

**Birthers, Death Panels and Satanic Corporations: The Challenges of Policymaking in  
a Fact-Free Environment**

**OR**

***Where's Detective Sergeant Joe Friday When We Need Him?***

**April 16, 2012**

You remember Detective Sergeant Joe Friday: the iconic LAPD detective played by Jack Webb in the *Dragnet* TV series of the 1950s and 1960s.

*“Just the facts, ma’am,”* we recall him saying in that no-nonsense monotone as he would interrupt a flustered witness straying from the narrative that *he* wanted to pursue in his interrogation.

You may share my sense that what passes for civic discourse these days could use a little fact checking from Detective Sergeant Friday.

Wouldn't that be refreshing?

Imagine this scenario:

Sarah Palin is at the podium delivering the shocking and sobering news that Obama death panels will result in granny being sentenced to death. Suddenly, over the public address system, Detective Sergeant Joe Friday interjects: “*Just the facts, ma’am.*”

President Obama seems to be at the center of a lot of this departure from reality – mostly from the right but also from his left flank, too. People just can’t figure out who or what he is. Socialist or Centrist? Muslim or Christian? American or Kenyan?

A poll taken shortly before this year’s presidential primaries in Mississippi and Alabama found that most GOP voters believe President Obama is a Muslim -- or have strong doubts about his avowed Christianity.

In Mississippi, 52 percent of Republican voters said Obama is a Muslim and only 12 percent took him at his word that he’s a Christian. The rest weren’t sure.<sup>1</sup>

On the left, Princeton University Professor Cornel West has labeled Obama as “a black mascot” of “Wall Street oligarchs.”

We know that personalities, politicians and pundits can get a little wild-eyed in their public pronouncements. But thank goodness the *judiciary* can be counted upon to discern the facts when it comes to this administration.

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<sup>1</sup> Public Policy Polling, March 12, 2012

Oh, wait. I forgot about Justice Scalia.

Court observers are still scratching their heads over his assertion during oral arguments on the Obama health reform law that the purchase of health insurance can be compared to buying broccoli at the grocery store.

I know broccoli is good for you, Judge. But that seems to be stretching the point.

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Trying to follow a serious policy matter issue through an election cycle or congressional debate is like navigating your way through a funhouse hall of mirrors.

With all the distortion, it's difficult to ascertain what's real and what isn't.

These distortions are discouraging. They feed the dysfunction in our politics, its hyper-partisanship. And they are downright dangerous at a time when we are confronted by so many vexing, complicated, critical decisions that have a profound impact on our lives.

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As an aside, and whatever your politics, you have to wonder how Obama manages everything on his plate on any given day. Maybe he secretly loses his cool and runs through the First Lady's White House vegetable garden ripping out all the broccoli plants.

My advice to the President?

Forget about trying to sneak a cigarette or two in the White House tool shed. Light 'em up, dude. Three packs a day. Whatever you need!

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Political humorist Andy Borowitz captured the upside down world of American policymaking in his satirical news story about the President's January State of the State speech. His headline:

*"Obama Risks Alienating Republicans By Using Facts; Radical Tactic Sparks Outrage,"*  
the headline reads.

Borowitz continued: *“The President stirred controversy throughout the speech with his relentless references to facts, data and things that have actually happened, all long considered the third rail of American politics.”*<sup>2</sup>

I’m not trying to pick on Republicans. In fact, I think they’ve done a better job than Democrats in recent years of embracing and giving voice to the belief systems that drive how people respond to our economic and social challenges. Just think Ronald Reagan.

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The seed for this essay was planted in a conversation I had a few months back with my friend Art Diers, longtime member of the this Club.

I was venting my frustration at how environmental advocacy groups had succeeded in framing the public debate about the future of two coal-fired power plants in Chicago.

Coal-fired power plants emit pollution. No question about it. But the local environmental activists distorted and exaggerated local environmental and public health impacts of these plants.

