I have been a history and government teacher over a period of almost 40 years, and I was a practicing politician for nearly 30 years. There are two “rules” that I learned during my time in Mississippi politics. They are:

1) Whatever the problem is, the best solution is usually “between the 30 yard lines”—not at either extreme.

2) If politicians want to get a deal, even if they have very different opinions on an issue, they can get a deal 60 percent to 70 percent of the time. If they do not want to get a deal, they will not get a deal, 100 percent of the time.

The term “polarization” in politics refers to the middle ground breaking down, and the extremes becoming more powerful. I believe that, more often than not, that is a bad thing for our country.

What follows are my opinions about some of the causes of polarization in 21st century American politics: (I warn you that I sound very old, even to myself, with these complaints about our politics today.)

The coarsening of American culture—with selfishness and shouting taking the place of civil, reasoned and respectful discussion . . . what I would call the “Jerry Springers” of the world taking over our culture.

The passing of “the Greatest Generation.” The people who grew up during the Great Depression of the 1930s, went off and literally saved the world in World War II, and came back and built modern America and took on some of our country’s greatest challenges—in particular racism and the need for expanded civil rights for all Americans—these people have passed from our leadership scene. As a whole, those people understood service and sacrifice. Now in 2014, our nation has been at war for more than a decade. Did you know that less than 1 percent of Americans have served in the military in Afghanistan or Iraq? The Greatest Generation leaders had a much clearer understanding of, and concern about, the common good of the nation, and the need to sacrifice for the common good, than we appear to have today.

Television and radio talk show hosts who “demonize” anyone who disagrees with them—saying that at best their opponents are ignorant and stupid, and very likely they are corrupt and unpatriotic. One result is that many people tend to listen to what they already agree with, and not listen to, or refuse to believe, anything that challenges their opinions and beliefs.

The 24 hour news cycle, much of which is filled with talking heads with opinions, rather than hard news with hard facts, and with programs that are sensational and entertaining, intended to drive up ratings, rather than to be informative and educational.
The internet, where any nincompoop has a platform to spout whatever foolishness or meanness he or she can dream up, often anonymously.

Permanently on-going and terribly expensive political campaigns, which lead to constant fund-raising, which leads to appeals for dollars to very wealthy and powerful interest groups, who push their own narrow agendas and expect winning candidates to follow their wishes after the election is over.

Along with becoming more expensive, many political campaigns today are negative and driven by attack ads, which turn off voters, decrease voter participation, and increase cynicism among our citizens and lack of confidence in our government.

Partisan “gerrymandering” of districts in the U. S. House of Representatives, practiced by both Democrats and Republicans. Out of 435 members, only about 20 percent of House districts are normally competitive between parties. The others are “safe” Republican seats or safe Democratic seats. That means the only real contests occur in the party primary elections. Primary elections attract party activist voters, whose beliefs are usually more extreme than the typical general election voter. That in turn results in frequent victories by more extreme candidates and the defeat of more moderate candidates, in both parties.

Underlying all these factors is a belief that “my side” must win, that winning elections is far more important than governing well, and that compromise is a dirty word—compromise may well be treasonous, and it must be avoided at all costs.

In stark contrast to all that, my very old-fashioned idea about how government is supposed to work is this: When the country has a problem that needs to be addressed, we should get the chief actors on that issue, with diverse viewpoints, around a table (figuratively or literally) and negotiate in good faith until they get a deal. I think that is how government should work.

(Please remember my two rules: the best solution is usually between the 30-yard lines, and politicians who want a deal will get a deal 60 percent to 70 percent of the time.)

Now, let me cite what I believe are six of the greatest laws (or seven—two of them were part of one package adopted on the same day) that have been passed in American history. They were all written the way I believe laws should be written. They were the products of a clear need, a thorough national conversation, and decisive, historic and bipartisan decision-making that was intended to fix major problems and challenges, and move our country forward. They were passed under the leadership of one Federalist, one Democratic-Republican (which was a term used to denote Jefferson’s political party in the early 1800s), two Republicans, and two Democrats.

