ASTRONAUTS FOR AMERICA

Institutional Norm: Working Across Differences

The United States was built on the idea that people with different beliefs, backgrounds, and interests can govern together.

BACKGROUND

In this brief in our series, "America, We Have a Problem", we look at an important central concept, "Working Across Differences. The crafting of our constitution required extensive debate and compromise among our founders, who expected democracy and the branches of government they created would continue to depend on discussion and cooperation among people with differing views. Our nation is diverse in its geography, culture, beliefs, experiences, and priorities. No single group represents all Americans, so progress often depends on finding common ground while respecting legitimate differences. Effective government depends on collaboration between political parties, congress, and the president. Failure to work across differences and unwillingness to make concessions can lead to extreme polarization and even demonization of opponents.

SELECTED HISTORICAL THREATS

- In 1787, while drafting the U.S. Constitution, large and small states disagreed about how representation should be determined. After considerable discussion, delegates reached a compromise that established a two-chamber legislature: the House of Representatives would reflect each state's population, while the Senate would grant equal representation to all states. This is one of the earliest American examples of working across profound political differences.
- Major civil rights legislation of the 1960s required coalitions that crossed party, regional, and ideological lines. Political leaders who disagreed on many issues nevertheless worked together to pass landmark legislation that reshaped American society.
- The failures of compromises to ward off disagreement between the north and the south (e.g. the 1820 Missouri Compromise and the Compromise of 1850) did not address nor solve the fundamental issue and failed to prevent divisions and instead increased polarization and deepened divisions that led to the Civil War.

SELECTED RECENT THREATS

- In passing the Take It Down Act in 2025 (which targets nonconsensual intimate images and AI-generated deepfake pornography), members of Congress disagreed on aspects of regulation, privacy, and enforcement, but ultimately found common ground in protecting victims from harmful misuse of emerging technology."
- In 2024, after months of negotiations between Republicans, Democrats, and the White House, Congress did not pass proposed border security legislation. Supporters argued it would have enhanced border security, streamlined immigration processing, and addressed fentanyl trafficking. However, political divisions prevented the compromise from becoming law.
- In 2026 Congress was unable to reach agreement on appropriations and DHS funding, resulting in funding lapses, shutdown threats, and disruptions to government operations. The dispute centered largely on immigration and border-enforcement policies, with both parties rejecting various compromise proposals. This continues a nearly three-decade problem of Congress not passing all appropriations bills on time due to complexity of modern governance and increasing political polarization.

Astronauts For America Focus: Human spaceflight is inherently complex, risky, and dependent on cooperation among people with different expertise, cultures, organizations, and even nations. Throughout the Space Shuttle era, NASA centers, contractors, and program managers sometimes disagreed about budgets, schedules, risk, and technical approaches, but worked to find solutions that did not compromise safety. NASA's greatest achievements—from Apollo-Soyuz to the International Space Station—demonstrate the power of working across differences, while Challenger and Columbia remind us of the cost when communication and trust break down. Just as no space mission succeeds without teams working across disciplines and perspectives, our democracy works best when elected leaders can bridge differences and focus on a shared mission. As former astronauts we are not constitutional scholars, but we know how to defer to subject matter experts when analyzing complex sociotechnical failures. Our sources are primary: court decisions, congressional records, and peer-reviewed scholarship. We will publish our findings and recommendations in a series of briefings we call, "Failure is Not an Option," calling on accountable officials to "course correct," and ensure that every person is subject to and accountable under the law.

The late senator Bob Dole argued that ***"Compromise is not a sign of weakness, but a testament to our willingness to work together for the common good"***.

John F. Kennedy stated, ***"Let us not seek the Republican answer or the Democratic answer, but the right answer."***

Appeal to Our Crewmates: We need your help. Please use the "Contact Us" feature on our website, AstronautsForAmerica.org, to make suggestions on what we can do to help our democracy strengthen its commitment to that critical founding value essential to our democracy, ***Working Across Differences***.