

The Cult of Compromise

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“Just *compromise* already!” So said millions of Americans to a Congress wrangling over the debt ceiling. And, in its default avoidance deal, Congress basically obliged: Republicans wanted big spending cuts, and Democrats wanted small cuts, so the nation got medium-sized cuts (and a rain-check on the big issues). Compromise is what we wanted, and compromise is what we got.

So why are we still down on Congress? Because we’re displeased with the outcome. The same cuts that struck half of us as too small struck the other half as too large. But wasn’t that what we wanted? Didn’t we and don’t we generally want our representatives to split the difference? Why so dour when they do?

This quandary illustrates what I call the “cult of compromise” – our intuitive belief that compromise is the ideal way to resolve conflict. Most people, seeing two parties at-odds, find it obvious that the best solution requires each to give ground. Yet, that solution inevitably leaves both parties unhappy, giving them too little of the one thing they wanted.

Decades of negotiation research have shown that compromise is, indeed, a false ideal. Scholars have repeatedly documented that compromise does not satisfy everyone so much as it satisfies no one. Luckily, their research also identifies a solution — integration — that works much better. Politicians’ disproof of the cult of compromise may help us rethink the best solution to conflict.

A compromise splits the difference between two, incompatible goals. Consider the debt-ceiling crisis. A single deal could not cut a lot and a little, so the compromise cut moderately. Likewise, consider a classic example from organizational theorist Mary Parker Follett: Two sisters fight over a single orange. Since their separate goals of obtaining the whole orange are incompatible, the sisters compromise by cutting it in-half. Note that (just like Republicans and Democrats) neither sister will like the compromise, as it gives each only 50% of her goal.

A better solution is integration, which gives each side 100% of its most important goal. During the debt debate, the true views of the two political parties (arguably) ran like this: Republicans wanted big cuts and didn’t want to raise revenue by closing tax loopholes, but the cuts were far more important to them than the loopholes. Democrats wanted both small cuts and loophole closure, but the loopholes were more important. Listing these priorities makes an integrative solution obvious: big cuts and loophole closure concurrently. Similar logic applies to the sisters. A discussion about priorities might have revealed that one sister wanted the rinds for juice, while the other wanted the skin for bread. Each sister could have had 100% of her true goal, had they understood those goals.

Integrative solutions are obvious on paper, but rarely in-practice. The cult of compromise persists because we view the whole world as orange-splitting. We think that their gain is our loss, and vice-versa. Thus, we see no alternative to splitting the difference. Most often, this is simply false. The world offers many “fruits”; conflicts that truly involve one are rare. Thus, the most obvious way toward integration is to expend more effort determining what matters most — or at least to demand that those negotiating for us do that.

Surprisingly often, the simple question “Why?” (e.g., “Why an orange?”) surfaces people’s real priorities, prompting an answer that recasts a one-fruit affair as multi-fruit. Even if both sisters want to eat the whole orange, a “why” might reveal that one sister is hungry for fruit in general, making the apple a possibility.

Even amid the rancor of the current Congress, there’s hope for integration. Speaker John Boehner recently suggested that Republicans would support the super-committee’s efforts to close loopholes if it also slashed spending. In our own lives or in our demands on government, we would all do well to support such efforts, moving from the cult of compromise toward the intelligence of integration.