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Politics Then and Now: Introduction

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Politics Then and Now

The articles in the following section are from a lecture series, "Politics Then and Now, in Maine and the Nation," presented by the Muskie School and Osher Lifelong Learning Institute at the University of Southern Maine in the fall of 2013, and from the William S. Cohen lecture held at the University of Maine in November 2013. Most of the speakers are prominent public office holders who were asked to address the issue of political polarization and dysfunction, comparing how politics was played in the past with the current situation, and discussing what Maine can offer based on experiences here. Series organizers Richard Barringer and Kenneth Palmer provide an overview of the lectures and summarize some of the common themes in their introductory article. Tom Allen analyzes the significance of conflicting worldviews in explaining the modern political climate in the United States. Angus King describes a number of factors contributing to the dysfunctional state of politics now, with one of the most fundamental being conflict over the size and scope of government. The remaining lectures are presented here as one page-excerpts: George Mitchell, Barney Frank, Elizabeth Mitchell, and Kenneth Curtis; a panel of Amy Fried, Ken Fredette, and Cynthia Dill; and a joint presentation by William Cohen and Alan Simpson. 

Politics Then and Now

Introduction

by Richard Barringer and Kenneth Palmer

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

It is now commonplace that American national politics has become polarized and dysfunctional of late. The inability of Congress to accommodate partisan differences has led to its failure to enact a federal budget in the past four years,¹ a partial federal government shutdown for the first time in 17 years, and the absence of progress on immigration reform, infrastructure repair, climate change, and other important national challenges. The partisan gridlock has led the American public to give Congress some of its lowest approval ratings in history. One recent poll found 85 percent of Americans hold an unfavorable view of Congress, while only 9 percent approve. Another indicated that fully 54 percent of Americans favor removing all members of Congress.

The face of the gridlock is the lack of civility, comity, and cooperation between two political parties with divergent worldviews as they vie for political power and policy dominance in a changing world, within a constitutional system designed for coalition building and principled compromise.

In a parliamentary system such as Great Britain's, where the prime minister and cabinet ministers all hold seats as lawmakers in the parliament, a single election may determine the policy direction of the government. In the United States, where the president, the House of the Representatives, and the Senate serve different terms of office, three election cycles may be required to set direction. Occasions where each party controls but a part of the government are frequent.

This framework was established in the U.S. Constitution itself. It was much praised by the writers of the Federalist Papers, particularly James Madison, as a way to curb arbitrary authority and to discourage dominance of the government by any one group or faction. Power was purposely distributed among three branches—the legislative, executive, and judicial—to slow the governing process and the accretion of power and to allow for careful deliberation. Of necessity, compromise

and bargaining must take place between the political parties in this system, as well as among the three separate branches of government, for national policy to be set and for national institutions to do their work.

How ideological battles and party polarization came to replace the accustomed consensus arrangements of compromise and coalition building is a topic that draws much scholarly attention today. While the cited causes for dysfunction are many and complex, a single fact illustrates its centrality in today's Congress. In surveys of voting behavior among members of the Senate, the most liberal member of the Republican caucus was still recorded in roll calls as more conservative than the most conservative-voting member of the Democratic caucus (Aldrich 2013). In brief, a long-existing area of ideological overlap between the two parties at the center of the political spectrum has disappeared.

In 2013 a series of lectures entitled “Politics Then and Now, in Maine and the Nation” was presented by the Muskie School of Public Service and the Osher Lifelong Learning Institute at the University of Southern Maine. Our lecture series was held at a dark time—mid-September through early November 2013—when the federal government was partially shut down for the first time in 17 years for lack of a federal budget, which was then extended to January 2014. Congress threatened to default on the nation's debt and at the deadline extended the limit to February 2014. The initial technically flawed implementation of the new Affordable Care Act, “ObamaCare,” only renewed Congressional debate about the legitimacy of the law and deepened the partisan divide.

