

Is Pennsylvania the Nation's New Future?

October 7, 2009

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Why? Why has Pennsylvania now failed for some four months to enact an annual budget spending plan, making it, excepting embattled Michigan, the only state in the nation without one?

This is no inconsequential question. The story of Pennsylvania's fiscal ordeal is much more than the vexing frustrations of one state or one budget. It is a story about national politics and national issues that transcend any one year, single issue, or particular politician.

Pennsylvania state government, to be sure, is an extreme case of divided government and polarized politics. But the differences between other states and Pennsylvania - indeed the differences between Pennsylvania and the nation - are differences of degree and not kind.

Now, if one asks even knowledgeable observers exactly why the Keystone state has failed seven times in a row to enact an annual budget on time - or why this year it has spectacularly failed to enact an annual budget at all - one will get a variety of answers.

Some blame it on the state's governor Ed Rendell, who surely has been aggressive in expanding state spending during his tenure. Others blame mostly the state legislature for its failure to reach consensus on budget issues and to coalesce around reasonable compromises on spending matters. Still others blame the economy, unfair taxation, special interests, and irresponsible politicians.

But bizarre as it may sound, much of this finger pointing comes close to "blaming the victim." Certainly rounding up "the usual suspects" doesn't take us very far here. The governor, the legislature, and others involved in the process are more symptoms of the problem than the problem itself, mere bit actors in a political drama increasingly paralyzing American politics and public policy.

The real problem, the true culprit, is two converging trends in our national life. One of them is now decades old and the other less hoary with age, but certainly not less capable of political mischief.

The older of the trends is in fact a time-worn staple of American government: divided government. And by divided government it's simply meant the executive branch is in the hands of one party and the legislative branch, in at least one chamber, is in the hands of the other party. Divided government has become prevalent at the state level as states have become more politically competitive between the major parties. Moreover, it is far from widely reviled by voters. In fact, one not so secret, secret about divided government is that many voters love it and believe it brings better government and more accountable politicians.

Political scientists aren't nearly so sanguine about divided government, indicting it for many sins, including a lack of consistent policy making and clear accountability. The larger point, however, is that roughly since World War II Americans have adapted to divided government, accepted its limitations, and even exploited its

opportunities. Divided government, like some niggling affliction, is something Americans have come to live with, if not quite relish.

But then came the second trend now bedeviling American politics: Americans discovered ideology (or rediscovered ideology, to be historically correct). In fact, the politics of ideology was present in national life as early as the epic Hamilton-Jefferson struggles of the 1790s. But in its modern embodiment it was vigorously revived in the Bush era - a revival aided and abetted by contemporary hardball reapportionment practices that stuffed politically homogenous voters into the same legislative district.

Surfacing first at the national level, ideological divisiveness has been around long enough now to seep into state and even local politics. And that seepage has produced a polarization that is increasingly paralyzing the incremental, "go along to get along" style of bargaining and compromise that had so long described American political life.

Divided government mixed liberally with movement politics and ideologically based policies has produced a witch's-brew blend of political nastiness not seen for generations in American politics. Our politicians less and less see adversaries as "honorable opponents" and more and more see them as "deadly enemies." Perhaps worse, these attitudes and feelings are being transmitted to rank and file voters who routinely eschew moderate politicians as wimpish political jellyfish. In truth, the voters are just as divided as the politicians who nominally lead them.

And it could hardly come at a worst time. The economy remains in recession - or at best is locked in a slow and feeble recovery. Faith in our politics and our politicians is ebbing near an all-time low. And our list of urgent unresolved policy problems seems to grow almost daily.

If divided government is a minor handicap to which the country has adapted, then the pervasive polarization of ideological-based politics is a chronic disease that offers no quick cures or easy remedies. To the point: ideological polarization more than any other factor in national politics today is responsible for the era of bad feeling we seem to have entered. "Compromise," long the soothing elixir used to coax consensus from conflict in American politics, has become a political expletive to be hurled at the head of opponents. In a polarized environment many apparently no longer believe that compromise is even a legitimate tool for governing.

There is here more hope than heralded by these dismal tones. But plainly the sharp elbows of movement politics mixes not well with the more traditional bargaining and compromise of national politics. The American political process is not well suited for the take-no-prisoners style of the ideologues - an ancient insight now painfully being relearned.

But American politics has been challenged before. It has undergone other periods of sharp polarization and savage politics not dissimilar to the kind experienced today. The nation has survived such challenges before and will do so again - but not very soon and probably not easily. Indeed, before America's newest infatuation with ideological politics has run its course, a late budget or two may be the least of our problems.

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