

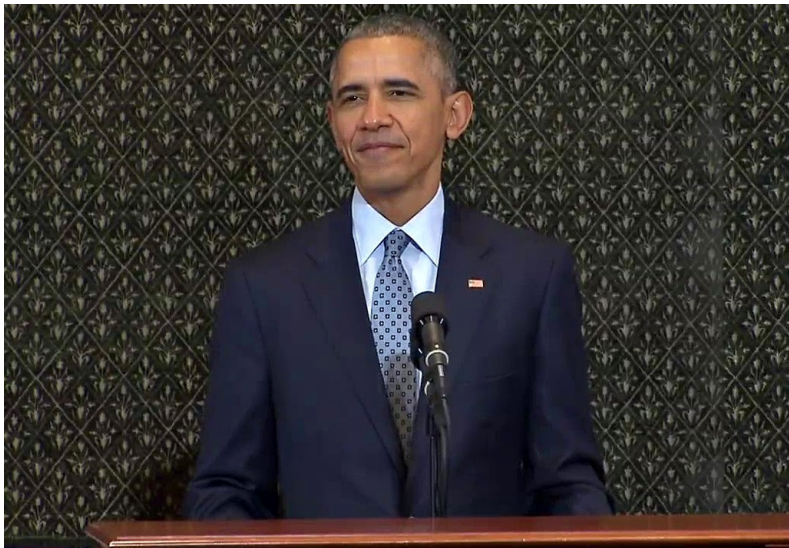


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Barack Obama

Illinois General Assembly Address

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Mr. Speaker, Mr. President, members of the General Assembly, my fellow Illinoisans: It's actually kind of fun to start a speech like that twice in one month.

What an incredible privilege it is to address this chamber. And to Governor Rauner, Senator Durbin, members of Congress, Speaker Madigan, Former Governor Pat Quinn, Mayor Langfelder and the people of Springfield -- thank you for such a warm welcome as I come back home. Thank you. Thank you so much. Thank you. It's good to be home. Thank you, guys. Thank you. Thank you. It is great to see so many old friends like John Cullerton and Emil Jones. I miss you guys.

It's great to be in the State Capitol. Being here today calls to mind the first time I spoke on the Senate floor, almost 20 years ago. And I was passionate, idealistic, ready to make a difference. Just to stand in that magnificent chamber was enough to fill me up with a heightened sense of purpose.



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And I probably needed a little dose of reality when I first arrived. So one day, I rose to speak about a bill. And I thought I'd made some compelling points, with irrefutable logic. And I was about to sit down, feeling pretty good about myself, when Pate Philip sauntered over to my desk. Now, there are some young people here, so for those of you who don't remember, Pate Philip was the Senate Majority Leader at the time. He was a Marine, and big shock of white hair, chomped on a cigar; was so politically incorrect that you don't even know how to describe it. But he always treated me well. And he came by and he slapped me on the back, he said, "Kid, that was a pretty good speech. In fact, I think you changed a lot of minds. But you didn't change any votes." Then he singled, and they gaveled, and we got blown out.

So that was my first lesson in humility. The next came when I presented my own first bill. It was a simple piece of legislation that would make it a lot easier for Illinois manufacturers to hire graduating community college students. I didn't know any serious opposition, so I asked for a vote. And what I got was a good hazing. I assume that this custom still exists.

So a senior colleague put the vote on hold to ask, "Could you correctly pronounce your name for me? I'm having a little trouble with it." "Obama," I said. "Is that Irish?" he asked. And being in my early 30s at the time, I was a little cocky -- I said, "It will be when I run countywide." "That was a good joke," he said, but he wasn't amused. "This bill is still going to die."

And he went on to complain that my predecessor's name was easier to pronounce than mine, that I didn't have cookies at my desk like she did, how would I ever expect to get any votes without having cookies on my desk. "I definitely urge a no vote," he said, "whatever your name is."

And for the next several minutes, the Senate debated on whether I should add an apostrophe to my name for the Irish, or whether the fact that "Obama" ends in a vowel meant I actually belonged to the Italians -- and just how many trees had had to die to print this terrible, miserable bill, anyway.