On November 7, 2013, the same day as our closing panel presentation, the 2013 Cohen Lecture was delivered at the University of Maine, featuring Secretary of State William S. Cohen and Senator Alan K. Simpson, on “The State of Our Nation: Hardball vs Civility.” Because of its cogent and timely content, we included it in our volume, with permission, as a special supplement to the lecture series, under the title, “Enough Is Enough!” (Barringer and Palmer 2014).

The central idea behind the lecture series is that we've come a long way since President John F. Kennedy characterized public service as "a noble calling," to today, when the nation's political system is routinely described as "dysfunctional" and public servants as "selfish bureaucrats." Systems theory has developed and been refined since World War II to help us to better understand and improve the behavior of complex systems—natural, human, and social. A well-established principle of the theory is that in any healthy system competition and cooperation coexist side by side, and sometimes cheek by jowl, to advance the system's purposes and ends. Whether it is a forest ecosystem, the human body, a bureaucracy, an economy, or a constitutional system, the system's elements compete for resources to meet their own needs, even as they act to contribute to the survival and persistence of the system itself.

[the lecture] series brought ...distinguished speakers to campus to address the issue of political polarization and dysfunction in our politics.

Somewhere along the way from the 1970s to today, the U.S. political system lost sight of this important principle, threatening its health and survival. Our series brought seven distinguished speakers to campus to address the issue of political polarization and dysfunction in our politics. A concluding panel of younger political leaders examined lessons learned from the seven presentations and offered comment on their prospects going forward. The speakers were prominent public office holders, either present or past, whose careers had in most cases spanned both Maine and national politics. We asked each of them to address three timely and important questions:

- How was politics played in earlier times in Maine and the nation? And how has that changed today?
- How did this come about? What are the implications for the state and the nation of our

continuing along this path? And what will it take to change course?

- What does Maine have to offer the nation in this regard, based on our experience here?

We asked all to include personal anecdotes and vignettes from their own experience to throw light on these questions and to reflect on the lessons their experience offers Maine and the nation today. Questions and answers followed each lecture and the panelists' presentations. As cohosts for the series, we started with a couple of questions of our own, and members of the audience joined thereafter. The speakers' responses elicited many heartfelt stories from personal experience.

To set the tone for the series, the first lecture opened with the viewing of a brief excerpt from the splendid Public Broadcasting System's *American Experience* biography of President Lyndon B. Johnson (1963–1968), entitled, "LBJ."

Fifty years ago, in the time of presidents Kennedy and Johnson, Americans had come to expect and rely on what was called a "consensus politics" in our national government, one built on principle, compromise, and deal making across party lines by lawmakers and chief executives alike who believed in this system and its abiding benefits to the people of the nation.

The growth of ideological, uncompromising, take-no-prisoner politics over the past generation takes many in our generation by surprise. It has a number of root causes, and the difference is perhaps nowhere better illustrated than in a brief video excerpt from the LBJ *American Experience* biography. It portrays LBJ in all the glory of his domestic legislative triumphs through the skillful application of bargaining, negotiation, persuasion, and cajolery that were his stock in trade, and the utter frustration and despair that attended his inability to reach agreement with Ho Chi Minh and end the war in Vietnam. "If only I just had him in a room, if only I could sit and talk to him," LBJ laments, "I'm sure we could cut a deal!" It is a tale of irreconcilable differences, a zero-sum game driven by conflicting world-views.

The excerpt brings to mind the story of a medieval cardinal, attending the King of England during the course of a long, protracted war with the King of France. "If only you could sit with the King of France," the cardinal urges, "I'm sure some agreement and accommodation might be reached, and all this suffering would

end.” “I’m afraid you fail to understand the matter, my dear Cardinal,” the King replied; “the King of France wants my kingdom, and I want *his!*”

LESSONS LEARNED

So, what lessons may we take from the lecture series? Each of our speakers came to it from a distinguished career. They represent different places on the political spectrum: five Democrats, three Republicans, and one independent. (U.S. Senator Susan Collins, former U.S. Senator Olympia Snowe, and former U.S. Congressman and Maine Governor John McKernan, all Republicans, were invited to participate in the series, but were unable to attend.) Six had been candidates for governor of Maine, two had served as governor. Five had held seats in the U.S. Congress. Two others had served in the Maine Legislature. Five had held offices in both Maine and national government. While legislative service figured prominently in their resumes, seven of the nine speakers had also held executive posts. The closing panelists—an academic, a Republican, and a Democrat—each brought to the series years of devotion to and accomplishment in Maine public service.

