

# **Making sense of polarization and hyper-partisanship: Some observations for funders, advocates, and their evaluators**

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It is a pleasure to be here. I'm grateful to David and the Aspen Forum for this opportunity to share and discuss some issues we have been grappling with in our work. It is good to be doing so with Julia and Tanya from the Center for Evaluation Innovation here today, as they have been invaluable teammates in this endeavor.

I've been asked to discuss how changing political contexts could be impacting advocacy efforts in ways that funders, advocates, and evaluators need to take into account in their work. I'll focus on the challenges of polarization and hyper-partisanship that have featured so prominently in American politics in recent years. I'll begin by introducing a metaphor that will give us a better feel for these issues. Then we will review some of the clearest manifestations of polarization and hyper-partisanship in order to better understand them. With the table set in this way, we will turn to consider how these dynamics are impacting different modes of policy-making. Finally, to prompt further discussion, I'll touch on some potential blind spots that may be clouding our collective vision.

The advertised title of this talk is *Assessing Advocacy Efforts through the Kaleidoscope of Politics and Policy Change*. However, as I was preparing my remarks, this seemed a bit abstract as metaphor for the visceral nature of politics and policy-making at present. Thus having baited you, let me switch up on you. I'd like to use an earthier metaphor – one conjuring up physical combat. Imagine two beaten-up fighters answering the bell to duke it out for another round.

The boxing metaphor works better, but even it stands in need of further refinement. As the late, great political scientist James Q. Wilson observed, it is always tempting to think of American politics as a traditional prize fight, with fixed rounds of finite duration, rules against head-butting or hitting below the belt, and an impartial referee. At the end of the political combat, i.e., after the election, one fighter is the declared the winner. This is how things work in the idealized parliamentary model admired by American reformers from Woodrow Wilson to Newt Gingrich. In some places, this is how politics works. It is playing out right now in Canada, where Justin Trudeau and his new liberal government, having defeated their opponents and won a healthy majority in parliament, are now carrying out the policy mandate on which they ran for office.

This model of politics is also more or less explicit in the media coverage of the presidential campaign. Witness the serious-sounding “Year of Decision” rhetoric used to drum up viewership for campaign related events and stories. The implicit narrative is that voters will decide who will win the fight and be elected president – be it Hillary or Ted or Bernie or the Donald. Then the victor gets the champion’s belt and the right to govern, and can move to enact all the campaign promises they made in Des Moines and Dixville Notch.

But as James Q. Wilson went on to point out, the prize fight metaphor is really not how things work in the United States. Here, politics and policy-making come together in what looks much more like a barroom brawl in a classic western: “Anybody can join in, the combatants fight all comers and sometimes change sides, no referee is in charge, and the fight lasts not for a fixed number of rounds but indefinitely or until everyone drops from exhaustion.”<sup>1</sup>

In the U.S. system, we rarely if ever have the same electoral resolution producing the clear mandate to govern that you have in Westminster-style parliamentary systems. Our campaigns are instead permanent; politics and policy are always intertwined. Yes this is a presidential election year. But – contrary to what you might reasonably be inferring from media coverage of the campaign – whoever will be elected president can do very little, especially in domestic policy, without the approval of our two strikingly different and independent houses of Congress. We have a lower house of 435 independently elected members who answer to several hundred thousand constituents each. All House seats are up for election every 2 years, in ways that may or may not mesh with the presidential outcome at the national level. Indeed, the most plausible scenarios for this year will present us on November 2 with a Democratic president and a Republican House that will oppose her policies at nearly every turn, and vice versa. We also have an upper house of 100 Senators representing 50 states. They answer to their constituents over a much longer time frame -- every six years -- and in a staggered fashion, with only 1/3 of the seats being up for grabs every two years.

The different and discordant constituencies and time horizons of the presidency, Senate, and House are, as we say out in Silicon Valley, not a bug but a feature of our constitutional design. The Framers of the Constitution sought to invest officeholders in these three institutions with different perspectives, incentives, and means for operationalizing them. The Framers believed that in the large and diverse republic they were establishing, whatever policies the national government adopted had to be backed by a deep and wide consensus among the disparate peoples and states involved. Only such a consensus, and the negotiation and compromises needed to bring it about, would produce the requisite legitimacy and continuity in policy that would in turn enable the republic to endure.

So it was the Founders, and the system of government they bequeathed to us, that created the never-ending and often bitterly fought barroom brawl that is politics and policy-making in the United States.

