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Polarization, dysfunction and the collapse of everything

MARC J. DUNKELMAN - SALON, AUGUST 3, 2014

The United States hasn't reached the level of dysfunction that paralyzes Jamaica. But judging from the exasperation Americans now feel about Washington's ongoing failure to tackle the nation's big challenges—the tendency of Congress to let issues come to the breaking point before piecing together a temporary solution—it seems we may be headed in that direction. Faith in the capacity of government to lead has fallen to a record low. And it's not clear to anyone—save those who pray for the return of what they think would be “real” leadership—what might be done to turn things around.

Explanations for the gridlock abound. Many on the left blame recalcitrance within the conservative movement—Republicans, they claim, cave in too frequently to the irresponsible demands of Tea Party activists. Others cite the nefarious influence of the filibuster, which allows a minority of senators to block substantive bills supported by the broad majority. Some argue that gerrymandering—the manipulation of legislative districts to guarantee the outcome of an election—has polarized the House of Representatives.

But while Democrats fault Republicans and conservatives blame progressives, most of the country is simply fed up. A recent *New York Times*/CBS News poll found that 72 percent of Americans believe that the country is off on the wrong track. While a majority of Americans believed that “the government is really run for the benefit of all people” in 1987, the figure has since plummeted. During the government shutdown of 2013, 70 percent of Americans disapproved of the way the Republican Congress was handling budget negotiations and 61 percent disapproved of their Democratic counterparts.¹⁰ So the nation's despair isn't directed at any single party or institution; it extends across the aisle.

If Americans from across the political spectrum can agree on anything, then, it's that Washington can't get out of its own way. Something has changed to preclude the collegiality of earlier eras. As PBS interviewer Charlie Rose often points out in conversations with the nation's leading thinkers, Washington now seems fundamentally incapable of arriving at optimal solutions. Too often, Congress is compelled simply to kick the can down the road.

Worse still, beneath the veneer of frustration is the sense that something more nefarious is corrupting the system. Nostalgia suggests that previous generations were more inclined to put the public interest above their own parochial concerns. It's as if a self-interested fever has spread through the governing class. Whether that's true or not, there's certainly veracity in the suggestion that something has changed. The question is: what threw the American system so far out of whack?

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The merry-go-round of culpability often begins with the suggestion that “special interests” have co-opted the government’s concern for ordinary Americans. The burden of campaign fundraising—the collective costs of running for federal office rose more than ten times between 1974 and 2010—have compelled politicians to accept donations that appear, by most estimates, to be high-class bribery. The growing army of lobbyists who have become expert in manipulating the system with strategically placed political patronage, many claim, wields an influence that drowns out the voices of individual citizens.

The effect, the conventional story goes, has been to drive the nation’s politicians to ideological extremes. After all, to the degree that lobbyists aren’t working to erect boondoggles like the infamous Alaskan “bridge to nowhere,” they’re likely using their considerable influence to enforce the interests of big money donors with an agenda of their own. Candidates who depend on donations from the conservative Club for Growth can’t afford, in many cases, to vote to raise taxes on the very wealthy—even if they’ve concluded, deep down, that it’s the responsible thing to do. Democrats invariably feel similar pressures from more progressive groups.

If the power of special interest–driven lobbyists hasn’t forced politicians to eschew bipartisan collaboration, many argue, then gerrymandering certainly has. Sophisticated technology now allows party hacks to invert the system: by manipulating the borders of legislative districts, bosses can often guarantee election outcomes. In 2002, a full 91 percent of congressional incumbents defeated their opponents by 10 percentage points or more. And to the extent that gerrymandering isn’t as pervasive or determinative as some claim, Bill Bishop has revealed that Americans, separate from efforts to redraw district boundaries, have gerrymandered themselves by migrating into politically homogenous communities.

The proliferation of news outlets has only exacerbated the very same trend. Politicians, after all, are in the business of saying what their audiences want, and in much the same way that their policy agendas are radicalized by gerrymandered districts, the audiences who watch Fox News and MSNBC demand ideological purity. A Republican who says something outlandishly conservative on Fox News is less likely to suffer the wrath of a moderate constituency—let alone one on the left. The same is true of a progressive on MSNBC. So members of both parties have yet another good reason to move away from the political center.