Despite their various persuasions and public offices held, all were in somewhat surprising agreement on a number of points:

The social distance between members of the two political parties in Congress and the White House has greatly increased since former times, especially in the past two decades.

Lawmaking in Washington today relies less on personal relationships than in the past. In their place, ideology has become far more important and the fulcrum for policy making. Fewer and fewer issues may be discussed in anything but partisan terms. Where once negotiations took place over dinner and in after-hours conversations, representatives and senators now mostly regard themselves as visitors to Washington. Normally at home from Thursday evening through Monday, they are reachable in person only during the middle of the week, when votes are taken.

Maine retains a political culture in which civility and personal relationships count importantly in elections and policy making.

In a small, rural state with a relatively large legislature, Maine legislators traditionally win office by door-to-door campaigning. Ideology is generally of lesser importance than inter-personal skills in both electioneering and the building of legislative coalitions. These habits carry over in the delegations Maine sends to the U.S. Congress and support the state’s reputation in Washington for moderation and independence, especially among its senators. At the same time, this tradition may be changing with the injection of significantly greater sums of ideologically driven, out-of-state money into recent state legislative races.

Maine’s pragmatic and bipartisan tendencies of late have generally served the state well and especially well in the 1960s and early 1970s.

Then, the Democratic Curtis administration was able to reorganize state government and undertake major reforms in tax policy, education, social welfare, human rights, and environmental protection. Each of these initiatives was enacted by a Republican legislature and has largely remained in effect through four decades, under administrations led by Democratic, Republican, and independent governors.

After more than a century of Republican Party domination, Maine had developed an effective accommodation between the two major parties, one based on electoral competition and purposeful governmental cooperation to advance shared values and goals for the state. This accommodation had the overall effect of raising the Maine of the 1950s from among the lowest states nationally in virtually every standard measure of prosperity and promise, to approaching near the middle of the pack (if not much better) by the early 1990s.

The accommodation was periodically interrupted, however, following several events of national and state distress—the Watergate scandal of the 1970s, the state government shutdown of the 1990s, and the Great Recession of 2007–2008. Each was followed by the election of an independent or Tea Party-backed candidate for governor, with substantially less than a majority vote and mandate to govern.

The computer-driven techniques employed today in state gerrymandering of U.S. House districts often produce lopsided majorities for one party or the other and appear to contribute significantly to party polarization.

While most presidential and Senate elections tend to be competitive, House primary elections routinely produce landslides for the dominant party, with the result that the party primary is often the only real election. This in turn encourages candidates with strong ideological agendas and financial support to compete, often at the expense of more moderate incumbents, and pushes the House to be more conservative than the non-gerrymandered Senate. State commissions or judiciaries that are independent of state legislatures may be the only way to provide greater party balance in the configuring of congressional districts.

Money matters, and there is far more of it in politics today than ever imagined heretofore.

Two narrow (5–4) decisions by the U.S. Supreme Court—*Buckley v. Valeo* in 1976 and *Citizens United* in 2010—have declared that money is speech and corporations are persons and removed all limits on corporate and union contributions to elections, fundamentally altering the political landscape and pumping previously unimagined amounts into state and federal elections.

A recent race for the Maine Senate, a position that pays some \$18,000 for a two-year term, cost each of the party candidates more than \$250,000, most of which came from unidentified, out-of-state donors. Previous races for the same seat would have been expected to cost each something on the order of \$25,000. The only hopes for changing this are (1) amendment of the U.S. Constitution, a lengthy and intimidating process; and (2) change in the composition and disposition of the U.S. Supreme Court, appointments to which have only become more contentious since the nomination of Robert Bork a quarter-century ago (so much so that the word Bork has become a verb in Washington-speak).