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<sup>2</sup> Borowitz Report, January 25, 2012

Full disclosure: The owner of the power plants, Midwest Generation, is my client and one of the “satanic corporations” of my title – which is to say, from the perspective of the “Occupy Wall Street” movement -- *any* corporation.

Both ends of the political spectrum are emboldened to use “fuzzy math” or “weird science” knowing they’ll get traction on cable TV and the Internet.

The Democrats’ “Medi-Scare” campaign against proposed Medicare reforms that would affect *new* entrants to the program is another example of facts being distorted for political advantage.

After listening to my rant about the power plant issue, my friend Mr. Diers apparently saw the germ of an idea for a Chicago Literary Club paper. Next thing you know, I’m on the menu for tonight’s Arthur Baer Fellowship Address.

So thank you, Art, and thanks to all of you who have been welcoming to this newbie at the dinners I’ve attended this season.

I’d also like to thank the Club for providing this forum. It’s a welcome diversion from the writing I typically do. I find outlets for short bursts of wit and wisdom on Twitter, but it’s nice to stretch out beyond 140 characters.

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OK, so how exactly *do* you make rational public policy in a fact-free environment?

I started down this path many weeks ago in the belief -- or at least hope -- that with some focused thinking on the matter I could come to you tonight with a few remedies for what ails us, and offer up a prescription for elevating the role of facts in our public policy debates.

I should have known better. My hope was too audacious.

But sometimes, when you see absolutely inane ideas gain traction in the public square, you just want to yell -- like the deranged news anchor Howard Beale in the 1976 movie *Network* -- *"I'm as mad as hell and I'm not going to take this anymore."*

I got that out of my system. Soon after I began the journey of working on this paper, its course took a sharp dogleg -- kind of like the "Great Bend" in the Illinois River that Steve Thomas told us about last week in his paper on the life and people of our state's arterial waterway.

It became clear that if I headed down my original path, I was going to sound like a hectoring schoolmarm, demanding that unschooled Americans buckle down and learn their history and civics lessons and eat their broccoli!

Just so you think I haven't gone around the Great Bend myself -- I still believe that facts *matter* in the policy arena. Reality sometimes has a way of barging into the room and will not be denied.

Long-delayed reform of our public pension system in Illinois may be one such example. Underscore "may."

For those who long for reality-based governance, it's tough to acknowledge that facts just don't matter as much as we might wish.

Barack Obama could be ordained as a Baptist preacher and it still would not change the minds of those Republican primary voters in Mississippi and Alabama who believe he's a Muslim and not a Christian.

**If you want reality, here it is: Our views on politics and policy have more to do with belief systems than with fact and reason. We selectively use facts to support our beliefs, and we reject other facts that undercut them.**

This came into sharp focus for me in a piece by Carl Bialik, who writes a blog for the *Wall Street Journal* called "*The Numbers Guy*." Having reviewed public opinion polls and interviewed the researchers, Bialik concluded that many Americans simply don't have their facts straight on issues like immigration, Social Security and foreign aid.



But damn the facts, full speed ahead: even when presented with facts that blew their argument out of the water, it made no difference.

For example, University of Illinois political scientist James Kuklinski conducted a study asking the state's residents what they knew and what they believed about welfare.

He found that a clear majority of Illinois residents overestimated the percentage of U.S. families on welfare by more than double the actual proportion. And the most misinformed were the ones most confident in their estimates.

But here's the real kicker: A subgroup of respondents subsequently supplied with the accurate numbers did not change their views.

The "Numbers Guy" wrote about another poll -- one on immigration. Given the tendency of people to overestimate the number of immigrants and illegal immigrants, political scientists hypothesized that supplying the correct numbers would diminish the perceived threat of immigration and hence change opinions on the issue.

Not so much. The study found that accurate, lower numbers simply *reinforced* anti-immigration views -- and even *increased* support for reducing the number of immigrants allowed into the U.S.<sup>3</sup>

Why do people stubbornly stick to facts even when they are shown to be glaringly inaccurate?