The effect has been unmistakable. Academic researchers have found that between the Congress sworn in with Jimmy Carter and the Congress that sat for the third and fourth years of George W. Bush’s administration, the percentage of moderates dropped from 30 to 8, while the percent who were “strong” conservatives or liberals grew from 27 to 57. According to data compiled by political scientists Keith Poole and Howard Rosenthal, two-fifths of the Senate’s Republicans and a third of House GOPers could be considered moderates as late as the early 1990s; by 2012, that label could be fairly attributed to only a tenth of Republican senators, and an even smaller slice in the House. Among progressives through roughly the same period, moderates dropped from 35 to 12 percent of the House Democratic caucus, and from 27 to 15 percent in the Senate.

It’s not just in Washington: the same sort of polarization has spread across the country. The 2012 election resulted in a sea change in state capitals throughout the nation: because one party or the other was so dominant,

half of state legislatures were subject to veto-proof majorities—almost double the number from four years earlier. All but three states were subject to one-party control. As the Associated Press reported:

Democrats in California gained their first supermajorities since 1883 in both the Assembly and the Senate. Republicans captured total control of the North Carolina Capitol for the first time in more than a century. The GOP set a 147-year high mark in the Tennessee statehouse and won two-thirds majorities in the Missouri Legislature for the first time since the Civil War. Republicans also gained or expanded supermajorities in places such as Indiana, Oklahoma and—if one independent caucuses with the GOP—Georgia. Democrats gained a supermajority in Illinois and built upon their dominance in places such as Rhode Island and Massachusetts.

Which pulls us to the other side of the dysfunctional ledger: not only has the nation's political scene been polarized over the last several decades, but our leaders seem to have discovered an affinity for “my way or the highway” politics. In the Senate, for example, members have little if any compunction about stymieing the policy-making process. Between 1955 and 1961, the Senate only took up a single vote to break a filibuster—a reflection of how seldom senators were willing to employ dilatory tactics. But between 2009 and 2010, there were eighty-four such votes. By another tally, less than a tenth of the important legislative bills considered by the Senate faced obstruction in the 1960s—but nearly three-fourths are subject to filibuster threats today.

In the House, similar efforts to steamroll the opposition have been reflected in changes to the decrees that govern legislative debate. The Speaker and his deputies, who craft the rules that determine when and if any amendments can be made to a bill being considered on the House floor, have more frequently chosen to shut down members of the opposition. During the first two years of the Clinton administration, nearly half the rules were “open”—members of the minority were free to offer amendments. But the Congress that came into office with Barack Obama permitted only a single open rule. Over the intervening period, the percentage of closed rules, which restrict the opportunity to offer amendments, shot up by a quarter.

All of the divisive elements listed above feed off one another. Candidates from gerrymandered districts pander to certain news outlets, and special interests enforce a member's ideological purity. Politicians learn that the key to getting anything done in the House or Senate is to be rigid—that the surest route to influence is their unflinching support of the House leadership's restrictive rules. Zealotry garners each member more media attention and additional special-interest money, inducing them to become more intransigent (or “principled,” depending on your point of view). As this merry-go-round continues, it drags down with it the public's confidence that Washington has the capacity, or the gumption, to get anything done.

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There's just one problem with the conventional wisdom: none of the purported causes of the government's contemporary dysfunction are new. That's not to suggest that Washington isn't more polarized than ever before, or that the dynamics that compel bipartisan collaboration haven't eroded over the last several years. But the litany of menaces we often blame were all present in eras when the gridlock wasn't so pervasive. Certainly there are differences in scale—but the distinction holds: the policy-making process muddled through in earlier eras despite the same pernicious influences. Why have things only recently gotten so bad?

Lobbyists aren't new to Washington—the term was coined (quite possibly apocryphally) during the nineteenth-century administration of Ulysses S. Grant. And while they've been vilified as a group, the special interests that are most powerful in Washington frequently lobby for a legitimate cause: the AARP, for example, represents the interests of older Americans, as the VFW does veterans. Moreover, these so-called special interests—whose demands need to be weighed against broader public concern—are often manifestations of the same affinity for voluntary associations that Tocqueville celebrated in the 1830s.

Money isn't new to the political process either—even if there's more of it today. Historian Robert Caro's *Master of the Senate* demonstrated how powerfully campaign contributions shaped the purportedly halcyon days of the 1950s and 1960s: Lyndon Johnson used his influence on the donations made by oil interests in Texas to wield power over his colleagues. Even earlier, Pierre du Pont was so exasperated by Woodrow Wilson's decision to establish an inheritance tax during the First World War that he donated \$92,500 to Charles Evans Hughes's presidential campaign in 1916—a sizable donation even without adjusting for inflation.

