

No Deal: How Politics Really Works

In high school civics, you hear a lot about political “log-rolling” or “horse-trading.” If you study political science in college, you get the same story: Faced with a conflict, our representatives roll up their sleeves and negotiate. Should you take a class in Public Choice, the topic of political bargaining is never far from the surface. Nobel laureate Jim Buchanan actually listed “politics as exchange” as a fundamental principle of the economic approach to politics. In markets, economic actors constantly make deals for their mutual betterment. In democracy, analogously, *political* actors constantly make deals for *their* mutual betterment.

Right?

When you patiently stare at the real world, however, this analogy of “politics as exchange” seems facile at best. Though political bargains are not unheard of, most political demands are bizarrely non-negotiable.

Imagine, for example, Democrats announcing that they’re willing to trade their votes on capital punishment for Republicans’ votes on abortion. Or give up on trans rights in exchange for \$50B of federal school funding.

Similarly, imagine Republicans offering to support higher immigration as long as immigrants were excluded from the welfare state. Or promising to abandon school choice if public K-12 establishes a 40% Republican teacher quota.

You could insist that all of these are rotten deals for the other side. If that were the key problem, however, you’d expect the other side to jump at the opportunity. “The Democrats will give us capital punishment if we give them abortion?! Sweet!” Normally, however, when you propose a bargain on any contentious political issue, *both* sides recoil in disgust.

Alternately, you could object that I’ve flipped the proposers’ priorities. But would Republicans really rejoice if the Democrats said, “Oh, you don’t want to trade abortion for capital punishment? Then how about capital punishment for abortion?” The top reaction is not, “They’re getting the better end of this deal,” but “I’m not making any deals about this.”

Political aversion to bargaining is especially remarkable at the international level. Since decolonization, countries have almost completely stopped trading territory. Russia continues to occupy four northern islands claimed by Japan. If you think Japan can just pay Russia to get the islands back and permanently settle the dispute, dream on. Even in the 90s, when Western-Russian relations were at their all-time peak, the Russian response was a hard *nyet*.

The correct answer to, “How much money does Taiwan have to give China to recognize its independence?,” similarly, is not a number. The correct answer is, “Dream on.”

Clever game theorists, when cornered, will likely appeal to “lack of credibility.” Whoever gets paid could take the money and renege, right? Yet this story, too, quickly crumbles. Credibility could explain why Taiwan doesn’t want to pay China. But it utterly fails to explain why China would refuse to name a price and cross its fingers in the hope that Taiwan will play the fool.

If all of these stories fall flat, what *does* make a wide swath of political deals so unthinkable?

First, principle. Most politically-active people have a set of moralistic precepts, rules about how the world ought to be. If two sides both believe they’re morally entitled to get everything they want, convincing either to compromise is damn hard.

Second, antipathy. Most polities are split into two big hostile tribes. The same goes for most international conflicts. If conflicting sides actively dislike each other, convincing either to compromise is damn hard.

You could protest, “Even so, top political leaders need to get results. A big part of their job is overcoming inconvenient principles and ancient antipathies.”

But who says leaders desperately “need to deliver results”? Paging Carl Sagan, could you please show me the extraordinary evidence for this extraordinary claim? The standard path to political success isn’t delivering results, but straight-up demagoguery – offering poetry instead of progress.

Why did you refuse to compromise on the death penalty to get your way on abortion? “Because whatever the other side may think, life is a sacred value.” (Cool, the slogan works for both sides).

Why did you turn down a hundred billion dollars for a few barely-inhabited islands? “Because this is a matter of national honor in the face of naked imperialism.”

Remember: In politics, **words speak louder than actions**. In democracies, this is plain: Leaders retain power as long as voters keep going to the ballot booth and saying that they like you. Yet dictators, too, hunger for their subjects’ affection. Keeping your enemies in line with fear works like a charm as long as your enemies are few.

When *should* we expect political bargaining despite these deep obstacles? In two main cases:

First, when the two sides, protestations notwithstanding, share similar principles and don’t

disagree very much. Like the budget. Or any ultra-boring issue, like fisheries or snow removal. This is what most democratic log-rolling comes down to.

Second, to avert large, sudden deteriorations. The polity will forgive you for passing up endless opportunities to make the country richer or safer. But if life *quickly* gets much worse, even the most silver-tongued demagogues struggle to keep holding the reins of state.

The rest of the time, expect politicians to avoid bargaining. In fact, gold-star demagogues know that the best way to deal with a long-lived conflict is to *let it fester*. Trying to permanently solve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is a great way to get yourself assassinated. Letting this festering conflict periodically erupt is a great way to rally the people behind you.

As I've said before, politics is cruelty.

In 1948, a Truman supporter shouted, "Give 'em hell, Harry!" Truman famously replied, "I don't give them Hell. I just tell the truth about them, and they think it's Hell." With rare exceptions, this is the official stance of all successful politicians. Their top goal isn't to persuade or bargain, but to inflame antipathy and strife. If they can't utterly win, they want to ensure that current miseries eternally endure. Can't send your enemies straight to the fires of Hell? Then let's slowly burn together here on Earth.