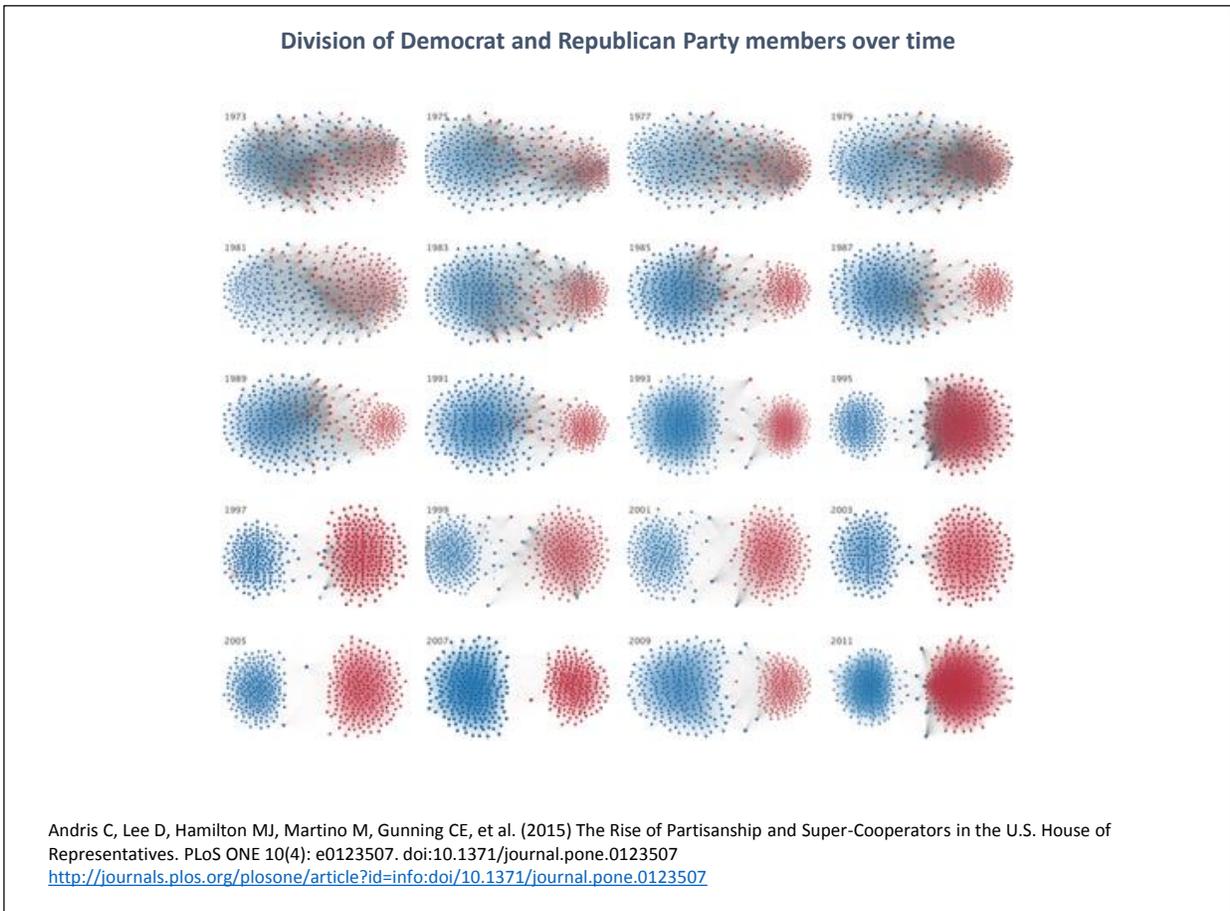
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<sup>1</sup> James Q. Wilson, *Bureaucracy: What Government Agencies Do and Why They Do It*, (New York: Basic Books, 1989), pp. 299-300.

Many subsequent generations have been tempted to think that the brawl has finally spiraled out of control in their day. Is it really that different in our time? Perhaps in some respects. The fight has sorted itself out so that it is occurring between two more or less equally sized gangs holding different sides of the bar. And because neither side has been able to get the upper hand, the fight has gotten especially nasty –with the political equivalent of broken beer bottles and pool cues now being used as weapons. Let’s turn and take a look what is happening, both among Washington elites and among citizens across the country, so that we can see what it entails for our work.