The Internet is not the cause of this phenomenon, but the torrent of information to be found there is a contributing factor.

The web has tremendous capacity to expand our minds by exposing us to vast amounts of information and knowledge. But alas, it generally doesn't work that way. Instead, it becomes an echo chamber in which people tune in to information and opinions that reinforce their own -- what I call "digital isolationism."

Public debates on the Internet can get pretty ugly and outrageous given that people who post comments on blogs and news stories often are able to do so anonymously. They don't have to own their misinformed, snide and snarky comments.

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<sup>3</sup> "Americans Stumble on Math of Big Issues," Carl Bialik/The Numbers Guy, Wall Street Journal, January 7, 2012

You may recall a famous *New Yorker* cartoon from the early 1990s that shows one dog commenting to another: “On the Internet, nobody knows you’re a dog.”

The Internet also allows for rapid, viral dissemination of distortions and untruths. You probably don’t associate Winston Churchill with the Internet, but he could have been talking about it when he declared, “*A lie gets halfway around the world before the truth has a chance to get its pants on.*”

Case in point: left-wing bloggers went ballistic last year after reports surfaced online that the Minnesota legislature was considering a Republican-backed law that purportedly would have made it illegal for poor people to carry more than \$20 in cash during any given month.

Now, if you heard that, you’d probably be a little skeptical, right? Sounds like a headline right out of *The Onion*.

And of course, it wasn’t true. The proposed law had nothing to do limiting the amount of cash poor people could stick in their pockets. It was about limits on withdrawals from state-issued debit cards.

I believe the Internet and the fragmentation of other media into communities of the like-minded merely amplify the underlying dynamic at work – the primacy of belief systems over reason.

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Take evolution, for example. I'm no scientist; I was an English major. But I'm pretty sure evolution is established both as theory and as fact.

GOP candidates Ron Paul and Rick Santorum stated unequivocally that they do not believe in evolution, as did Rick Perry earlier in the GOP primary season.

Politicians who doubt evolution and favor creationism have plenty of company.

A 2009 Harris Poll of more than 2,000 Americans found that 45 percent of respondents believe in evolution, 32 do not and 22 percent aren't sure. So a majority of Americans either don't believe in evolution or aren't sure about it. At the same time, 40 percent of respondents said they believe in creationism, a religious theory of how the world began.

It can be easy to mock these views, but when I read or watch news accounts of Santorum rallies, I'm struck by the depth of feeling for the candidate and his socially conservative view of the world. It's not my view, but dismissing it out of hand misses the opportunity to understand what motivates this belief and learn more how belief informs political views.

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The primacy of moral beliefs in our politics is a key theme in a notable new book by University of Virginia social psychologist Jonathan Haidt. It's called, "*The Righteous Mind: Why Good People are Divided by Politics and Religion.*"

One aspect of Haidt's analysis is that people only use facts or reason to support conclusions based on their underlying moral beliefs.

When I first heard of this book last month, I tuned into it immediately as it mirrored my own thinking on this topic. I began reading excerpts and watching Haidt speak on web videos. I gained new insights into why Democrats continue to get pounded by Republicans in the battle for the hearts of America voters.

I've long believed that Republicans have a strategic messaging advantage because they tend to see issues as black or white.

Democrats like to muck about in gray areas. But that's a losing strategy, because politics and the media can't handle ambiguity. There's no room for nuance or subtlety in policy debates.

Republicans understand that. Democrats tend to forget it.

But according to Haidt, there's even more to it than that. He suggests that Republicans better "understand moral psychology."

Haidt and his colleagues have conducted substantial research into this area of belief systems, much of it through a website called "YourMorals.org."

Based on answers from tens of thousands of subjects, he's identified six fundamental ideas – what he calls "receptors" – that animate our moral belief systems. Because they are grounded in history and in human nature, political parties ignore them at their peril.