These laws are:

1) The Great Compromise, (or Connecticut Compromise), in the U. S. Constitutional Convention of 1787, which created a bicameral (2-house) Congress, with the Senate having
equal representation among the states and the House of Representatives being apportioned among the states according to population. It was passed under the leadership of General George Washington, president of the convention, who would come to be known as a “Federalist.” The Articles of Confederation were our previous national government, in effect from 1781-1789. Under the Articles each state had an equal vote in Congress, which was disliked by the larger states. In the 1787 Constitutional Convention, the Virginia Plan (or Large State Plan) called for states’ representation in Congress to be based on population. The New Jersey Plan (or Small State Plan) proposed to keep the practice of each state having an equal vote in Congress. In July, 1787, the Convention deadlocked and very nearly broke down over this issue. Then Roger Sherman of Connecticut proposed the Great Compromise, for a bicameral Congress that combined the features of the Virginia and New Jersey Plans. This proposal passed on a 5-to-4 vote, which paved the way for adoption of our national constitution and the establishment of a functional national government.

2) The Louisiana Purchase of 1803, under which the U. S. approximately doubled the size of the country by paying $15 million to France for the land between the Mississippi River and the Rocky Mountains. It was approved during the Presidency of Thomas Jefferson, leader of the party known as Democratic-Republicans. France had recently acquired the vast Louisiana territory from Spain, and had declared its intention to close the port of New Orleans to American shipping coming down the Mississippi River. This would be potentially devastating to farmers, trappers and merchants in the Mississippi River Valley. President Jefferson proposed to buy the port of New Orleans from France. The Emperor Napoleon, expecting a renewal of European war, offered to sell to the U. S. all of Louisiana. President Jefferson was troubled by this offer, as he believed in an inexpensive national government and also in strict construction of the Constitution. Nowhere did the Constitution authorize the national government to purchase massive new territories. But common sense and the enthusiastic approval of the American people prevailed. The U. S. Senate approved the proposed treaty on a bipartisan vote of 24 to seven, and the nation purchased more than half a billion acres for about 3 cents per acre. This action increased the future wealth, prestige and power of our nation to an incalculable degree.

3) The 13th Amendment to the Constitution, adopted in 1865, abolished slavery in the United States. It was passed under the leadership of President Abraham Lincoln, the first Republican president. The American Civil War began in April, 1861. Initially, the abolition of slavery was not the crucial issue at stake. Preserving the Union was. But as the war dragged on at terrible costs to the nation, President Lincoln believed that the existence of slavery must be ended once and for all. He proposed the 13th Amendment to the Constitution, to abolish slavery in the country. In April, 1864, it easily passed the Senate by a vote of 38 to six, but in June it failed by 93 to 65 to win the necessary 2/3 vote in the House of Representatives. The proposed amendment had overwhelming Republican support in the House, but it lacked sufficient votes among northern Democrats. If you have not seen the movie “Lincoln,” I recommend it, as it deals with this political fight in dramatic fashion. The President determined to use every lever of power and all the influence and deal-making ability he possessed to pass the amendment. Finally the re-vote in the House was called on January 31, 1865, with no one knowing what the outcome would be. It passed 119 to 56, with every Republican and 16 Democratic representatives voting “yes.”
4) The Pure Food and Drug Act and the Meat Inspection Act of 1906. These laws, passed on the same day and signed into law on the same day, gave Americans the first significant protection from being poisoned by filthy, contaminated so-called “medicines” and also food. They were passed under the leadership of the Republican President Theodore Roosevelt. The “Muckrakers” were journalists at the beginning of the 20th century who wrote detailed articles and books about many problems afflicting our country. Two of these problems were the sale of unregulated “patent medicines,” which were promised to cure every imaginable disease, including cancer, but often contained unlabeled opium, cocaine, and especially heavy doses of alcohol. Muckrakers, particularly in “Collier’s Weekly” magazine, educated the nation about these drug abuses. It was the novelist Upton Sinclair in his book “The Jungle” who exposed the filth in Chicago meat packing houses, where frequently diseased cattle and hogs were slaughtered and their meat was contaminated with rats, sawdust, insects and human waste and blood. President Theodore Roosevelt sent a team to Chicago to investigate whether these reports were true, and he was told absolutely “yes.” The two offending industries had fought federal oversight for many years, but Roosevelt went to the country and asked Congress for federal regulation of both of them. Final passage of both bills came in the House of Representatives on June 23, 1906. The Pure Food and Drug Act passed by an overwhelming 240 to 17, and the Meat Inspection Act by an even larger 296 to two.