And I was chastened. And I said, "If I survive this event, I will be eternally grateful and consider this a highlight of my legal and legislative career." And I asked for a vote. And initially the tote board showed that it was going down, but at the last minute it flipped and my bill passed. But I was duly reminded that I was a freshman in the minority. And I want to thank all my former colleagues in both chambers for not letting me forget it.

To be a rookie in the minority party, as I was, is not much fun in any legislature. We were called "mushrooms" -- because we were kept in the dark and fed a lot of manure. But one benefit of being in such a position -- not being invited into the meetings where the big deals were being made -- is that I had a lot of time to get to know my colleagues. And many of us were away from our families, and so we became friends.



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We went to fish fries together. We'd go to union halls. We'd play in golf scrambles. We had a great bipartisan poker game at the Illinois Manufacturer's Association. Boro Relijie would host, and folks like Dave Luechtefeld and Terry Link, others would join in. We'd eat downstairs -- and I can't say I miss the horseshoes. But away from the glare of TV, or the tweets, or the GIFs of today's media, what we discovered was that despite our surface differences -- Democrats and Republicans, downstate hog farmers, inner-city African Americans, suburban businesspeople, Latinos from Pilsen or Little Village -- despite those differences, we actually had a lot in common. We cared about our communities. We cared about our families. We cared about America.

We fought hard for our positions. I don't want to be nostalgic here -- we voted against each other all the time. And party lines held most of the time. But those relationships, that trust we'd built meant that we came at each debate assuming the best in one another and not the worst.

I was reminiscing with Christine Radogno -- we came in in the same class. And we were on opposite sides of most issues, but I always trusted her and believed that she was a good person. And if we had a bill that we might be able to work together on, it was a pleasure to work with her on. Or Dave Syverson, who -- we worked together on the Public Health and Welfare Committee, and we got some important work done that made a difference in people's lives.

And we didn't call each other idiots or fascists who were trying to destroy America. Because then we'd have to explain why we were playing poker or having a drink with an idiot or a fascist who was trying to destroy America.

And that respect gave us room for progress. And after I'd served here for six years, my party finally gained the majority. Emil Jones became the President of the Senate. And by then, I had made some friends across the aisle -- like Kirk Dillard, who I believe is here today, and we were able to pass the first serious ethics reform in 25 years. And working closely with law enforcement, who knew by then that we cared about cops and sheriffs and prosecutors. And working with folks like John Cullerton, we passed Illinois' first racial profiling law, which was good for police officers and minority communities.

And because someone like my friend, John Bouman, who worked at the Shriver Center on Poverty Law, helped us build coalitions across the state, including with business, and was able to then reach out to Republicans, we were able to increase tax credits for the working poor and expand health insurance to children in need.

And we wouldn't bend on our most deeply held principles, but we were willing to forge compromises in pursuit of a larger goal. We were practical when we needed to be. We could fight like heck on one issue and then shake hands on the next.



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Somebody like Jesse White was able to travel around the state and people didn't even know what party he was necessarily from because he brought so much joy with the tumblers and the work that they were doing.

So I want you to know that this is why I've always believed so deeply in a better kind of politics, in part because of what I learned here in this legislature. Because of what I learned traveling across the state, visiting some of your districts, before I was running statewide, before I was a U.S. senator; learning all the corners of this state -- this most-representative of states. A state of small towns and rich farmland, and the world's greatest city. A microcosm of America, where Democrats and Republicans and independents, and good people of every ethnicity and every faith shared certain bedrock values.

I just saw a story the other day showing that if you rank all 50 states across categories like education levels and household incomes, and race and religion, the one state that most closely mirrors America as a whole is Illinois, this state.

And I learned by talking to your constituents that if you were willing to listen, it was possible to bridge a lot of differences. I learned that most Americans aren't following the ins and outs of the legislature carefully, but they instinctively know that issues are more complicated than rehearsed sound bites; that they play differently in different parts of the state and in the country. They understand the difference between realism and idealism; the difference between responsibility and recklessness. They had the maturity to know what can and cannot be compromised, and to admit the possibility that the other side just might have a point.