Haidt is nominally a Democrat, but his goal is not to help Democrats win elections. He's aiming higher. If you want to change minds, he says, you have to appeal to people's underlying moral intuitions -- not to reason.

He puts these moral intuitions in six categories:

- Care
- Fairness
- Liberty
- Loyalty
- Authority
- Sanctity

Haidt says Democrats and Republicans alike espouse the first three -- care, fairness and liberty -- although they may express them in different ways. But he says Democrats haven't done as good a job of recognizing loyalty, authority and sanctity as concepts that Americans see as vital to holding the social fabric together.

So here's where all of this take me: if facts, reason and science don't really matter in shaping public opinion and public policy, and underlying belief systems are paramount, we're just talking past each other if we try to appeal to reason.

But hey, look on the bright side of this fact-free environment.

When you're having one of those friendly policy debates at a cocktail party and struggling to remember that killer factoid you read in the *New York Times* that will surely bring your adversary to his knees, *stop wracking your brain! Relax! Facts really don't matter.*

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So where do we go from here?

I suppose I could end my paper on a downbeat, with the sense of existential dread that infused graduation remarks that Woody Allen published in The New York Times in 1979:

***“More than at any other time in history, mankind faces a crossroads. One path leads to despair and utter hopelessness. The other, to total extinction. Let us pray we have the wisdom to choose correctly.”***

So I *will* offer a few ideas for your consideration – maybe just as conversation starters.



But first, I ask that you indulge me in a little side trip to provide additional context for a personal journey that has led to my interest in this topic.

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I mentioned earlier that the seed for this paper was planted in a conversation with Art Diers. But the soil into which that seed was planted was cultivated many years ago.

Let's just say it was sometime after November 20, 1951, when I entered the world at the U.S. Army Hospital in Frankfurt, Germany as a member of the nomadic tribe known as "Army Brats."

I roamed during my early years across an assortment of locales – Frankfurt ... London ... Ankara, Turkey ... Fort Bragg, North Carolina ... Fort Gordon, Georgia ... Arlington, Virginia ... and points between.

I attended nine schools in grades K-8.

My journey continued with secondary education in rural Delaware and then college in Cambridge, Massachusetts.

As for my initial post-college years, it was New York, Boston and then Springfield, Illinois.

I've been in Chicago now for nearly 27 years. The pattern has been broken.

So what does this personal travelogue have to do with tonight's topic?

I often think that growing up as an outsider of sorts influenced my choice of career.

I can't claim any scientific basis for this, but at least anecdotally I know that Army brats can grow up feeling a little disconnected, viewing life from the periphery.

It's not much of a leap from that to a career in journalism, where you tend to be on the outside looking in, and then as a public affairs consultant providing clients advice from a dispassionate perspective.

But what you lose as an Army brat -- that sense of being rooted in a place -- you *gain* in the opportunity to experience different ways of living and thinking.

**You learn to adapt.** After six months of fourth grade at William Robinson Elementary School in Augusta, Georgia you would have thought by my sugary drawl that I had been born and bred a Georgia Cracker.

(Please note that “Cracker” is not a pejorative term when used to describe the early settlers of Georgia and their descendants.) I made friends with a classmate named Byron – or as I soon began pronouncing his name “Baa-ruhn.”

**You’re exposed to a wide range of ideas and skills -- some useful, some best ignored.**

Miss Annie Mobley, the matronly teacher of that fourth-grade class in Augusta, Georgia, taught us flower arranging. She also informed us – this was 1961 -- that Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. was a Communist.

Her comment on my end-of-year report card read: “Billy is a true Southern Gentleman.” I hope that was a reflection of my deferential demeanor and not any agreement on my part with her views of Dr. King.

At the German Embassy School in Ankara, Turkey I learned to speak German fluently – enough for second grade, at least. My older brother and I were among 17 nationalities represented at the school. I learned how to sing “Silent Night” in Korean at the 2<sup>nd</sup> grade Christmas pageant.