5) The Social Security Act of 1935. Although the initial law was limited in the groups of citizens that it covered, and its coverage would be expanded numerous times in coming decades, this was the first time in American history that there was a significant effort for the federal government to provide a safety net for the aged, the poor, the unemployed, widows, orphans, and disabled citizens. It was passed under the leadership of Democratic President Franklin Roosevelt, when the nation had been suffering through the Great Depression for more than five years. Passage of Social Security was a major step in enlarging the scope of the federal government to directly help individual citizens who were suffering economic hardship. It had strong opposition in Congress. But a combination of the ongoing stresses of the Depression and President Roosevelt’s salesmanship pushed the bill through with bipartisan support. In August, 1935, the final bill passed the House 372 to 33, and passed the Senate 77 to six.

6) In the Civil Rights Act of 1964, adopted in the midst of the Civil Rights Movement, the federal government asserted its intent to prevent discrimination based on race, color, religion, sex or national origin. The law’s goals included ending unfair treatment of African Americans in voter registration, segregated schools, the workplace, and “public accommodations” such as restaurants and hotels. It was passed under the leadership of the Democratic President Lyndon Johnson, some seven months after the assassination of President John Kennedy, who had initially proposed the act. Of all six great laws described in this study, this act may be the strongest testament to bipartisanship. Lawmakers from the segregated South were very aggressive in their opposition. Passage in the House was relative easy, by a bipartisan 280 to 126. In the Senate, however, the opponents conducted a two-month “filibuster,” which could be ended only by a 2/3 vote. Aside from President Johnson, one of the heroes of this fight was Senator Everett Dirksen of Illinois, the Republican Minority leader. He persuaded enough Republican senators to join with northern Democrats to provide the 2/3 vote
needed to invoke “cloture” and end the filibuster. Eventually the bill passed the Senate 73 to 35, and passed the House of Representatives 289 to 126.

Thus were adopted what I believe were six great pieces of legislation, which made our nation better. What conclusions may we draw from these snapshots of history?

I believe consensus building in law-making is important for two very important reasons:

First, we usually get better policies for governing our country.

Second, achieving popular consensus on policies produces greater legitimacy and acceptance of our government and its laws, which results in a more unified and peaceful nation.

I will repeat the comment that I made a little while ago about those six great laws:

“They were the products of a clear need, a thorough national conversation, and decisive, historic and bipartisan decision-making that was intended to fix major problems and challenges, and move our country forward.” In every case, passage of these great laws required bipartisanship and compromise.

Now contrast that with the dysfunctional, hyper-partisan, sound-bite dominated activity that passes for deliberative government in Washington today, where it often seems that the worst criticism that can be made against someone is that he or she would compromise and work across the aisle with the elected representatives of the opposing party.

In my opinion, that attitude and that approach to governing are doing us no good. For one thing, we have very serious national problems, such as an out-of-control national debt, but our leaders are “kicking the can down the road” and apparently waiting for another generation of leaders to fix them. Perhaps even more damaging, the toxic political culture has our nation divided down the middle. When it comes to politics, it seems that half of our country is suspicious and hostile and distrustful toward the other half. I think that is wrong, and it is a threat to our nation.

Another lesson that I learned in politics is, the easiest thing in the world is to just “work one side of the street.” In other words, to talk only with people who think like you think, and to sew suspicion against people who think differently. Because if they are different, they may be dangerous and threatening—right? I don’t think so! It is much easier to believe the worst about people if you do not get out of your comfort zone and try to get to know and understand them, but just believe the stereotypes you have heard or read about them. And besides, if an elected official tries to compromise with the other party and actually govern, he or she might be defeated by a more extreme opponent in a party primary at election time. So it’s better to be safe and just curse the opposition rather than actually accomplishing anything—right? I don’t think so!

There are many factors pushing our nation toward that kind of politics in the 21st century. But in my opinion, that kind of politics is not good for our country. In fact, it is very bad for our country. It is harder to “work both sides of the street”—to work across divisions and to look for common
ground and build good will. But I think the United States badly needs that kind of effort and that kind of leadership and statesmanship.

Going back to those great laws I spoke of earlier . . . I wish our government would do the hard work to build national consensus on how to fix big national problems. I think that is what we need. I believe we need more consensus building and governing, and fewer attack ads and sound bites for the television camera.

So my message to you today is: Please reach out and engage in our national political conversation in a positive way. Please “work both sides of the street.” Please be part of the solution and not part of the problem.

Thank you, and thanks to Jackson State University for honoring me by inviting me to be with you today!