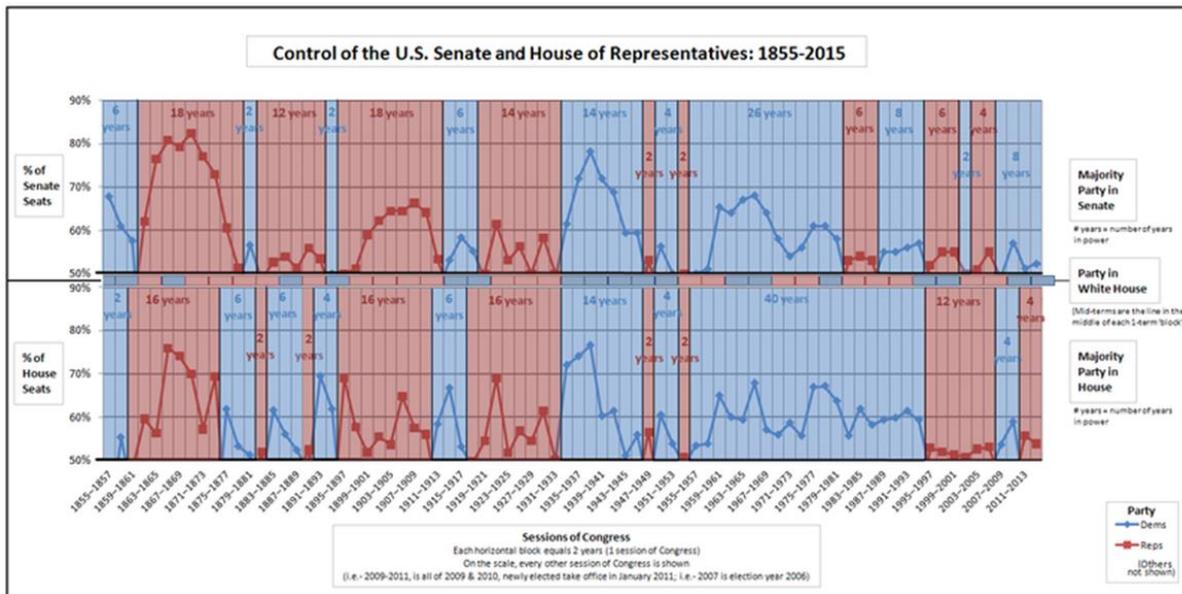
Politics and policy-making have certainly become more ideologically polarized, especially at the elite level. In the early 1970s, if I had told you a member of Congress was a conservative or a liberal, you wouldn’t have been able to readily identify which party they belonged to. There were many conservative Democrats, especially in senior positions in Congress, and likewise many liberal Republicans.

In the ensuing decades, however, members of Congress have sorted themselves out into two distinct parties. If I tell you someone is a conservative, it’s a safe bet they are a Republican; if they are liberal or progressive, you know they are a Democrat. There is no longer any ideological overlap between the parties. They have each become more coherent internally in terms of their ideology, and diverged vis-à-vis each other as they have done so. This chart provides a powerful visualization of the legislative relationships among members of the house over the past four decades.



A related and reinforcing development has been the rise of activist advocacy organizations in DC that have, in effect, picked one side or the other and are working strenuously to keep their side from compromising with the other's side. Take a range of issues that are seen as especially controversial today – abortion, gun control, environmental regulation, etc. Into the early 1970's, those seeking policy outcomes on these issues could find allies, and opponents, in both parties. But as the parties sorted themselves out into two ideologically opposed camps, so did many of the advocacy groups, to the point now where they formed up in two opposing coalitions of what political scientists have termed "intense policy demanders." The parties are prodded from behind by their aligned coalitions of ideologically-turbocharged groups to be unstinting in their policy stances, even if the majority of rank and file voters who support those parties feel less intensely about the matters in question.<sup>2</sup>

But there is another development having little to do with ideological polarization that is as if not more responsible for the hyper-partisanship we have seen in Washington in recent years. As Frances Lee, a political scientist based the University of Maryland has pointed out, we are in an unusually protracted fight for control of Congress. Traditionally, one party or the other has predominated in Congress, with ample majorities in both houses. The other party, relegated to a small minority, and with little if any hope of winning power in the near future, has generally seen fit to "go along to get along." This chart showing party control of the House and Senate since the civil war, demonstrates the pattern:



Source: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/United\\_States\\_Presidents\\_and\\_control\\_of\\_Congress](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/United_States_Presidents_and_control_of_Congress)

The Senate is above the line, the House below the line. Periods of Republican control in each institution are mapped out in red, Democratic Control in Blue. The trend lines capture the majorities enjoyed by the dominant party in each Congress. For example, for virtually all of the

<sup>2</sup> For more on "intense policy demanders" and these political dynamics, see Kathleen Bawn, et al., "A Theory of Parties: Groups, Policy Demands and Nominations in American Politics," *Perspectives on Politics*, September 2012, pp. 571-597.

period from the mid-1930's to the mid-1990s, the Democrats had a lock on Congress, indeed, they controlled the House for four straight decades over the later part of this period.