Turns out I was taking classes in a former garden storage building where the Turkish spy codenamed “Cicero” – who was personal valet to the British ambassador to Turkey – passed secrets to the Germans during World War II.

**You get accustomed to change.**

Not only did I grow up in changing locales, I grew up in a changing society.

I lived a little civil rights history in the fall of 1965 – I was in eighth grade in Arlington, Virginia -- when a nearby all-black junior high school was closed by court order and its students incorporated into the school I attended, Gunston Junior High.

We white kids didn’t know what to expect. I’m sure the black kids felt even more uncertain, as they were coming to our turf. But we did just fine. Black kids and white kids who had never before hung out with each other learned to laugh, play sports and study together.

I also discovered that young love – or at least a teen crush -- could be colorblind. Her desk was across from mine in French class. It would have been unthinkable in 1965 to give expression to any of my tingly adolescent feelings for Muriel Lucas. But I remember her name to this day.

**You are exposed to seemingly irreconcilable viewpoints.**

Military service has long been a proud tradition in the South, and many of the adults in my younger years were southerners. My parents were both from the South: my father born and bred in Alabama and my mother -- herself an Army brat -- with family roots deep in the heart of Texas. Given their upbringing, I'd have to say my folks were reasonably modern in their thinking about race and politics.

But not so with some of their friends. I remember when a close family friend who was visiting one day -- a great guy, I thought -- liberally used the "N" word in his critique of the black race.

Well, maybe "liberally" isn't the right choice of word.

That was jarring. So was dichotomy between my two worlds during college, when I would go back and forth between Cambridge, Massachusetts and Arlington, Virginia during the Vietnam War era. I practiced intellectual ambidexterity, arguing against whichever side was the prevailing view in either locale.

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OK, time to pull back out onto the interstate after that short back roads detour.

I said earlier I would that offer up a few ideas for trying to address this problem of facts and rationality being shoved aside in our policy debates.

But what are we really after here – a form of clinically proven rationality that once understood, would coalesce all right-thinking Americans around the patently obvious rational course of action?

I don't think so. I think we're after a different concept, a simple concept -- not that it's an easily achievable one.

Perhaps you've heard of it.

It's *wisdom*.

Look up “wisdom” in the dictionary. Definitions include “good sense” ... “wise decision” ... “accumulated learning.” Synonyms include “understanding” ... “knowledge” ... “insight” ... “perception” ... “astuteness” ... “good judgment.”

I'll take those qualities any day from my government.

Governance that is wise is not distracted from its important mission by foolish, strident voices at either extreme of our political spectrum. It certainly does not pander to them.

Governance is wise that embraces America's diversity; that works to bring all voices into the decision-making process; that tries to accommodate and incorporate conflicting points of view in substantive ways – not just in staged “town hall” meetings.

Governance that is wise ... having weighed all sides ... also is decisive. And it clearly communicates the rationale for its decisions.

We need wisdom that pushes the fear-mongers and con artists on either end of the political spectrum even further into the margins.

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I'd like to suggest two general approaches for moving toward greater wisdom in American politics and policy based on a more engaged electorate – more engaged in the political process and more engaged with one another.

- One approach is election law reform, which has the ability to loosen the grip of political parties on the electoral process and expand the number of people and points of view participating in our politics.
- The second is a little more challenging, with a path not quite as clear. But it probably gets at the problem in a more fundamental way: promotion of greater meaningful engagement between those of different ethnicities and belief systems.

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**First, let's look at political and election reforms designed to bring more diverse perspectives to our policymaking by changing the way we draw legislative and congressional districts, expanding the number of people who vote, and providing electoral incentives for candidates who may be more moderate in their political views.**

You can't make somebody register or vote. If people don't want to participate in the democratic process, that's their prerogative.

But I will say this: As far as I'm concerned, if you don't vote you forfeit your right to whine about the current state of affairs!