Which brings us to redistricting. Information technology has certainly made it easier to pinpoint how one city block votes versus another, and so the specific lines separating districts can be manipulated with greater precision. But improvements on the margins of data analysis hardly represent a revolution. Politicians have been manipulating the borders of their districts since the dawn of the Republic. For every crazy-looking diagram of a district crafted to guarantee an electoral outcome in the next election, a political historian can easily find a map just as crazy from decades or centuries before.

Have cable networks and blogs fostered a more partisan media? A historical lens reveals that the polarized press we have today is a throwback to an earlier era. Fox News and MSNBC may signify a turn away from the ethos of the Walter Cronkite era, when balance was the watchword of the mainstream press. But through most of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Americans got their news through highly partisan newspapers, many owned by media barons such as Joseph Pulitzer and William Randolph Hearst. For example, many historians believe—although it is quite possibly apocryphal—that the Spanish-American War was pursued largely because of public sentiment manipulated by “yellow journalists.”

Finally, has the filibuster, almost by itself, ruined American democracy? Without question, senators have increased their use of procedural tools to stymie legislation. As never before, there's a sense that every substantive bill will be filibustered, so any proposed bill needs the support of a supermajority of senators. But it is not the result of some new rule—in truth, with the exception of a change made in November 2013 to protect certain presidential nominations from endless scrutiny, the rules of the Senate have remained relatively stable. And so the real change has been a declining compunction among senators to hold policies hostage even in the face of broad-based support.

At root is a central mystery: if the institutions we blame for Washington's gridlock were present in earlier eras, why have things now gone off the rails? If the common excuses for today's dysfunctional politics don't explain the more present gridlock, what's changed? The answer, like the explanation for the decline of economic innovation, lies in the disappearance of the middle rings.

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On a certain level, Washington's devolution can be traced to a change in the rhythms of life inside the capital Beltway. As experts at the Bipartisan Policy Center have argued, the routines of political life have evolved over the last two decades, leaving members of the political class strangers to one another, and as such, incapable of forging compromise. In an earlier era, politicians moved their families to the Washington suburbs and became enmeshed in the oft-vilified Georgetown cocktail circuit. Today, far from enrolling their children in the capital's tony private schools, many refuse even to sign a lease in Washington, sleeping in their offices and rushing to the airport as soon as votes are done for the week. Whatever time they do pass on Capitol Hill, they spend dialing for dollars largely in cubicles across the street from their official offices.

But the dysfunction isn't only a function of what's happened between the politicians—it's also a reflection of how the architecture of American community has changed. If politicians, slippery as they can be, are adept at understanding what will and won't appeal to their constituents, we have to wonder whether the American electorate has disrupted the collaborative spirit in Washington. After all, if there were a political advantage to be had by reaching across the aisle, politicians would likely grab it.

Bill Bishop was among the first to make a connection between sociological change and political gridlock. Noting the absence of any proof that gerrymandering had played a significant role in making districts more monolithic (there's no reasonable way, for example, to shape a district around San Francisco that isn't wildly progressive), he traced gridlock to the more recent tendency of Americans to sort themselves into communities of common interest. In the absence of having neighbors with cross-cutting political views, politicians had become trapped by the staid mindsets of various constituencies.

But it's not just that. After all, not only have we chosen to live in more ideologically monolithic communities, but the reshuffling of American social capital has deprived us, in nearly every facet, of the capacity to imagine the world through other eyes. In a townshipped community, there were disagreements among those who lived near one another, ate in adjoining booths, drank on adjacent stools, and played in the same softball tournaments. Everyone on Spring Street might have voted for Adlai Stevenson in 1952, but they could not avoid Eisenhower voters in the course of a typical day-to-day routine.

Today, if you don't know your neighbors—if you've transferred social capital away from the middle rings—your political frame of reference is limited both to the people you love most and the legions who, through outer-ring networks, share your point of view. If you're a progressive, you've "liked" progressive groups on Facebook that then ply you with facts and arguments. If you're a conservative, you get an e-mail each week from the Heritage Foundation with updates on their newly released studies and talking points. Absent the fundamental ability to understand those on the other side of a cultural or political divide, it's almost impossible to stomach the possibility that "our" representative in Washington might be the one collaborating with people who represent a different flavor of constituent.

The sorts of conversation endemic to townshipped community often seem inappropriate in more contemporary circumstances. Middle-ring contacts are more likely to bicker about political issues—one fellow might think the

local congressman a stuffed shirt, while another is convinced he's a beacon of sanity. No matter whether these two emerge with any sort of mutual understanding—whether or not a schoolteacher manages to convince a dry cleaner to support the local school budget—the course of everyday conversation made it more difficult to view the proposal itself as an abomination. Partisans were once more inclined to disagree in an agreeable way. And in turn, they were less inclined to vilify representatives in Washington in instances where they disagreed, even if they supported the opposition.