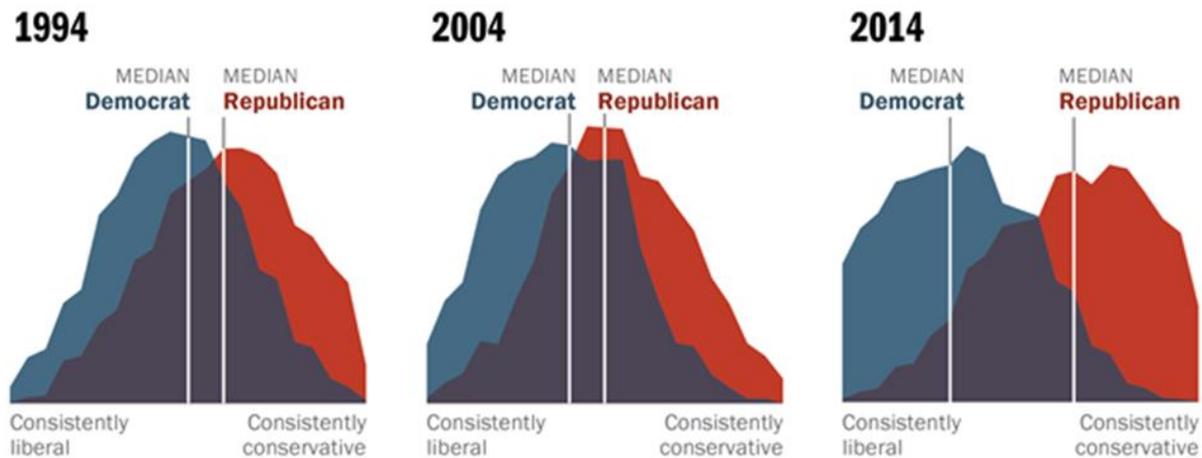
But notice the past twenty years – it is marked by intermittent periods of red and blue control, and much narrower majorities. Those majorities, as Lee has noted, are in effect politically insecure, and thus less apt to work with the large minorities in position to unhorse them. For their part, the minorities want to do everything in their power to embarrass the other party so as to increase their odds of winning power in the next election.<sup>3</sup>

Now I don't want to suggest that we should be shocked – shocked! – to find legislators shamelessly playing politics. The point here is simply that a lot of what we might think at first glance is intense ideological polarization is in fact the ongoing quest for political advantage and control of Congress. It is also worth noting on this chart that the last juncture when we experienced such high periods of polarization according to the standard metrics in political science was the late Gilded Age, another period in which the parties had narrow governing majorities and frequently traded control of Congress.

When we turn from the elite to the mass level, we see a similar patterns of polarization and hyper-partisanship emerging. Consider the following data from the Pew Research Center.

### Democrats and Republicans More Ideologically Divided than in the Past

*Distribution of Democrats and Republicans on a 10-item scale of political values*



Source: 2014 Political Polarization in the American Public

Notes: Ideological consistency based on a scale of 10 political values questions (see Appendix A). The blue area in this chart represents the ideological distribution of Democrats; the red area of Republicans. The overlap of these two distributions is shaded purple. Republicans include Republican-leaning independents; Democrats include Democratic-leaning independents (see Appendix B).

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<sup>3</sup> See Frances Lee, "American politics is more competitive than ever. That is making partisanship worse." [Wonkblog](#) in the *Washington Post*, January 9, 2014.