There's no question we need major election law reform in this country to expand and diversify the electorate. If we accept the premise that people are motivated more by beliefs than by facts, then let's make sure we get the broadest possible mix of beliefs reflected in the votes that determine our government leaders.

The composition of the electorate in any given election can make a huge difference. The 2010 mid-term elections are a classic example. A smaller, older, whiter, wealthier electorate contributed to the influence of the Tea Party and Libertarian Party in the composition of the GOP House majority that was elected in 2010.

When compared to the 2006 midterm election, the number of ballots cast by seniors in 2010 increased 16 percent, and many more of those seniors went Republican than in the 2006 midterms.

Disillusionment with President Obama among the younger and more liberal elements of his base seemed to have been a key factor, too. When compared to the 2008 presidential election, minority and youth voters dropped out of the voting population in 2010 at faster rates than whites.

Project Vote, a non-partisan, not-for-profit organization promoting expansion of voting, says the gains made in 2008 toward a more representative electorate disappeared.

But why else, beyond disinterest, might they have stayed home?

- Younger, low-income voters tend to be more transient. Studies have shown that many of these 2010 voters have simply disappeared from the rolls. Registering to vote in a new jurisdiction isn't always made easy by the party-dominated election apparatus.
- Given the way we draw legislative districts, the outcome of many congressional elections was determined in 2010 primary elections, leaving little or no real choice in the November midterms.

These factors are among many that point out the critical need for reforms that will expand voting rolls and broaden the electorate so that it's less susceptible to narrowly focused interests on the right or the left.

In my book, the most vital electoral reform is changing the way we draw legislative districts at the local, state and federal level.

As backers of redistricting reform like to say, under the current system politicians get to choose their voters, when it's supposed to be the other way around.

Maps are carefully crafted by legislative leaders to produce specific outcomes – generally to achieve a partisan result and to retain incumbents. Maps are not drawn to consider voters' interests – such as maintaining the integrity of municipal or community interests in a given district.

Given that redistricting is essentially a partisan exercise controlled by whichever party is in power, the real election battlegrounds are primaries rather than general elections.

And given that primary voters tend to represent “movement” voters, or those representing the far end of the political spectrum, the winning candidates are generally those who play to the extremes.

This contributes to the hyper-partisanship that drives our politics, as those with the most rigid belief systems are the ones who win primaries.

It's tough to muster support for redistricting reform. For one thing, we only go through the process once every 10 years to reflect changes documented by the U.S. Census. But mostly, it's because of the difficulty of wresting the process away from politicians.

California has embarked on an interesting and promising experiment. Through its noted referendum process, California voted in 2008 to give the job of drawing political boundaries to an independent commission.

Whereas only *one* congressional seat changed parties in California during the past decade, political observers estimate there are a dozen competitive districts in 2012. The independent commission presumably drew boundaries designed to achieve fair and representative districts as opposed to ones designed to achieve a specific partisan result or protect an incumbent.

To touch on other election law reforms that will bring more perspectives to our policymaking:

## **Expanding voter rolls by reforming voter registration laws.**

Concerns about voter fraud – which we can certainly relate to here in Chicago -- are probably overblown these days – especially with technology available to scrub voter lists and cross check voters against other data.

The real fraud in my view is the notion that we have a true representative democracy. We can't claim this when we have state laws that discourage voting by requiring would-be voters to provide photo ID, or that prohibit voting by those who have served time in prison -- even if they're back home as productive members of their community.

Florida -- which we know all too well is a key battleground state in presidential elections -- leads the pack in new restrictions on voter registration. Groups like the League of Women Voters have suspended registration drives this year because of those burdensome restrictions imposed last year by state officials. Civic groups face fines for violating these restrictions and they just don't want to risk that.

More subtle, but equally damaging to our electoral process, is our reliance on antiquated voter registration systems that lead to substantial errors and create just enough hassle to deter all but the most determined from registering when they turn 18, or relocate.

