Center for Ethics in Public Life
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Ethics and Political Dysfunction: The Deeper Ethical Obligations of Governing
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“The American people overwhelmingly believe that this town doesn’t work” (11/5/2014)
"We're here to make the place function again" (11-10-2014)
CNN and Pundits

Gallup Poll October 2013:
   “Government Dysfunction” cited as number one problem in the country
Dysfunction and Ethics

- Usual Suspects in “Public Ethics”
  - Conflict of Interest Laws
  - Disclosure and Reporting Laws
  - Transparency and Open Records Laws
  - Nepotism Laws

- These just barely scratch the surface of the ethical obligations of public officials.
Common Question: “Isn’t Political Ethics an oxymoron?” (chuckle, chuckle)

Answer: “NO, it is a repetitive phrase. Politics IS ethics. Politics is the only answer we have found to one of the deepest, most complex, and pressing ethical questions in the world:”
“How do we ethically protect the social cooperation that makes our society cohesive and strong, while also respecting the rights of individuals to pursue vastly divergent vision of the good life, and deeply conflicting moral and political beliefs?”
Evaluating Politicians

- Ideal Statesmen
- Abraham Lincoln's
- Ethical Decision Making
  - Weighing the Right Kinds of Reasons the Right Way
- Minimally Ethically Adequate
- Blagoyeviches, Kilpatricks
- Abominable Abusers of Power
Ethical Decision Making

- What is the perfect meeting point of what is politically possible and what is ideally desirable?
- How much power should the majority have?
- How much influence does the minority deserve?
- When does one stand on principle and when does one compromise?
- When is one endangering the political process itself in the pursuit of a political objective? And is that ever justified?
Ethical Decision Making

- When should individual rights win out over considerations of general well-being, such as the economy and security?
- When does one have enough information to take a position? Is that information good information from objective sources?
- What should one do when loyalty to party conflicts with one’s convictions?
- What should one do when one’s convictions conflict with the preferences of one’s constituents?
- What should one do when one’s deeply held convictions may endanger one’s re-election chances?
“Democracy is the worst form of government in the world, except for all the others.”
Conflicts and Tensions Built into the Political Process

- Tensions between Executive, Legislative, Judicial Branches
- Tensions Between Political Parties
- Tensions Within Political Parties
- Historical, Cultural and Socio-Economic Tensions
- And of course the fundamental Tension between the conflicting freedoms and beliefs of individuals and social cooperation that keeps our society together
- All these tensions multiplied by all the societies on earth and their interaction
Events that need not qualify as government dysfunction

- Your favorite policy is continually voted down by the majority.
- Your favorite policy is continually filibustered by the minority.
- If laws are VERY difficult to pass
- If laws only pass very slowly
- If the government does something that your entire immediate community doesn’t like
- The law-making process causes strong clashes within society
Events that might qualify as government dysfunction

- Healthy contentious partisanship turns into unhealthy, hyper-partisanship
- When we confuse our political opponents with our mortal enemies
- When the majority thinks its status gives it the right to dictate unilaterally
- When the minority thinks that its right to disrupt the process under certain circumstances is actually an invitation to disrupt it under all circumstances, (perhaps as a ploy to regain the majority).
The one indispensable lifeblood of democracy

- TRUST
Our Questions for Today

- What does Political Dysfunction Look Like?

AND

- What do we do about it?
How would you describe the level of dysfunctionality in governing processes in the U.S. today?

A. **Lethally dysfunctional.** Dysfunctional to the point where it represents a tangible threat to our very existence as a nation.

B. **Severely dysfunctional.** Dysfunctional enough to disrupt core political tasks.

C. **Somewhat dysfunctional.** Dysfunctional in some aspects, but with a core of functional processes maintained.

D. **Barely dysfunctional.** Dysfunctional only at superficial levels.

E. **Not dysfunctional.** This is the normal democratic process.
Is this level of dysfunction due more to:

A. the laws and rules we have governing the political process
B. the behavior and choices of the political party machinery
C. the behavior and choices of the individuals who hold office
D. the behavior and choices of citizens eligible to vote
What branch of the federal government deserves the most blame for dysfunction?

A. Executive
B. Legislative
C. Judicial
Who is most to blame for dysfunction in Congress?

A. Democrats in congress
B. Republicans in congress
C. Both congressional delegations equally
D. Individuals within each delegation
Among the common prescriptions for dysfunction what do you think would be most effective?

A. Term limits
B. Campaign finance reform
C. Non-partisan re-districting process
D. Getting rid of the filibuster
E. Banning lobbyist gifts
Does the media play as big a role in causing dysfunction as the government itself?

A. Yes
B. No
With respect to the recent unrest sparked by the killing of Michael Brown, do you think dysfunction at the local government level:

A. Was the **most important factor** (aside from the shooting itself) in causing that uprising.
B. Was a **very significant factor** in causing that uprising
C. Was a **somewhat significant factor** in causing that uprising
D. Was a **small factor** in causing that uprising
E. Was **no factor** in causing that uprising
Final Question

- What can you do to help eliminate dysfunction in government?
  - At the federal level?
  - At the state level?
  - At the local level?