



CHARLIE COOK THE COOK REPORT

Bird's-Eye View

Those who are no longer in the trenches of political warfare have the best perspective on the perils of partisanship.

ONE OF THE few political topics on which there is virtually universal agreement—both inside and outside the Beltway—is that Congress is broken.

The longer one has been in Washington, the more one is convinced that something has gone terribly wrong. But once the subject turns to who is to blame, opinions tend to diverge. Funny thing: People who are Democrats and liberal overwhelmingly blame Republicans and conservatives, while those who are Republican and conservative are equally adamant that Democrats and liberals are at fault. Go figure. Try to think of anyone you know who blames his or her own team for a substantial share of the problem. As pollsters would say, it's a small cell.

To me, the people worth listening to are those who have been in the trenches of political warfare in Washington and have observed the changes over a long period of time—but are no longer combatants. That perspective carries a lot more weight than those of spectators in the upper deck or operatives who simply want to point fingers at the opposing side. With *The Partisan Divide: Congress in Crisis*, Tom Davis and Martin Frost, along with Richard Cohen, have written a terrific and insightful book that desperately needed to be written—and that, arguably, no other three people are better qualified to write.

Davis, a Republican, served for 14 years in the House, representing the Northern Virginia suburbs. For 26 years, Frost, a Democrat, represented parts of the Dallas-Fort Worth area in Texas. Each chaired his party's House campaign committee for four years. Davis went on to chair the Government Reform Committee, and Frost led the Democratic Caucus. I can count on one hand the number of people who have chaired the Democratic or Republican campaign committees over the past 40 years who had both in-depth, granular savvy and a broader, 40,000-foot understanding of politics as it is played in states and districts across the country, and up and down the hallways of the House and Senate office buildings. The third member of the trio is Cohen, who started out as a young Senate staffer and then switched sides to build a distinguished career in journalism. Cohen covered Congress for more than 37 years for *National Journal*, and he coauthored the *Almanac of American Politics* for 10 years. No living journalist knows and understands Capitol Hill as intimately as Cohen. It was a treat and an education to work for many years just steps away from him.

Both Frost and Davis are moderates who watched their parties shift. Democrats moved far to Martin's left; Republicans moved just as far to Tom's right. This

widening gap left each of them more apt than extreme partisans to admit the imperfections and mistakes of his party and the mounting toll on the principle of compromise and the art of governing. Frost's Texas has become almost a no-fly zone for Democrats statewide. Davis's Virginia now sports two Democratic senators as well as a Democratic governor, lieutenant governor, and attorney general—and no Republican statewide-elected officials.

Davis's chapter "Divided Government: the New Normal," walks through the current population and voting patterns that have made the House all but a lock for Republicans these days. He notes that in roughly 80 percent of House districts, Democratic and Republican incumbents' principal political concern is winning their primaries. Their vulnerability is from the left for Democrats and from the right for Republicans, making legislative compromises across the aisle increasingly difficult to secure.

Both Frost and Davis spend a chapter taking on the very difficult subject of race in American politics. Frost tells of his tenure at the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee, when pollsters would stop by and talk enthusiastically about how well Democrats were doing among seniors and women. That's when he would ask for the breakdown of numbers among white seniors and white women. Invariably, these numbers were not nearly so encouraging. But Frost makes the point that Republicans' dismal performance with minority voters keeps raising the bar for the GOP to attract more and more white voters—in some cases, a bar that's unreachably high.

Davis provides an interesting history of the evolution of racial voting in this country, with polls showing almost imperceptible differences in the public's impressions of the two parties on racial issues before the Civil Rights Act of 1964. Frost spends a chapter examining the role of redistricting and, with Cohen, contributes a "Moneyball" chapter on the role of campaign finance. Davis takes a close look at the "all politics is local" angle, up to and including then-House Majority Leader Eric Cantor's shocking primary upset earlier this year. Davis also focuses on the role of independents and the collapse of the middle in politics, while Frost laments both parties' dangerous obsession with their own base voters and at social media's role in the growing polarization. Both look at the uniqueness of House and Senate races, which are, as Davis puts it, different animals of the same species. They move on to suggest changes in the operation of Congress and some political reforms that might help fix what is broken on Capitol Hill.

If you are going to read one book this year on what has happened to Congress and why, *The Partisan Divide* is the one. ♦