And it convinced me that if we just approached our national politics the same way the American people approach their daily lives -- at the workplace, at the Little League game; at church or the synagogue -- with common sense, and a commitment to fair play and basic courtesy, that there is no problem that we couldn't solve together.

And that was the vision that guided me when I first ran for the United States Senate. That's the vision I shared when I said we are more than just a collection of red states and blue states, but we are the United States of America. And that vision is why, nine years ago today, on the steps of the Old State Capitol just a few blocks from here, I announced my candidacy for President.

Now, over these nine years, I want you to know my faith in the generosity and the fundamental goodness of the American people has been rewarded and affirmed over and over and over again. I've seen it in the determination of autoworkers who had been laid off but were sure that they could once again be part of a great, iconic American industry. I've seen it in the single mom who goes back to school even as she's working and looking after her kids because she wants a better life for that next generation. I've seen it the vision and risk-taking of small businessmen. I've seen it time and time again in the courage of our troops.



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But it's been noted often by pundits that the tone of our politics hasn't gotten better since I was inaugurated, in fact it's gotten worse; that there's still this yawning gap between the magnitude of our challenges and the smallness of our politics. Which is why, in my final State of the Union address, and in the one before that, I had to acknowledge that one of my few regrets is my inability to reduce the polarization and meanness in our politics. I was able to be part of that here and yet couldn't translate it the way I wanted to into our politics in Washington.

And people ask me why I've devoted so much time to this topic. And I tell them it's not just because I'm President, and the polarization and the gridlock are frustrating to me. The fact is we've gotten a heck of a lot done these past seven years, despite the gridlock. We saved the economy from a depression. We brought back an auto industry from the brink of collapse. We helped our businesses create 14 million new jobs over the past six years. We cut the unemployment rate from 10 percent to 4.9 percent. We covered nearly 18 million more Americans with health insurance. We ignited a clean energy revolution. We got bin Laden. We brought the vast majority of our troops home to their families. We got a lot done. We're still getting a lot done.

And our political system helped make these things possible, and the list could go on. There's no doubt America is better off today than when I took office. I didn't want this to be a State of Union speech where we have the standing up and the sitting down. Come on, guys, you know better than that. No, no, no, I've got a serious point to make here. I've got a serious point to make here because this is part of the issue, right? We have an importation of our politics nationally, and on cable and talk radio, and it seeps into everything.

The point I'm trying to make is I care about fixing our politics not only because I'm the President today, or because some of my initiatives have been blocked by Congress -- that happens to every President, happens to every governor, happens to everybody who participates -- anybody who participates in a democracy. You're not going to get 100 percent of what you want all the time.

The reason this is important to me is, next year I'll still hold the most important title of all, and that's the title of citizen. And as an American citizen, I understand that our progress is not inevitable -- our progress has never been inevitable. It must be fought for, and won by all of us, with the kind of patriotism that our fellow Illinoisan, Adlai Stevenson, once described not as a "short, frenzied outburst of emotion, but the tranquil and steady dedication of a lifetime." It requires citizenship and a sense that we are one.

And today that kind of citizenship is threatened by a poisonous political climate that pushes people away from participating in our public life. It turns folks off. It discourages them, makes them cynical. And when that happens, more powerful and extreme voices fill the void. When that happens, progress stalls. And that's how we end up with only a handful of lobbyists setting the agenda.



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That's how we end up with policies that are detached from what working families face every day. That's how we end up with the well-connected who publicly demand that government stay out of their business but then whisper in its ear for special treatment.

That's how our political system gets consumed by small things when we are a people that are called to do great things -- to give everybody a shot in a changing economy; to keep America safe and strong in an uncertain world; to repair our climate before it threatens everything we leave for our kids.

So that's what's on my mind as I come back to Illinois today. This is what will be a focus of mine over the course of this year and beyond: What can we do, all of us, together, to try to make our politics better? And I speak to both sides on this. As all of you know, it could be better, and all of you would feel prouder of the work you do if it was better.