Research commissioned by the Pew Center on the States, released in February, highlights the extent of the problem: approximately 24 million voter registrations in the United States – one of every eight – are no longer valid or are “significantly inaccurate.”

Not only can technology clean up voter fraud and purge lists of erroneous data, it can greatly expand the rolls of registered voters. Some 20 states now have “motor voter” laws in which you may choose to have your data automatically sent from motor vehicle offices to election officials for voter registration purposes.

It works. In South Dakota seven times as many people registered to vote at motor vehicle offices after the state began an automated system in 2006.

In some states you can register and vote on the same day.

In others, you can register online with a driver’s license or state ID.

Another area of electoral reforms is aimed at electing more moderate or centrist candidates.

Proportional voting or “cumulative voting” may sound familiar to you, because we had it in Illinois from 1870 to 1980. Under this system, each House district was divided into three-seat districts. Voters could cast three votes with the option of giving all three votes to one candidate or splitting their votes.

As a result, House districts typically elected representatives from two major factions within the majority party and one representative from the minority party. We actually had Republican legislators from Chicago. Imagine that! But more important, we had greater diversity of views in the Illinois House.

You may also recall that this system was eliminated by the “Cutback Amendment,” spearheaded by then-political activist and now-Governor Pat Quinn. His idea got traction as a way to save tax dollars, and played off voter outrage at a legislative pay increase.

But its primary effects have been anything but reformist. It has silenced voices of moderation, made the House an even more rigidly partisan place and further consolidated power in the hands of legislative leaders.

Another way to promote moderation and centrism in our politics is through “open primaries,” which allow independent voters to cast ballots in primary elections of either party.

In some states you have to be registered with a given party to vote in a primary, which is called a “closed primary” system. In a fully open primary, you are given a ballot that lists all candidates of all parties so that you don’t have to declare a party preference.

With 37 percent of all registered voters in the U.S. identifying themselves as independent or non-affiliated, this would seem to make sense. It might also dilute the effect of those on the extremes of either major party dominating the nomination process.

I have not included campaign finance reform on my list. There’s certainly a strong argument to be made that taking the big money out of politics will give greater voice to the concerns of more Americans.

I just don’t think we’ll see significant campaign finance reform anytime soon -- certainly not with the current Supreme Court.



Perhaps justices are waking up to the damage wrought by the SuperPACs enabled by the now-infamous *Citizens United* decision last year and will modify that ruling in a future case. SuperPACs, criticized by leaders in both parties, can raise and spend unlimited amounts of money, so long as they are nominally independent of a candidate's official campaign.

Underscore the word “nominally.” They are not really independent of the campaigns. We've never seen binge spending on elections like this.

The fact is that so long as money is equated with constitutionally protected free speech, we aren't going to be able to do much about the confluence of money and politics.

For the time being, I think the strongest reform card to play is **disclosure**, so that we at least know who's giving what to whom and perhaps why. That is another area where they need to clean up this whole SuperPac mess, because there are loopholes that allow some donors to remain anonymous.

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**Having looked at political and election reforms designed to bring more diverse perspectives to the business of policymaking, I'll turn now to a second approach: promoting greater engagement between those of different races, regions and belief systems. We need to do this as institutions and communities, but more fundamentally, as individuals.**

I will admit that this goal is far more challenging than the kinds of election law reforms I've mentioned – not that *those* are easy to accomplish.

We usually find successful examples of cross-cultural and inter-regional engagement at the grassroots, retail level. They take time to bubble up to the broader regional or even national level.

Foundations and other philanthropic organizations are good at this and are well respected according to public opinion surveys. They are good candidates to lead new efforts to create circumstances where people of different beliefs can come together to better understand one another and become more empathic.

For example, many years ago my firm worked with The Chicago Community Trust on a program called “Chicago Dinners.” These were a series of small dinners – each held on the same night -- hosted by people who had signed up for the program.