In a 2014 survey of 10,000 Americans, Pew found that, “The overall share of Americans who express consistently conservative or consistently liberal opinions has doubled over the past two decades from 10% to 21%. And ideological thinking is now much more closely aligned with partisanship than in the past. As a result, ideological overlap between the two parties has diminished: Today, 92% of Republicans are to the right of the median Democrat, and 94% of Democrats are to the left of the median Republican.”<sup>4</sup>

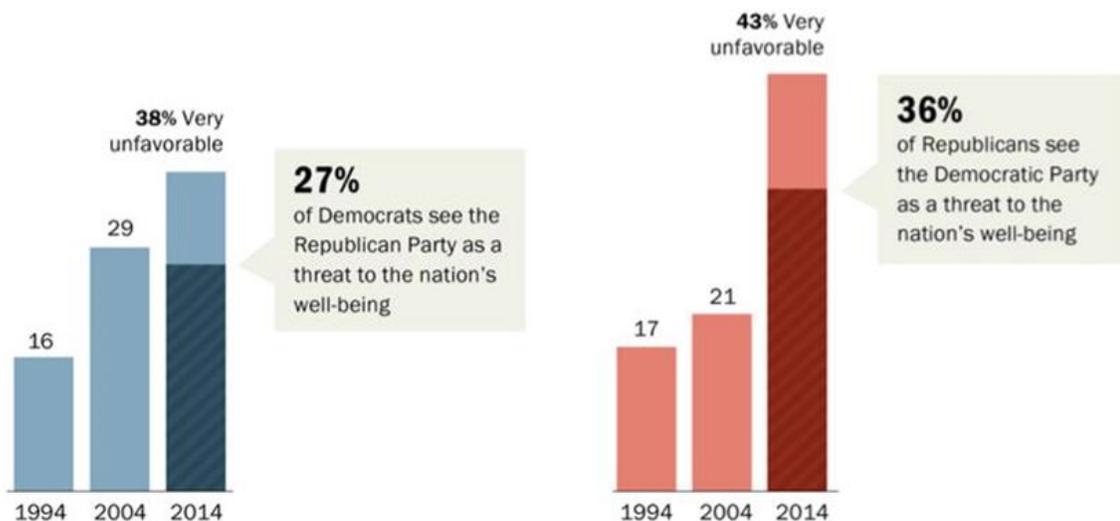
This growing ideological consistency, or what researchers call “constraint” among citizens, is in keeping with what we have observed in a comparative contexts. It tends to go hand in hand with an increasing levels of education. It therefore is likely to continue.

But we shouldn’t see this as an entirely rational phenomenon. There is also growing partisan antipathy among Americans. As this additional bit of data from Pew indicates, 2 out of 5 of us have come to hold “very unfavorable” views of the other party. Indeed, in 2014 Pew added a new question to its recurring survey and found that 27% of Democrats and 36% of Republicans regarded the opposing party as nothing less than a “threat to the nation’s well-being.”

### Beyond Dislike: Viewing the Other Party as a ‘Threat to the Nation’s Well-Being’

Democratic attitudes about the Republican Party

Republican attitudes about the Democratic Party



Source: 2014 Political Polarization in the American Public

Notes: Questions about whether the Republican and Democratic Parties are a threat to the nation's well being asked only in 2014. Republicans include Republican-leaning independents; Democrats include Democratic-leaning independents (see Appendix B).

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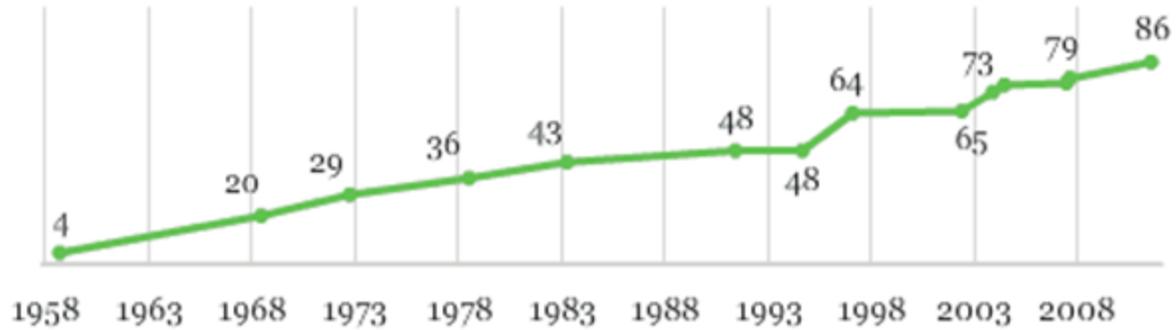
Social psychologists have a term for this growing antipathy – affective polarization. It is not so much that that we like our own party more, it is that we really don’t like those other guys! This is deep-seated tribalism between in-and-out groups. To put it in sharp relief, consider the progress that we have made on other questions in this regard. Over the past five decades,

<sup>4</sup> Pew Research Center, “Political Polarization and the American Public,” June 12, 2014, p. 6.