So, first, let's put to rest a couple of myths about our politics. One is the myth that the problems with our politics are new. They are not. American politics has never been particularly gentle or high-minded -- especially not during times of great change.

As I mentioned when I visited a mosque in Maryland last week, Thomas Jefferson's opponent tried to stir things up by suggesting he was a Muslim. So I'm in good company. But that's nothing compared to the newspaper which warned that if Jefferson were elected, "murder, robbery, rape, adultery, and incest will be openly taught and practiced." His Vice President, Aaron Burr, literally killed Alexander Hamilton in a duel. I don't even want to tell you what Andrew Jackson's opponents said about his mamma. Lincoln, himself, was routinely called "weak, wishy-washy," a "yahoo," "an unshapely man," "the obscene ape of Illinois," and, my favorite -- a "facetious pettifogger." I don't know what that means -- but it sounds insulting.

So, comparatively speaking, today is not that bad -- as long as you've got a thick skin. As Harold Washington once said: "Politics ain't beanbag." It's tough. And that's okay.

There's also the notion sometimes that our politics are broken because politicians are significantly more corrupt or beholden to big money than they used to be. There's no doubt that lobbyists still have easier access to the halls of power than the average American. There's a lot of work that we need to do to make sure that the system works for ordinary people and not just the well-connected. That's true at the federal level; that's true at the state level. Folks aren't entirely wrong when they feel as if the system too often is rigged and does not address their interests.

But, relative to the past, listen, I'm confident we've got enough rules and checks to prevent anyone in my Cabinet from siphoning whiskey tax revenue into their own pockets like President Grant's administration did. Until FDR went after the ward bosses of Tammany Hall, they controlled judges and politicians as they pleased -- patronage, bribery, and money laundering. It's not as easy as it was to whip up tens of thousands of phantom votes, whether in Chicago or South Texas.



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From the Teapot Dome to Watergate, history tells us we should always be vigilant and demand that our public servants follow the highest ethical standards. But the truth is that the kind of corruption that is blatant, of the sort that we saw in the past, is much less likely in today's politics. And the Justice Department and the media work hard to keep it that way. And that's a very good thing. So we don't want to romanticize the past and think somehow it's a difference in the people being elected.

And it also isn't true that today's issues are inherently more polarizing than the past. I remember, we endured four years of Civil War that resulted in hundreds of thousands of dead Americans. This country was divided on a fundamental question. Before Pearl Harbor, entering into World War II was a highly charged debate. The fault lines of Vietnam, the culture wars of the '60s -- they still echo into our politics a half-century later.

We've been arguing since our founding over the proper size and role of government; the meaning of individual freedom and equality; over war and peace, and the best way to give all of our citizens opportunity. And these are important debates that everybody should join, with all the rigor that a free people require.

My point is, the problem is not that politicians are worse, the problem is not that the issues are tougher. And so it's important for us to understand that the situation we find ourselves in today is not somehow unique or hopeless. We've always gone through periods when our democracy seems stuck. And when that happens, we have to find a new way of doing business.

We're in one of those moments. We've got to build a better politics -- one that's less of a spectacle and more of a battle of ideas; one that's less of a business and more of a mission; one that understands the success of the American experiment rests on our willingness to engage all our citizens in this work.

And that starts by acknowledging that we do have a problem. And we all know it. What's different today is the nature and the extent of the polarization. How ideologically divided the parties are is brought about by some of the same long-term trends in our politics and our culture. The parties themselves have become more homogenous than ever. A great sorting has taken place that drove Southern conservatives out of the Democratic Party, Northern moderates out of the Republican Party, so you don't have within each party as much diversity of views.

And you've got a fractured media. Some folks watch FOX News; some folks read the Huffington Post. And very often, what's profitable is the most sensational conflict and the most incendiary sound bites. And we can choose our own facts. We don't have a common basis for what's true and what's not. I mean, if I listened to some of these conservative pundits, I wouldn't vote for me either. I sound like a scary guy.