The change, then, isn't that Americans today are necessarily more polarized, or are less inclined in the routines of their everyday lives to believe in compromise. It's that those on the other side of any given issue now are not only wrong, they're almost alien. You can't say, "that's a crazy position to take, but I understand why Jack thinks that" if you don't know Jack, or don't know what Jack's take is. Without the firsthand exposure gained from passing conversations, it's much easier to castigate the other side—whether your position has hardened or not.

Charles Murray, who explored how different classes of Americans have become more alien to one another, found another problem: "As the new upper class increasingly consists of people who were born into the upper-middle-class bubble, the danger increases that the people who have so much influence on the course of the nation have little direct experience with the lives of ordinary Americans, and make their judgments about what's good for other people based on their own highly atypical lives."

What we too often miss is how the new style of political engagement has filtered up to members of Congress. It's not just that their constituencies are more monolithic, that they're more desperate for campaign contributions, or that they're paralyzed by the burdensome demands of special interests. It's that they know compromising isn't seen as a demonstration of virtue; it's evidence of apostasy. Among their constituents, moderation is seen as fealty to an objectionable agenda. It suggests a lack of character or a dearth of principle.

In essence, the spirit of collaboration that allowed politicians in Washington to tackle big challenges wasn't organic to the nation's political system. It was built from the ground up. The dynamics that once allowed the political leadership of Barbados to overcome the barriers to collaboration—the dynamics that defined the townships Alexis de Tocqueville described in the 1830s—have been disrupted. The ascendance of networks as the building blocks of American community has driven the nation's politics to resemble Jamaica's. Senators haven't become more inclined to filibuster today because they're less concerned about the public interest. Their intransigence reflects the public's new appetite.

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Traditionally, we imagine that the through lines that connect democracy and community runs primarily in one direction: public policy is designed, after all, to affect the workings of our local neighborhoods. For that reason, we focus on what policy makers can do to steer American community life—what sorts of legislation have the potential to breathe new life into civil society. Those on the right, reflecting Robert Nisbet's treatise from the 1950s, *The Quest for Community*, often wonder whether government bureaucracies aren't undermining bonds that might otherwise flourish between family, friends, and neighbors. Those on the left wonder whether

additional investments—new resources devoted to education, infrastructure, and community programming—might empower the residents of impoverished neighborhoods to thrive despite trying circumstances. But a closer look shows that the influence appear to flow both ways.

When he published *The Radicalism of the American Revolution* in 1993, Gordon Wood looked beyond the explicitly political narrative that defines our understanding of the struggle for independence. George Washington and his peers were unquestionably driven by a desire to free themselves from the tentacles of British monarchy. But that wasn't the whole story: they were also driven to adapt the nation's political framework to the social architecture beneath it. The township architecture of community that had begun to emerge near the end of the eighteenth century couldn't abide the incumbent system of British rule. And so the Constitution that was written several years after the Revolution was designed to accommodate town-shipped community.

We may not be on the verge of a revolution today, but we face a similar conundrum. Our political system isn't in rhythm with the networked community that replaced the American township. That's not to suggest we should abandon the Constitution: there is a way for American government to adjust. But we ought not to minimize the challenge. In his revelatory work exposing how Facebook and Google are obviating the cross-cutting interactions in American life (a full 30 percent of Americans get news from Facebook), Eli Pariser put it well: "Ultimately, democracy works only if we citizens are capable of thinking beyond our narrow self-interest. But to do so, we need a shared view of the world we cohabit. We need to come into contact with other people's lives and needs and desires."

Pariser was focused on technology, but the principle applies across the American experience. Our dwindling faith in American government is apparent in our own front yards. Three factors will determine whether we'll be able to adapt. The first is the extent to which networks continue to subsume townships. The second (as evidenced by the results of deliberative polling) is how capable we are of establishing patterns in networked society that reflect the benefit of townshipped familiarity. And the third is our capacity to re-form the political system to fit twenty-first-century community.

We don't know how things will turn out. Already, efforts are being made to develop technologies that might alleviate neighborly alienation, allowing people who live near one another to use social networks to build bonds.³⁸ If the federal government can't break the current gridlock, it's likely that local government and nonprofits will emerge to fill the void. So we need not be despondent. But if America is to thrive in the decades to come, recalibrating the relationships between democracy and community will be one of our most trying challenges.

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