Gallup surveys have found that we have progressed from less than 5% of Americans approving of inter-racial marriage to the point where now 86% of Americans report they approve of it.

*Do you approve or disapprove of marriage between blacks and whites?*

■ % Approve



1958 wording: "...marriages between white and colored people."

1968-1978 wording: "...marriages between whites and non-whites."

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That is the good news. But on other dimensions, we are heading in the other direction. In 1960, fewer than 1 in 20 Americans reported they would be "displeased" if their child married someone from the opposite party. Recently, social psychologists found that nearly 1 out of 2 Republicans and 1 out of 3 Democrats reported that they would be "unhappy" with this development.<sup>5</sup>

	"Displeased" by inter-party marriage of child? (1960)	"Unhappy" about inter-party marriage of child? (2012)
GOP	4%	49%
Dem	5%	33%

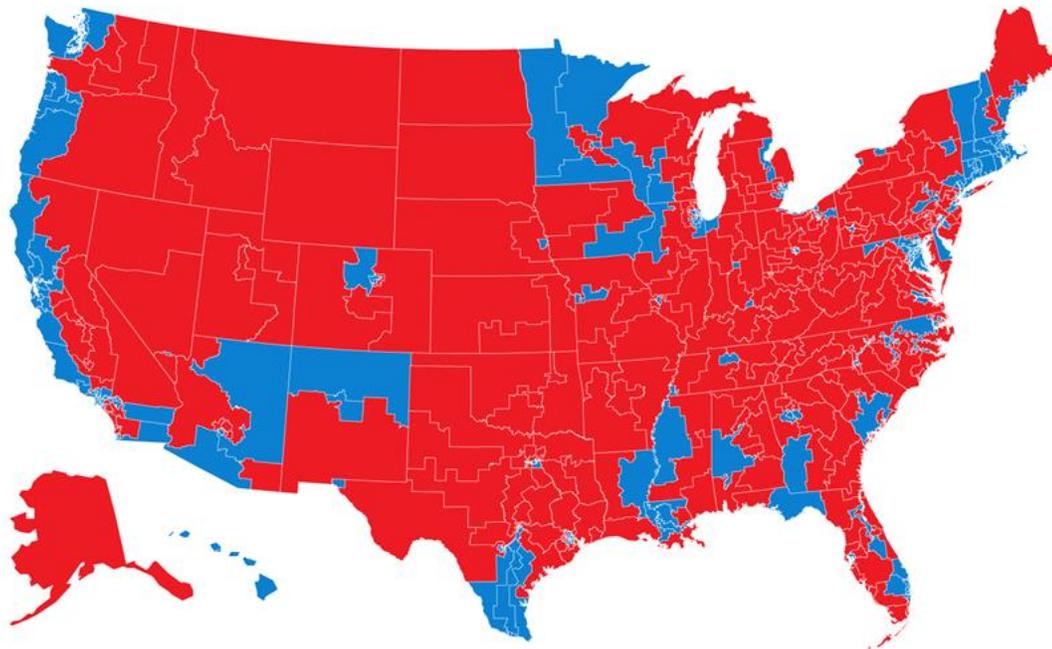
<sup>5</sup>Shanto Iyengar, et al., "Affect Not Ideology: A Social Identity Perspective on Polarization," *Public Opinion Quarterly*, September 17, 2012, pp. 11-14.

Maybe it's time for a remake of "Look Who's Coming to Dinner" plotted along somewhat different lines. I am thinking we cast Rachel McAdams as a fun-loving but unabashedly liberal and tart-tongued fiancé coming over to meet Ryan Gosling's buttoned-down Republican family.

Now for the right realism we'd have to think carefully of where to set this drama – it would definitely need to be in flyover country, maybe say in Paducah or suburban Topeka. These patterns of more intense partisanship are playing out differently in different parts of the country. As indicated by this map from National Journal of U.S. House districts by party control in the current Congress, we have come to sort ourselves into a Red America in the rural hinterlands covering vast swaths of the country and increasingly concentrated Blue urban enclaves on either coast and in the upper and lower Mississippi Valley.