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You've got advocacy groups that, frankly, sometimes benefit from keeping their members agitated as much as possible, assured of the righteousness of their cause. Unlimited dark money -- money that nobody knows where it's coming from, who's paying -- drowns out ordinary voices. And far too many of us surrender our voices entirely by choosing not to vote. And this polarization is pervasive and it seeps into our society to the point where surveys even suggest that many Americans wouldn't want their kids to date someone from another political party. Now, some of us don't want our kids dating, period. But that's a losing battle.

But this isn't just an abstract problem for political scientists. This has real impact on whether or not we can get things done together. This has a real impact on whether families are able to support themselves, or whether the homeless are getting shelter on a cold day. It makes a difference as to the quality of the education that kids are getting. This is not an abstraction.

But so often, these debates, particularly in Washington but increasingly in state legislatures, become abstractions. It's as if there are no people involved, it's just cardboard cutouts and caricatures of positions. It encourages the kind of ideological fealty that rejects any compromise as a form of weakness. And in a big, complicated democracy like ours, if we can't compromise, by definition, we can't govern ourselves.

Look, I am a progressive Democrat. I am proud of that. I make no bones about it. I'm going to make another point here. I believe that people should have access to health care. I believe they should have access to a good public education. I believe that workers deserve a higher minimum wage. I believe that collective bargaining is critical to the prospects of the middle class, and that pensions are vital to retirement, as long as they're funded responsibly.

Hold on a second. Hold on a second. Sit down, Democrats. Sit down. Sit down -- just for a second. I appreciate that, but I want to make this larger point.

I believe we're judged by how we care for the poor and the vulnerable. I believe that in order to live up to our ideals, we have to continually fight discrimination in all its forms. I believe in science, and the science behind things like climate change, and that a transition to cleaner sources of energy will help preserve the planet for future generations.

I believe in a tough, smart foreign policy that says America will never hesitate to protect our people and our allies, but that we should use every element of our power and never rush to war.

Those are the things I believe. But here's the point I want to make. I believe that there are a lot of Republicans who share many of these same values, even though they may disagree with me on the means to achieve them. I think sometimes my Republican colleagues make constructive points about outdated regulations that may need to be changed, or programs that even though well-intended, didn't always work the way they were supposed to.



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And where I've got an opportunity to find some common ground, that doesn't make me a sellout to my own party. That applies -- well, we'll talk later, Duncan. This is what happens, everybody starts cherry-picking. One thing I've learned is folks don't change.

So trying to find common ground doesn't make me less of a Democrat or less of a progressive. It means I'm trying to get stuff done.

And the same applies to a Republican who, heaven forbid, might agree with me on a particular issue -- or if I said America is great, decided to stand during a State of Union. It's not a controversial proposition. You're not going to get in trouble.

But the fact that that's hard to do is a testament to how difficult our politics has become. Because folks are worried, well, I'm going to get yelled at by you, or this blogger is going to write that, or this talk show host is going to talk about me, and suddenly I've got to challenger, and calling me a RINO or a not a real progressive.

So when I hear voices in either party boast of their refusal to compromise as an accomplishment in and of itself, I'm not impressed. All that does is prevent what most Americans would consider actual accomplishments -- like fixing roads, educating kids, passing budgets, cleaning our environment, making our streets safe.

It cuts both ways, guys. See, suddenly everybody is standing. This is fascinating to watch. The point is, it cuts both ways.

Our Founders trusted us with the keys to this system of self-government. Our politics is the place where we try to make this incredible machinery work; where we come together to settle our differences and solve big problems, do big things together that we could not possibly do alone. And our Founders anchored all this in a visionary Constitution that separates power and demands compromise, precisely to prevent one party, or one wing of a party, or one faction, or some powerful interests from getting 100 percent of its way.

So when either side makes blanket promises to their base that it can't possibly meet -- tax cuts without cuts to services -- "everything will be fine, but we won't spend any money" -- war without shared sacrifice -- "we're going to be tough, but don't worry, it will be fine" -- union bashing or corporate bashing without acknowledging that both workers and businesses make our economy run -- that kind of politics means that the supporters will be perennially disappointed. It only adds to folks' sense that the system is rigged. It's one of the reasons why we see these big electoral swings every few years. It's why people are so cynical.