There appears not much prospect of a third or independent party arising as a result of the current dissatisfaction with the two national parties.

It is more likely that divisions within the parties, especially the Republican Party, will appear and prompt a party split, or at least reveal the need for accommodation within the party. One possibility is the divergence of the more moderate Wall Street Republicans from Tea Party Republicans, especially over matters concerning the national debt. Another possible division lies between

the more moderate and pragmatic Republican governors and the Tea Party members of Congress.

In the end, the electorate must and will set the nation's course in this regard, for better or worse.

Ultimate authority in the system resides with those who vote in elections, “the will of the people” as framed by the Constitution. There will be no abatement of dysfunction and gridlock unless and until the voters elect to office people who will deliver it. Money in politics today may be more influential in determining who runs for office than in how they vote once they get there. The question now becomes how to level the playing field for entrants who would seek a more civil dialogue and a more fact-based and less dogmatic approach to the nation’s abiding challenges.

In fairness to the voters, we would address the question of how deeply (or not) party polarization has infected the American electorate itself. Recent literature on polarization and gridlock indicates that polarization has grown among party activists (who supply most of the money) and office holders, and less so among the voters themselves. Partisan activists and office holders have more contempt for and hostility toward one another today than in past decades. Voters show less change from the mostly centrist, politically disengaged habits identified in the University of Michigan voter survey studies of the 1950s.

It may be useful, then, to separate the ideas of party realignment and polarization. Parties have realigned since the 1950s and 1960s, such that each is now more homogeneous, and neither remains, geographically, a truly national party. Republicans win in the South, Midwest, and rural-suburban areas, and have little support in New England. Democrats win in the coastal states (East and West), the upper Midwest, and the big cities, and have little support in the South.

The result is a sorting process in which voters’ ideology and party affiliation have become more closely tied than in the past. This has intensified cohesion within the parties, and especially among party elites, in the stark choices they now offer the electorate. However, it does not necessarily mean that the voters insist that these be the only choices they will consider. Former Congressman Barney Frank notes, for example, that a number of Tea Party extremists were defeated by more moderate candidates in 2012.

Camaraderie Then, Confrontation Now?

Finally, several of our speakers—George Mitchell, Barney Frank, Libby Mitchell, Peter Mills, Bill Cohen—made note of the human tendency ever to look back and see the past through rose-colored glasses and to imagine the best of it. At the same time, it is difficult for us not to remark upon the sense of fellowship, camaraderie, and shared purpose that pervades the tales of “Politics Then,” as opposed to the vitriol and contempt that too frequently characterize exchanges in the “Now.” The good feeling “Then” appears to have derived from a shared understanding that while the players might compete vigorously, especially around the questions of how best to serve the state’s and the nation’s purposes, there was until recently a widely shared understanding among elected officials on the nation’s purposes and goals—on what government is for and will do in our democratic society.

There is a potentially historic struggle underway, one that may set the course of the nation for generations to come. Congressman Jim McDermott (D-WA) characterized it delicately (in the *New York Times* in March 2014) as “a fundamental debate about what is public good.” In our series, former Congressman Tom Allen describes it as a profound clash of basic worldviews, between the extremes of what he characterizes as a “me vs we” nation. Senator Angus King sees it in the rise of elected representatives whose avowed purpose is to shut down or cripple a national government built over three generations since the Great Depression. Our speakers noted, however, that the camaraderie now lost in the halls of Congress may still be found elsewhere in the nation. Several pointed to the political culture and processes in Maine, where elements of confrontation and cooperation coexist within state government, even as it is now divided between a very conservative Republican governor and more liberal Democratic majorities in the legislature.

A historic time of decision may be upon us, then. Those who vote will decide the nation’s course and, accordingly, determine who will win and who will lose from the policies adopted along the path chosen. 🐟

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<http://muskie.usm.maine.edu/Publications/Politics-Then-and-Now-large.pdf>

ENDNOTE

1. On January 17, 2014, Congress passed and the president signed into law a budget to continue operation of the federal government through the end of federal fiscal year 2014, September 30, 2014.

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