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#### 114th Congress: House of Representatives map



NATIONAL JOURNAL Graphic

Sources: Staff reports; AP

The pattern is if anything starker at the level of state politics, where the GOP now controls 31 governorships and 69 out of 99 state legislatures. The extent of the concentration of the Democratic electorate in its urban enclaves is underscored by comparing the electoral performance of Jimmy Carter in 1976 and Barack Obama in 2012. Both won narrow majorities of the popular vote. But President Carter won 1,711 of the 3,143 counties in the US, while President Obama, with a slightly larger share of the popular vote while, only managed to win 693 counties.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup>I am grateful to Rob Richie of FairVote for pointing out the magnitude of these electoral shifts to me.

Let's turn now to consider what these patterns of polarization and hyper-partisanship entail for various models of policy-making.<sup>7</sup>

The first model of policy-making that we might consider is traditional bipartisanship, in which policy emerges from negotiated compromises among Democrats and Republicans. This mode of policy-making is one that mainstream philanthropy has long supported. A classic pattern has been to support a blue-ribbon, bipartisan commission to develop policy solutions, grounded on a consensus among researchers and experts, and then offer recommendations up to the policy process. There may be some further refinements through political negotiations, but the final product is readily recognizable as a workable solution, something we all can agree on.

It is fair to say that this model of policy-making has been battered if not completely blown apart by the developments we have outlined above. Historically it has presumed that we have centrists in Congress, an overlap between pragmatic and moderate-leaning Democrats and Republicans. Think Sam Nunn and Dick Lugar. Or while we are here at Aspen, Dan Glickman and Mickey Edwards.

But alas many if not most of the legislators holding these centrist views and practical mindset have left Congress by now. As we saw earlier there no longer is any middle ground where the parties overlap. The territory that used to serve as the seedbed of compromise between the parties has completely eroded. This has led some observers to argue that bipartisanship as a way of doing business is effectively dead. Long live bipartisanship. Some sharper partisans on both the right and the left don't even lament this development, for they regard bipartisanship and the negotiation that it entails as compromising with the enemy, the muddle in the middle.

Fortunately, though, we still have access to this model, as indicated by our two recent multi-year budget agreements, the permanent solution to the so-called doc fix, or the passage in late 2015 of long awaited transportation and education bills. But it is also fair to say that bipartisan policy-making, insofar as it occurs, often plays out along different lines. Rather than the public process characterized say the Simpson Bowles Commission, we are as likely to see it work through private, even secretive negotiations of the sort that Paul Ryan and Patty Murray engaged in to reach their 2013 budget agreement. Another example of this pattern would be the negotiating that Speaker Boehner and Leader Pelosi engaged in on the doc fix. Not only are these deals worked out well away from the public eye, once the terms are agreed to they are often brought quickly up for a vote so as to avoid the counter-mobilization by the intense policy-demanders. This is not your grandparents' bipartisanship, and advocates need to rethink how they work to support it given the different settings in which it occurs, but it remains a viable option in some circumstances.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> I use the tripartite framework of bipartisan, transpartisan, and partisan policymaking helpfully put forward by Steven Teles, Heather Hurlburt, and Mark Schmitt in "Philanthropy in a Time of Polarization," *Stanford Social Innovation Review*, Summer 2014, although I reach different conclusions about the viability of these different modes of action in the discussion below.

<sup>8</sup>On these dynamics, see the illuminating case studies developed by Jill Lawrence for the Brookings Institution's Profiles in Negotiation Series, which can be found at <http://jilllawrence.com/profiles-in-negotiation.html>

A second model of policy-making is trans-partisanship. This is typically offered up as a new and some would argue more principled form of policy-making relative to traditional bipartisanship. Rather than building coalitions from the center out based on negotiation and compromise, in trans-partisanship you build them from the outside in based on improbably shared principles. Think Grover Norquist and peace activists working together to reduce defense spending, or the Freedom Caucus and the Black Caucus to reform criminal justice. Or, alternatively, at the grass roots level, teachers' unions and tea partiers working from different directions to do in the Common Core.<sup>9</sup>

This model of policy-making may well fit better with the more ideologically coherent parties and networks of intense policy demanders that we have today. And we have seen some progress in certain areas, especially in criminal justice reform at the state level. But the effectiveness and range of applications for this model remain to be seen. It seems to be viable when there are issues in play where libertarians and liberals can team up. But is not yet clear whether this can work in other situations. Moreover, in the quest for matching up "strange bedfellows," it is easy to end up forcing a relationship that is not that compelling for some of the parties involved, as funders and advocates of "creation care" discovered in trying to enlist Evangelicals in the fight against climate change.