Now, I don't pretend to have all the answers to this. These trends will not change overnight. If I did, I would have already done them through an executive action. That was just a joke, guys. Relax. A sense of humor is also helpful.



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But I do want to offer some steps that we can take that I believe would help reform our institutions and move our system in a way that helps reflect our better selves. And these aren't particularly original, but I just want to go ahead and mention them.

First is to take, or at least reduce, some of the corrosive influence of money in our politics.

Now, this year, just over 150 families -- 150 families -- have spent as much on the presidential race as the rest of America combined. Today, a couple of billionaires in one state can push their agenda, dump dark money into every state -- nobody knows where it's coming from -- mostly used on these dark ads, everybody is kind of dark and the worst picture possible. And there's some ominous voice talking about how they're destroying the country.

And they spend this money based on some ideological preference that really is disconnected to the realities of how people live. They're not that concerned about the particulars of what's happening in a union hall in Galesburg, and what folks are going through trying to find a job. They're not particularly familiar with what's happening at a VFW post. [Phone rings.] Somebody's phone is on. In Carbondale. They haven't heard personally from farmers outside of the Quads and what they're going through. Those are the voices that should be outweighing a handful of folks with a lot of money. I'm not saying the folks with a lot of money should have no voice; I'm saying they shouldn't be able to drown out everybody else's.

And that's why I disagree with the Supreme Court's Citizens United decision. I don't believe that money is speech, or that political spending should have no limits, or that it shouldn't be disclosed. I still support a constitutional amendment to set reasonable limits on financial influence in America's elections.

But amending the Constitution is an extremely challenging and time-consuming process -- as it should be. So we're going to have to come up with more immediate ways to reduce the influence of money in politics. There are a lot of good proposals out there, and we have to work to find ones that can gain some bipartisan support -- because a handful of families and hidden interests shouldn't be able to bankroll elections in the greatest democracy on Earth.

The second step towards a better politics is rethinking the way that we draw our congressional districts. Now, let me point this out -- I want to point this out, because this is another case of cherry-picking here. This tends to be popular in states where Democrats have been drawing the lines among Republicans, and less popular among Republicans where they control drawing the lines. So let's be very clear here -- nobody has got clean hands on this thing. Nobody has got clean hands on this thing.

The fact is, today technology allows parties in power to precision-draw constituencies so that the opposition's supporters are packed into as few districts as possible. That's why our districts are shaped like earmuffs or spaghetti. It's also how one party can get more seats even when it gets fewer votes.



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And while this gerrymandering may insulate some incumbents from a serious challenge from the other party, it also means that the main thing those incumbents are worried about are challengers from the most extreme voices in their own party. That's what's happened in Congress. You wonder why Congress doesn't work? The House of Representatives there, there may be a handful -- less than 10 percent -- of districts that are even competitive at this point. So if you're a Republican, all you're worried about is what somebody to your right is saying about you, because you know you're not going to lose a general election. Same is true for a lot of Democrats. So our debates move away from the middle, where most Americans are, towards the far ends of the spectrum. And that polarizes us further.

Now, this is something we have the power to fix. And once the next census rolls around and we have the most up-to-date picture of America's population, we should change the way our districts are drawn. In America, politicians should not pick their voters; voters should pick their politicians. And this needs to be done across the nation, not just in a select few states. It should be done everywhere.

Now, the more Americans use their voice and participate, the less captive our politics will be to narrow constituencies. No matter how much undisclosed money is spent, no matter how many negative ads are run, no matter how unrepresentative a district is drawn, if everybody voted, if a far larger number of people voted, that would overcome in many ways some of these other institutional barriers. It would make our politics better.

And that's why a third step towards a better politics is making voting easier, not harder; and modernizing it for the way that we live now.

Now, this shouldn't be controversial, guys. You liked the redistricting thing, but not letting people vote. I should get some applause on that, too.

