of a group that talked with him about religion and politics. Danforth is an Episcopal priest who served three terms in the United States Senate from Missouri and was the United States representative to the United Nations. In his first book, *Faith and Politics*, he wrote about the emergence of the religious right as a force in U.S. politics and in his own party in the '80s. In a new book, *The Relevance of Religion: How Faithful People Can Change Politics*, he analyzes current political gridlock and suggests that the churches can effect positive change.

As Danforth spoke, I thought about how rare his brand of Republicanism is now—the Republicanism of Dwight Eisenhower, William Scranton, Nelson Rockefeller, Charles Percy, and Richard Lugar. Many of these Republicans were able to reach across the aisle and collaborate with Democrats. The Civil Rights Act of 1964, for instance, could not have passed without the support of Everett Dirksen, the conservative Republican senator from Illinois.

But today, says Danforth, the right wing of his party calls him a RINO, or “Republican In Name Only.” He believes that American politics is broken because of an ideological divide not only between the two parties but within the Republican Party. The Freedom Caucus, a group of 40 ultraconservative Republican congressional representatives, is holding Congress and the nation hostage by insisting on having

its own way on matters of budget and fiscal policy.

What is missing in the current equation, Danforth said, is the virtue of putting the common good above personal gain. Our first four presidents thought this virtue was central to democracy. James Madison thought that even the finest political system in the world could not survive without it. But the last time this virtue was mentioned in political rhetoric, Danforth said, was in John Kennedy's inaugural statement: "Ask not what your country can do for you—ask what you can do for your country." Instead of the common good, today's politics focuses on personal gain, typically in a promise to lower taxes regardless of the consequences.

Virtue creates the climate in which compromise can happen. Nobody gets everything he or she wants but things get done, progress is made, and ideological gridlock and its consequences are avoided.

I was encouraged when Danforth said that the churches are the one place in American culture where virtue can be taught. He suggested that vital faith communities have "gifts" to give to America. Religion keeps politics in proper perspective and teaches that political positions are not ultimate truth. Faith communities know that the greatest good and the deepest happiness is to give and not to get, and that personal gain is always secondary to the common good.

Finally, our faith communities exist because their members believe that religion is communal by nature, not individualistic, and therefore they create the environment in which compromise can happen.