A third model of policy-making is old-fashioned partisanship. The way to make policy here is simply to win decisive majorities and then push everything through that you can before the policymaking window closes. Think Scott Walker in Wisconsin, or the first two years of the Obama Administration. Some philanthropy, especially of a more political bent, has increasingly come to support this kind of political hardball and the advocacy undergirding it. Conservative foundations admired and supported Walker's efforts and worked to spread them to other states they felt were ripe for a shift rightward. Similarly, some liberal foundations invested heavily in the passage of the Affordable Care Act (ACA) along partisan lines.

The latter example warrants some further reflection. President Obama and the Democratic majorities in the House and Senate managed to bypass the filibuster via parliamentary procedure and pushed the ACA through Congress without a single Republican vote, notwithstanding the fact that the law would impose a new regulatory framework on one-sixth of the U.S. economy. The contrast of this outcome with the bipartisan support for the initial passage of Social Security and Medicare, legislation of similar magnitude, was stark.

Some progressive analysts have argued that the passage of the ACA along party lines is an example of how to let go of outdated notions of bipartisanship in order to seize fleeting legislative moments in a polarized age.<sup>10</sup> But it may be too soon to tell. The rejection of central

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<sup>9</sup> See in-depth case studies of these and other episodes prepared by various authors for the New America Foundation's Strange Bedfellows series, which can be found at <https://www.newamerica.org/political-reform/>. The discussion here draws on these profiles.

<sup>10</sup> See for example Teles et al., "Philanthropy in a Polarized Age," and Theda Skocpol, "Naming the Problem: What It Will Take to Counter Extremism and Engage Americans in the Fight Against Global Warming," January 2013, [http://www.scholarsstrategynetwork.org/sites/default/files/skocpol\\_captrade\\_report\\_january\\_2013\\_0.pdf](http://www.scholarsstrategynetwork.org/sites/default/files/skocpol_captrade_report_january_2013_0.pdf)

elements of the ACA by multiple GOP-controlled states has already confounded the law's implementation. So have the unrelenting efforts by many Republicans in Congress to repeal the law. Rather than the consensus long regarded as a precondition for successfully passing, refining, and sustaining such a complex policy on a national scale, we have witnessed instead unaccustomed opposition and partisan conflict that shows no sign of abating.

In wrapping up, and in case I haven't said enough to provoke conversation already, let me touch on some blind spots that might be limiting the clarity with which foundations, advocates, and evaluators are seeing the world. Imagine if we did a meta-evaluation of all of the advocacy work funded by mainline foundations so that we could discern aggregate patterns across the various / multifold efforts. I'd hypothesize we'd see some of the following issues, which are all especially problematic in a time of polarization and hyper-partisanship.

One pattern would be an excessive focus on getting the near-term policy win by whatever means necessary relative to the successful implementation and legitimation of the policy needed to sustain it over time. In the barroom brawl of American politics, neither implementation nor legitimation can be taken for granted. In an age when the country has come to have deeply red and deeply blue sections, passing strongly partisan policies at the federal level, or issuing them by executive fiat, is asking to have them thwarted when it comes time to administer them in states governed by competing political precepts. Moreover, in an age of growing partisan antipathy, it may well be possible to win the battle but lose the war – to secure the policy win but generate a backlash that undermines its legitimacy in the eyes of those who will ultimately need to be reconciled to the policy for it to be effectively implemented, updated, and funded over time.

On a related note, I also see among the largest mainstream foundations a more or less pervasive liberal and progressive political bias that all too often fails to comprehend how conservatives and libertarians might see the world—if it does not dismiss those perspectives outright. This hurts the odds for planning and funding successful advocacy work, especially in places and institutions dominated by Republicans—such as the U.S. Congress and a substantial plurality of the states at present.

Finally, I would argue that we are failing to recognize the importance of maintaining the ability of our political system to develop and legitimate policy solutions for a diverse and closely divided society. We might liken the policy-making process to a vending machine. We put our money into it and want to get our candy bar out it. Those of us in this room and the institutions we represent have become increasingly adept at getting what we want from the vending machine. If it doesn't come out when we put our money in – or sometimes even when we don't – we slap, bang, shake, jiggle, or tilt the machine until it does. But if everyone using the vending machine does this, and nobody is working to maintain and repair it, sooner or later it will cease to function at all. We can't afford to let that happen; if it does, we will be in no small part to blame.