Listen, three years ago, I set up a bipartisan commission to improve the voting experience in America. It had the election lawyers from my campaign and from Mitt Romney's campaign. They got together outside of the context of immediate politics. And I actually want to thank this assembly for moving to adopt some of its recommendations. Thanks to the good work of my dear friend, Senator Don Harmon, and many of you, there's a new law going into effect this year that will allow Illinoisans to register and vote at the polls on Election Day. It expands early voting -- something that makes it a lot easier for working folks and busy parents to go vote.

Think about it. If you're a single mom, and you've got to take public transportation to punch a clock, work round the clock, get home, cook dinner on a Tuesday in bad weather -- that's tough. Why would we want to make it so that she couldn't do it on a Saturday or a Sunday? How is that advancing our democracy?

So this law will make a difference. I'm proud of my home state for helping to lead the way.



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And we know this works. In 2012 and 2014, the states with the highest voter turnout all had same-day registration. So today, I ask every state in America to join us -- reduce these barriers to voting. Make it easier for your constituents to get out and vote.

And I'd encourage this assembly to take the next step. Senator Manar and Representative Gabel have bills that would automatically register every eligible citizen to vote when they apply for a driver's license. That will protect the fundamental right of everybody. Democrats, Republicans, independents, seniors, folks with disabilities, the men and women of our military -- it would make sure that it was easier for them to vote and have their vote counted.

And as one of your constituents, I think you should pass that legislation right away. I think the Governor should sign it without delay. Let's make the Land of Lincoln a leader in voter participation. That's something we should be proud to do. Let's set the pace -- encourage other states across the country to follow our lead, making automatic voter registration the new norm across America.

Now, just during the course of this talk, it's been interesting to watch the dynamics, obviously. In part because so much of our politics now is just designed for short-term, tactical gain. If you think that having more voters will hurt you on Election Day, then suddenly you're not interested in participation. And if you think that the gerrymandering is helping you instead of hurting you, then you're not for those proposals.

We get trapped in these things. We know better. If we were setting up a set of rules ahead of time, and you didn't know where you stood, which party you were going to be in, if you didn't have all the data and the poll numbers to tell you what's going to give you an edge or not, you'd set up a system that was fair. You'd encourage everybody to be part of it. That's what we learned in our civics books. That's how it should work.

The fact that we can't do that, that brings me to my last point, which is, even as we change the way system works, we also have a responsibility to change the way that we, as elected officials and as citizens, work together. Because this democracy only works when we get both right -- when the system is fair, but also when we build a culture that is trying to make it work.

Recently, I've been thinking a lot about something a friend of mine, Deval Patrick, once said to his constituents when he was governor of Massachusetts. He said, "Insist from us and from each other a modicum of civility as the condition for serving you." This is what he told voters. "Insist on us having a modicum of civility."

I think that's something that all of us, as Americans, have to insist from each other. Our children are watching what we do. They don't just learn it in school, they learn it by watching us -- the way we conduct ourselves, the way we treat each other. If we lie about each other, they learn it's okay to lie.



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If we make up facts and ignore science, then they just think it's just their opinion that matters. If they see us insulting each other like school kids, then they think, well, I guess that's how people are supposed to behave. The way we respect -- or don't -- each other as citizens will determine whether or not the hard, frustrating, but absolutely necessary work of self-government continues.

I've got daughters that are getting older now, and one of the most important things about being a parent I think is them just seeing what you do not when you're out in public, not when you're dealing with somebody important, but just how do you do -- how do you treat people generally. And it makes me much more mindful. I want to live up to their expectations.

And in that same way, I want this democracy to live up to the people's expectations. We can't move forward if all we do is tear each other down. And the political incentives, as they are today, too often rewards that kind of behavior. That's what gets attention. So it will require some courage just to act the way our parents taught us to act. It shouldn't, but in this political environment apparently it does. We've got to insist to do better from each other, for each other.

Rather than reward those who'd disenfranchise any segment of America, we've got to insist that everybody arm themselves with information, and facts, and that they vote. If 99 percent of us voted, it wouldn't matter how much the 1 percent spends on our elections.

