

Inquiring Minds topic – 5 October 2012 - Albert Myers, Moderator

Turning Partisans into Americans

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“We have to reclaim our democracy, not from an invading army but from the parasitic destruction waged in the name of partisan interest.” Those are strong words, and there are more where those come from.

In a new book titled “The Parties Versus the People,” former Republican U.S. Rep. Mickey Edwards, who served the Fifth District of Oklahoma for 16 years, lays out a series of recommendations that he believes could break the stranglehold of America’s two major parties on our political system.

For the Republican and Democratic parties, and for Congress itself, the changes proposed by Edwards are nothing less than revolutionary:

Take away the right of the parties to control access to the ballot.

Take away the parties’ control over redistricting.

Reduce spending and increase competition in political campaigns.

Establish a nonpartisan congressional leadership.

Establish nonpartisan congressional committees.

Change congressional rules to restore democracy.

Eliminate the trappings of partisanship.

Establish longer workweeks and more interaction within Congress.

Eliminate one-party White House strategy sessions.

Sign no pledges and stand up to bullies.

Those steps, argues Edwards, will return to a democratic path the political party framework through which our elected officials gain their offices and within which they govern.

This newspaper long has advocated one of Edwards’ major proposals — replacing the closed primary system with open primaries, allowing any and all registered voters to choose those candidates whose names will appear on the ballot. Ultimately, says Edwards, the primary winners could both be from the same party or neither party. “By creating an open primary, with its greater number of candidates to choose between, and simultaneously making it easier for prospective voters to cast their ballots, we would take a major step forward toward ensuring that the ‘democracy’ part of our national governing system is much more of a reality,” writes Edwards.”

One result of open primaries, Edwards argues, would be to break down the partisan gridlock that grips today’s Congress. “When all of a state’s voters, rather than merely its activists, have a voice in determining the results of the election process, there is a far greater chance that the winners will be candidates who are more willing to accept compromise as a necessary ingredient of government.”

That need for compromise is a theme that pervades Edwards’ book. Reforming the rules under which Congress operates would be a step toward “unraveling the partisanship that is destroying the ability of our legislators to cooperate across the aisle,” he writes.

“If we’re going to do all the things that the Constitution says that we legitimately can do as a country — as a single country — we have to be able to have a Congress where people will talk together, just like our founding fathers did,” the former congressman told National Public Radio in a recent interview.

Edwards acknowledges that members of Congress are “unlikely to be willing supporters” of his proposals. They will happen only if we, as citizens, demand such changes.

To that end, “The Parties Versus the People” should be required reading for anyone interested in, or involved in, the American political process. It offers a thoughtful, even essential, blueprint to restore our democracy.