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Breaking the Political Deadlock?

Albert Myers, Moderator

How Not to Compromise

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1 As high-stakes fiscal showdowns have become a constant feature of our national
2 politics, calls for compromise have come from every corner and are growing louder.
3 But political compromise, to paraphrase Mark Twain, is a bit like the weather:
4 while everyone talks about it, no one does anything about it.

5 Maybe that's because we're confused about how we should compromise. It's
6 certainly true that we live in an overly polarized political culture and that governing
7 requires more than the base-pleasing demonization and posturing that feeds
8 campaigns. What we need now, though, is not compromise for its own sake; it's
9 *smarter* compromise. And that means two things: finding a real middle in
10 negotiations (it's not where Washington thinks it is) and getting politicians to yield
11 on matters of principle.

12 Many pundits presume that compromise means splitting the difference between
13 extremes. But to find the real middle, we have to distinguish between *mean* and
14 *median*. The mean is what we usually call the average: add up all the points along a
15 spectrum and divide by the number of points. Modern politics, unfortunately, has
16 become about chasing the mean, which means that if one side's outliers becomes far
17 more extreme than the other's, then over time what counts as average (or centrist)
18 drifts in that direction. This is what happened when the Tea Party pulled the GOP
19 rightward — and many Democrats allowed the center to be reset accordingly.

20 The median, by contrast, is the point on the spectrum at which half the people can
21 be found on one side and half on the other. It yields a very different result — one
22 less distorted by outlier opinions, more truly representative of the middle and thus a
23 more democratic basis for compromise. Following the median is what our politics
24 could use more of. The median public view on responsible gun laws, for instance, is

25 further to the left than the mean is. The same is true for cutting entitlement
26 programs, as President Obama is quite aware. But the median view on whether the
27 federal government threatens individual liberties appears further to the right than
28 the mean does.

29 Properly setting the midpoint for any compromise is only half the challenge. The
30 other half is rejecting the belief that compromise is inherently suspect because it
31 waters down a morally pure position. The president of Emory University, James
32 Wagner, recently cited the Constitution's three-fifths provision — in which slaves
33 were counted as three-fifths of a person — as a model of compromise that today's
34 leaders could emulate. Outrage ensued, Wagner recanted, and the lesson seemed to
35 be that some principles simply must never be compromised.

36 But the Emory case — or rather, the case of slavery itself — is an exception that
37 proves the rule. Freedom and slavery were fundamentally incompatible. Three-
38 fifths was indeed a corrupt bargain. Most of the time, though, American politics is
39 *precisely* about compromising principles. Should civil liberties be limited in the
40 name of national security? Should free speech be infringed to reduce the role of
41 money in politics? Should austerity trump fairness as the prime directive for
42 budget-makers? These are legitimate three-fifths questions.

43 On rare occasions, the difference between principles is irreconcilable. That's how
44 we got the Civil War. Today's fight about the size of government is not such an
45 occasion. Taxing and spending — the everyday work of self-government — demand
46 not moral absolutism but a mind-set that you win some and you lose some. The
47 current budget negotiation isn't sudden death; it's one in a never ending series of
48 negotiations about the proper role of government, punctuated by a never ending
49 series of elections that will continuously reset the median of public opinion.

50 That may sound like your version of hell, but it's simply democracy in a republic.
51 Doomsday devices like fiscal cliffs and sequestration create the *form* of compromise
52 to avoid the *substance* of it. It's time we citizens make our representatives practice
53 more actual compromise — and make ourselves accept the results.

Liu is the author of several books, including The Gardens of Democracy and The Accidental Asian. He was a speechwriter and policy adviser to President Clinton. The views expressed are solely his own.