Rather than reward the most extreme voices, or the most divisive language, or who is best at launching schoolyard taunts, we should insist on a higher form of discourse in our common life, one based on empathy and respect, -- which does not mean you abandon principle. It doesn't mean you're not tough.

Rather than paint those who disagree with us as motivated by malice, to suggest that any of us lack patriotism -- we can insist, as Lincoln did, that we are not enemies, but friends; that our fellow Americans are not only entitled to a different point of view, but that they love this country as much as we do.

Rather than reward a 24/7 media that so often thrives on sensationalism and conflict, we have to stand up and insist, no, reason matters, facts matter; issues are complicated. When folks just make stuff up, they can't go unchallenged. And that's true for Democrats if you hear a Democratic make something up, and that's true for a Republican if you see a Republican cross that line.

Rather than accept the notion that compromise is a sellout to one side, we've got to insist on the opposite -- that it can be a genuine victory that means progress for all sides. And rather than preventing our kids from dating people in other parties -- well, I may have issues about dating, generally -- but we can trust that we've raised our kids to do the right thing, and to look at the qualities of people's character, not some label attached to them.



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And maybe, most of all, whenever someone begins to grow cynical about our politics, or believes that their actions can't make a difference or it's not worth participating in, we've got to insist, even against all evidence to the contrary, that in fact they can make a difference. And in this job of being a citizen of the United States of America, that's a big deal. It's something we should revere and take seriously.

Abraham Lincoln wasn't always the giant that we think of today. He lacked formal schooling. His businesses and his law practices often struggled. After just one term in Congress, his opposition to the Mexican-American War damaged his reputation so badly he did not run for reelection. He was denounced as a traitor, a demagogue, an enemy sympathizer. He returned to his law practice and admitted he was losing interest in politics entirely.

And then something happened that shook his conscience. Congress effectively overturned the Missouri Compromise, that flawed and fragile law that had prohibited slavery in the North and legalized it in the South, but left the question ultimately unsettled. And stunned by this news, Lincoln said he'd been roused "as he had never been before" over what it meant for America's future.

And so, here in Springfield, at the state fair, he got back in the game and he delivered the first of his great anti-slavery speeches to a crowd of thousands. And over the next six years, even as he lost two more political races, his arguments with Douglas and others shaped the national debate. That's when he uttered those brilliant words on the steps of the Old State Capitol that "A house divided against itself cannot stand;" that "this government cannot endure, permanently, half slave and half free."

He became the first Republican President, and I believe our greatest President. And through his will and his words and, most of all, his character, he held a nation together and he helped free a people.

And those victories did not solve all of our problems. He would be attacked at times for the compromises he was prepared to make by abolitionists and folks from his own side. It would be 100 years more until the law guaranteed African Americans the equal rights that they had been promised. Even 50 years after that, our march is not yet finished. But because Lincoln made that decision not to give up, and not to let other voices speak for him, and because he held in his mind the strength of principle but the vision, the ability to understand those who disagreed with him, and showed them respect even as he fought them -- because of what he set in motion, generations of free men and women of all races and walks of life have had the chance to choose this country's course. What a great gift. What a great legacy he has bestowed up.



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And that's the thing about America. We are a constant work of progress. And our success has never been certain, none of our journey has been preordained. And there's always been a gap between our highest ideals and the reality that we witness every single day. But what makes us exceptional -- what makes us Americans -- is that we have fought wars, and passed laws, and reformed systems, and organized unions, and staged protests, and launched mighty movements to close that gap, and to bring the promise and the practice of America into closer alignment. We've made the effort to form that "more perfect union."

Nine years to the day that I first announced for this office, I still believe in that politics of hope. And for all the challenges of a rapidly changing world, and for all the imperfections of our democracy, the capacity to reach across our differences and choose that kind of politics -- not a cynical politics, not a politics of fear, but that kind of politics -- sustained over the tranquil and steady dedication of a lifetime, that's something that remains entirely up to us.

Thank you, Illinois. God bless you. God bless America.

It's good to see all you. I miss you guys.