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My internship at Senator Dianne Feinstein's office during the Fall Semester 2011 was an incredibly educational experience, not only because it allowed me learn more about the federal legislative process, but also because it demonstrated the central importance of political compromise and negotiation to both civility and democratic engagement.

For example, Senator Feinstein-- a Democrat-- is currently Chairwoman of the Senate Caucus on International Narcotics Control, where she routinely works with members of the opposite party, including Co-Chairman Chuck Grassley (R-- Iowa). Senators Grassley and Feinstein recently introduced the Transnational Drug Trafficking Act of 2011 (S. 1612), which would help combat international drug trafficking organizations by making it easier for prosecutors to bring charges against drug traffickers from foreign countries. Similarly, Senator Feinstein recently worked closely with Senator Jon Kyl (a Republican from Arizona) to introduce the Border Tunnel Prevention Act of 2011 (S. 1236), which targets illegal tunnels constructed by drug traffickers on the U.S.-Mexico border. While the media tend to focus on instances of Congressional gridlock, therefore, my internship at Senator Feinstein's Capitol Hill office allowed me to see bipartisanship and political compromise in action.

This spirit of compromise and bipartisanship is essential to effective democratic engagement. When drafting and debating legislation, Senate and House members must consider not only the proposed law's impact on their constituents, but also its ramifications for the nation as a whole. (This balancing of national and local interests is particularly acute for Senators, who are jointly charged with representing the interests of an entire state.) Since nearly all federally-enacted laws will have a broad national impact, and can potentially affect the lives of millions of people, Senators and House members must frequently confer with one another while drafting legislation so that they can simultaneously represent their constituencies and look out for the national welfare at large. Such an exchange of ideas depends on the ability to communicate in a professional and civil manner. It also depends, in large part, on compromise.

In news reports, we often hear about members of Congress who are unwilling to compromise on issues they perceive to be of vital importance to their constituents. Such unwillingness to compromise is destructive because it undermines the democratic process; ideologically rigid positions lead to congressional gridlock and ultimately to policies that reflect narrow constituencies rather than the interests the American people at large.

My internship with the office of Senator Feinstein, however, showed me that political compromise and bipartisanship in Congress are both possible. In addition to giving me firsthand experience in the day-to-day operation of a Senate office, my internship allowed me to view political compromise not as a sign of ideological weakness or equivocation, but as a vital part of our democratic process.