Participants, representing people of different ethnicities and backgrounds, exchanged candid and personal perspectives on race. In a small group like that, trust can develop. It was a tremendous and memorable learning experience. This is the kind of thing that can be replicated.

Ultimately greater understanding, compassion and dare I use the word, “empathy,” rests with us as individuals because these are matters of the heart.

As we learned from the Pogo comic strip, “We have met the enemy and he is us.”

And we don’t much trust religious institutions, governments, corporations, universities these days when it comes to economic and social issues.

But it does appear that we trust ourselves.

A public opinion research report published earlier this month found that Americans overwhelmingly trust their own judgment on economic matters more than the judgment of either President Obama or Mitt Romney.<sup>4</sup>

We also trust our neighbor, our friend, our co-worker, our classmate.

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<sup>4</sup> “Most Voters Trust Their Own Economic Judgment More than Obama, Romney;” RasmussenReports.com, April 9, 2012

Building trust requires personal connection – in-person, offline, in the flesh, eye-to-eye.

Researchers at the University of Michigan found that college students lack the empathy of students from previous generations – probably because their reliance on digital communications robs them of the human contact in which real empathy and trust can be developed.<sup>5</sup>

Why do we trust our friends, neighbors, co-workers? Probably because they *listen* to us and we *listen* to them.

Listening well is a lost art. We should dispatch a team of archeologists from the University of Chicago to rediscover it.

I confess: I am an offender. Pretty much everybody I work with is an offender. I'd like to tell you it's because we all have active minds and are eager to contribute to the conversation. But frankly, it also has to do with a desire to make that absolutely brilliant, supposedly game-changing observation that will persuade others of our strategic brilliance.

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<sup>5</sup> Why E-Mail May Be Hurting Off-Line Relationships, TIME, June 22, 2010

Men are especially good ... or more accurately, *bad* at this. Women I know will accuse we men of taking their words, repackaging them, and presenting them as our own – with that deeper voice of authority of course adding gravitas.

You could call that the conversational equivalent of the *New York Times*: It simply isn't news until it's appeared in *The Times*.

We should take our cue instead from Bernard Baruch, the presidential advisor and noted “park bench statesman,” who said, “*Most of the successful people I've known are the ones who do more listening than talking.*”

If our politics and governance is lacking in empathy, the first and most crucial step in addressing this shortcoming is an incredibly simple thing. It's called “listening.”

Listening requires intention and discipline. But you can actually practice it and get better at it. You may be amazed by what you learn by listening to others.

My friend Robert Althouse is an ordained Zen priest who runs the Zen Life and Meditation Center of Chicago, located in Oak Park. Robert has written about five ways in which you can begin to improve your listening skills.

I'd like to leave you with these five suggestions:

**Don't interrupt.** When you interrupt someone it makes it harder for that person to complete his or her thought, and degrades the quality of the conversation.

**Let go of your agenda.** Letting go of your own agenda can improve your listening right away, because you don't need to rehearse what you're going to say while the other person is speaking. (CONTINUE ON NEXT PAGE)

When you let go of your attachment to the outcome, it improves your presence and listening. You give yourself the opportunity to learn something new rather than focus on winning or losing an argument.

**Listen to the whole person.** Eye contact and body language offer clues to what the person is feeling and needing as they talk. This will add to your understanding of the words.

**Don't multi-task while another person is speaking to you.** Give the person your full attention. Put down the handheld device. You make it hard on the other person to concentrate and you're not really listening.

**Finally, let the other person know that you're listening.** One legitimate form of interruption is to ask for clarification so that you can better understand what the person is saying. You can ask them to confirm what you think you heard. Not only does that ensure you understand what the person is saying; it shows them you've been listening.<sup>6</sup>

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I hope that you have enjoyed listening tonight, I welcome your comments over a nightcap, and I thank you for your kind attention.

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<sup>6</sup> "5 Ways to Listen Well," Zen Life Blog, May 9, 2011, Zen Life and Meditation Center, [zlmc.org](http://zlmc.org)

