

Mickey Edwards. 2012. *The Parties Versus the People: How to Turn Republicans and Democrats into Americans*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, pp. 232.

During the quiet summer months of 2011 when Congress was out of session, former Oklahoma Congressman Mickey Edwards sent a shock wave through the Washington establishment. As part of its annual “Big Ideas” issue, *The Atlantic* magazine had just published his article, “How to Turn Republicans and Democrats into Americans.” The title alone pushed political hot buttons. In this widely-read piece, Edwards outlined a six-point plan to reform Congress. While more cynical politicians may dismiss many of Edwards’s recommendations as “pie-in-the-sky” wishful thinking, his arguments struck many as cogent and persuasive. He was, after all, an accomplished politician himself with years of experience steeped in congressional and partisan politics. He was one of the original trustees of the Heritage Foundation. He also had the opportunity to think and reflect on his experiences in the academic halls of Harvard, Princeton, Georgetown, and George Washington University.

The Atlantic article formed the nucleus for this book. The original name is retained in the subtitle, with the new book now refashioned as *The Parties Versus the People*. Here, Edwards expands his original political critique into a grander manifesto of change for the American political system. His basic thesis is that Congress has become wholly dysfunctional due to an escalating political war between the two parties.

His approach is both diagnostic and prescriptive. Edwards perceives the main problem to be the current “political party framework through

which our elected officials gain their offices and within which they govern” (p. xiii). He departs—at least in degree—with other analysts who suggest the explanation lies in the rise of alternative media. He says, “The problem is not the extent of polarization but the extent of partisanship, and the two are not the same thing” (p. xii). In articulating the problem in just this way, he contradicts longstanding assumptions by many political scientists that strong political parties are important for proper functioning of the American political system.

I first became aware of *The Parties Versus the People* when Edwards gave a lecture and book signing at my university. Even though he is a wonderful speaker and I enjoyed myself thoroughly, my first reaction was that he was basically making an appeal to popular discontent concerning contemporary American politics. It would be an easy sell given the recent historic low approval ratings of Congress (Steinhauser, 2013). I viewed Edwards as a political opportunist, but now practicing his craft in the arena of publishing. In other words, I thought his analysis was rather simplistic and shallow. I wanted to review this book in order to contrast his premises and conclusions with the many other credible, alternative perspectives. To my surprise, Edwards anticipated and effectively dealt with most of my initial objections throughout his book.

Edwards advances a fascinating argument. He points to when the Progressive movement reformed politics away from the proverbial smoke-filled back rooms where party bosses exercised their rule. The Progressives favored the implementation of primaries to reconnect the electorate to the candidate selection process. According to Edwards, the primary system merely replaced political bosses with an arrangement that has evolved over time to be controlled mostly by ideological extremists on both sides. The enormity of campaign financing distorts the process even more. And as government increasingly expands into more and more areas, many citizens “conclude that their own limited ability to participate in the decisions would make little difference” (p. 6).

He proposes a thought experiment: Imagine that you and your neighbors are tasked with the challenge of reforming the schools in your community. You would come together and discuss the issues. How would you attract and motivate the best teachers? How would you ensure the optimum physical infrastructure in terms of learning environment, cost, and safety? How would you and your neighbors come to agreement on textbooks? Who would select and how would you pay for the most effective learning technologies? You and your neighbors would probably divide up the labor, forming various subcommittees to tackle these problems in turn. “But there is one thing you will probably not do; you will probably not divide the organization into separate partisan camps” (p. 7). Yet, when it comes to the U.S. Senate and House of Representatives that tackle society’s most pressing problems, our elected leaders act in lockstep with their affiliated political parties. This is a recent phenomenon. As Edwards points out, people have always joined their respective political parties because of general congruence and affinity for espoused principles. However, in light of the rich diversity inherent in a nation of well over 300 million citizens, it is almost incomprehensible that we find elected leaders mindlessly following their party platforms on almost each and every vote. A legislator’s conscience and representation of diverse constituencies should lead him or her to deviate more than occasionally from the party line.

His solutions move along two fronts: (1) reform how congressional representatives and senators get elected in the first place, and (2) once they are in office, organize Congress to best achieve substantive success in legislative initiatives. His original six-point plan expands now to a ten-step program:

Step 1: Take Away Party Control of Ballot Access

Step 2: Take Away Party Control Over Redistricting

Step 3: Reduce Campaign Spending, Increase Competition

Step 4: Establish Nonpartisan Congressional Leadership

Step 5: Establish Nonpartisan Congressional Committees

Step 6: Restore Democracy to Congress

Step 7: Eliminate Trappings of Partisanship

Step 8: Extend Legislative Workweeks with More Opportunities for Interaction

Step 9: Eliminate One-Party White House Strategy Sessions

Step 10: Sign No Pledges, Stand Up to Bullies

In no small measure, the reality of these proposals getting implemented as election laws and redistricting policies across the states and Congress reforming itself depends much on the unlikely acquiescence of the parties to surrender their political and organizational power. It would necessarily involve peeling back years of legislative accretion in which the parties have consolidated power over the political process. Edwards admits the challenge is great, but points to individual states that have already reformed ballot access or set up redistricting procedures based on either bipartisan or independent commissions. His hope is that citizens will have had enough, and that political momentum will begin to build. In probably the weakest of all of his chapters, Edwards points the way forward by encouraging his fellow citizens to tweet about politics rather than what they had for lunch (p. 179). As a “catalyst” for reform, Edwards pins his hopes on the fourteen states that have initiative petition processes. The Appendix contains a table with deadlines and number of signatures needed. All in all, it’s a bit anticlimactic.

It's important to note that Edwards supports the internal integrity and autonomy of political parties to manage their own affairs in terms of platform and membership. What he argues against is the set of laws and rules that systematically work to exclude other voices other than partisan activists.

A major strength of this book is that Edwards spices up his narrative with numerous examples from his own career. Many times he is self-effacing and rarely hesitant to be critical of his own Republican Party. His writing is contextual. Although at times he is probably overly optimistic, he is certainly not naive. Yet, the reader wonders if Edwards has made the most accurate diagnosis after all. Contrast his premise with a near opposite one written even more recently by journalist Mark Leibovich in his book, *This Town*. It describes the DC culture as a bipartisan consensus of politicians, journalists, lobbyists, and other elites socialized into a Washington culture whose primary motivation is self-preservation. Both books are plausible. Both are written by Washington insiders. However, both books are contradictory. That said, even if Edwards has mis-diagnosed the main reason for Washington's dysfunction, many of his proposed steps (campaign finance, ballot access, redistricting reform, nonpartisan committee restructuring, etc.) would ameliorate an entrenched Washington elite as well. Despite its weaknesses, *Parties Versus the People* is both provocative and substantive. It has the promise of doing at least a bit more than just starting the conversation.

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