

# Hunger Grows for Progress Through Compromise

Last week's ABC News/Washington Post poll contained little good news for President Obama, congressional Democrats, or the country. Only 22% of Americans think their personal finances have improved since Mr. Obama took office; 57% believe that the standard of living in the



**POLITICS  
& IDEAS**  
By William  
A. Galston

country is getting worse; and more than five years after the official end of the Great Recession, 77% remain worried about the economy's direction. Although the Republican Party hasn't regained the ground it lost after last year's government shutdown, public approval of the Democrats is plunging.

None of this is particularly surprising, and most of it tracks the findings of the NBC News/Wall Street Journal survey also released last week. But tucked away beneath the headlines, the latter survey offers evidence that the public mood is shifting in ways that could reframe our politics.

When asked to name the issue that would be most important in deciding their vote Nov. 4, 23% of respondents said job creation and economic growth. But tied for first place, also with 23%, was this: "breaking the partisan gridlock in Congress to get things done." The people have noticed

what's happening—more precisely, what's not happening—in their nation's capital. They don't like it, and they'd like to change it.

No doubt many seasoned political observers will react cynically to this finding: Sure, people want to end gridlock, but they'll keep on voting for the kinds of people who perpetuate it.

Maybe not. The NBC News/WSJ survey posed another question: If your choice for Congress comes down to a candidate who will make compromises to gain consensus on legislation or a candidate who will stick to his or her position even if this means no consensus, 50% opted for the consensus-seekers, and 42% for candidates who would stick to their guns. Just four years ago, two weeks before the 2010 midterms, only 34% favored candidates who sought compromise; fully 57% wanted candidates who would stand their ground, no matter what.

In short, the people got what they voted for in 2010, and they don't like the results. So, sensibly, they want our politics to move in a different direction.

It was with these findings fresh in mind that I flew to St. Anselm College in Manchester, N.H., last weekend for a town-hall meeting sponsored by No Labels, a national civic organization that I helped start and is working to create a new politics of problem-solving.

Some in the group were pessi-

mistic about the turnout. We were competing with a number of pumpkin festivals and college homecoming weekends. Nonetheless, people flooded in. We ran out of chairs in the large meeting room, and dozens of participants had to stand against the walls. About 250 people packed the hall for the full 75 minutes.

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## Public support for consensus-seeking politicians has jumped to 50%, from 34% in 2010.

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No Labels had something to offer, the launch of a process to produce a National Strategic Agenda organized around four goals: creating 25 million jobs over the next decade; stabilizing Social Security and Medicare for the long-term (which the actuaries define as 75 years); achieving U.S. energy security by 2024; and balancing the budget by 2030.

These goals enjoy broad support across party lines, and they provide the point of departure for a year-long process of consultation to develop policies that could promote them while maintaining that broad support. The completed agenda will be unveiled in New Hampshire next October, and field staff there and in other states will work hard to inject it

into the nominating campaigns of both parties.

As we outlined this plan and opened the floor for discussion, the mood in the room spoke volumes. Citizens are deeply frustrated. Many are angry—some very angry. But few have given up hope. Despite all the disappointments, Americans still believe in our system of self-government, and they think it can be fixed. They are open to a wide range of options for changing the process and content of the nation's politics.

Underlying the arguments, which sometimes grew raucous, there was agreement on one point: The winner-take-all politics that now dominates Washington isn't working and can't work. In a polarized, closely divided country, neither party can impose its will on the other. The choices reduce to two: either a new politics that finds ways of revitalizing the tradition of honorable compromise, or a continuation of paralyzing, hyperpartisan warfare.

As I left the hall, I heard a story that filled me with hope. Among those in attendance were a young man and woman who had gotten engaged that morning. Their first act as a married-couple-to-be was to jump in their car and drive some distance to participate in the event. They saw no line between their own future and that of their country. And neither should we.