MOVING BEYOND POLITICAL POLARIZATION:
HOW CAN CONGRESS BEST SERVE THE NATION IN THE COMING DECADE?

★ STENNIS FELLOWS— 112TH CONGRESS

MOVING BEYOND POLITICAL POLARIZATION: HOW CAN CONGRESS BEST SERVE THE NATION IN THE COMING DECADE?

The 112th Congress John C. Stennis Congressional Staff Fellows came together across party lines from both Chambers of Congress to work together in roundtables and retreats that spanned the two-year term of the 112th Congress. Nominated by Members of Congress and chosen by an independent selection committee, 30 staff leaders with over 330 years of combined experience on Capitol Hill began meeting together in July of 2011. The objective of the program is to provide a unique leadership development experience for senior-level Congressional staff through dialogue and relationship building across boundaries of party and Chamber, and to focus on the future of Congress as an institution of American democracy. The 112th Congress Stennis Fellows began with the core theme of: *Moving Beyond Political Polarization: How Can Congress Best Serve the Nation in the Coming Decade?*

I. The Learning Agenda

At the inaugural meeting the Stennis Fellows identified four broad questions to pursue together related to the theme of *Moving Beyond Political Polarization*:

- What is the History of Political Polarization in America?

- What is the Impact of Media and Technology on Political Polarization?

- How Does Congressional Process, Rules, and Procedures Impact Political Polarization in Congress?

- Does Political Polarization Come from the People to the Political System or from the Political System to the People?

These broad questions provided the starting point for a series of half-day roundtable dialogues where Stennis Fellows explored these issues with leading experts.

II. Using Dialogue

All of the roundtables and other sessions of the Fellows' program were conducted as dialogues. Dialogue had been recommended by previous classes of Stennis Fellows as a powerful and different way of learning and leading. Perhaps the best way to understand dialogue[1] is by contrasting it with its opposite, debate or advocacy.

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[1] The discussion of the nature and use of dialogue in this report is based on the *Dialogue Essentials* workshop provided to the Fellows by Viewpoint Learning (www.ViewpointLearning.com).

A key to using dialogue effectively is to recognize that it does not replace debate, advocacy, negotiation or decision-making; it <u>precedes</u> them. Dialogue provides a way to map areas of common ground <u>before</u> debate or negotiation begins. Participants in a dialogue are usually surprised by the amount of common ground they share, even on the most contentious issues. That certainly was our experience. Once you realize that you agree on perhaps 80% of the matters being considered, it becomes easier to deal with the remaining 20% in a productive way.

Dialogue: The Opposite of Debate	
Debate/Advocacy	**Dialogue**
Assuming there is one right answer	Assuming others have pieces of the answer
About winning	About finding common ground
Listening for flaws	Listening to understand
Defending assumptions	Exploring assumptions
Seeking your outcome	Discovering new possibilities

Stennis Fellows practiced dialogue during all sessions of the Fellowship. Many Fellows also undertook experiments, trying to apply dialogue on the job and then reporting the results to other Fellows. Generally Stennis Fellows reported that dialogue helped in a wide variety of practical circumstances, especially when it could be applied <u>before</u> the debate or negotiation had been fully engaged. It is a valuable tool that Stennis Fellows plan to use more widely and hope to encourage others to try it.

III. Key Insights From Roundtables

The Fellows conducted four roundtable dialogues with different panels of guest experts, one roundtable on each of their learning agenda topics:

Historical Perspective on Political Polarization in America
- Alan I. Abramowitz, *Professor of Political Science at Emory University*
- Mickey Edwards, *former Congressman, Vice President of the Aspen Institute and Director of the Rodel Fellowships in Public Leadership*
- Sean M. Theriault, *Associate Professor at the University of Texas*

The Role of the Media and Technology in Political Polarization
- Deborah Potter, *Executive Director of NewsLab*
- Lee Rainie, *Director of the Pew Internet and American Life Project*

Process, Rules, and Procedures: Impact on Political Polarization
- Lawrence Evans, *Professor of Government at the College of William and Mary*
- John Fortier, *Director of the Democracy Project at the Bipartisan Policy Center*
- Frances Lee, *Professor of American Politics at the University of Maryland*

Does Political Polarization Come from the People to the Political System or from the Political System to the People?
- Ted Carmines, *Director of the Center on American Politics at Indiana University*
- Nolan McCarty, *Professor of Politics and Public Affairs at the Woodrow Wilson School, Princeton*

During these roundtable dialogues, a number of points made by the guest experts stood out:

Political polarization is not new in American politics. Intense partisan division and polarization has been a part of the American political scene almost from the beginning. Many periods of American history have been marked by intense polarization, including the 1830s, the Civil War era, and the New Deal period. Fellows were told that the post-World War II period when partisan tensions seemed to lessen might best be seen as an aberration.

Political Polarization Reflects Changes In American Society

Voters are divided along lines of culture, race and ethnicity, wealth and income, and geography. Voters are becoming less likely to talk with those who disagree with them. Sharp divisions and political isolation are profoundly impacting voter attitudes and are increasingly altering the electoral coalitions needed to win general elections.

Over the past 30 years voters have become more reliably partisan in their voting behavior. Split -ticket voting had been on a steady rise since the 1950s. But Fellows heard that by the first decade of the 21st Century, voters were back to preferring the same party candidates across different national offices. More Senators today represent a state that is safe for their party and the number of states with split-party delegations has been trending downward for about 30 years. One result is that a Senator's individual political interests now are less at odds with their party's interests than they were 20 or 30 years ago. Fewer Members feel 'cross-pressured' today.

The more politically engaged a person is, the more partisan he or she is apt to be. Fellows heard that those least engaged in politics tend to be more independent.

Does political polarization track economic inequality? Fellows were told that there is a striking correlation between income inequality and polarization. When income inequality has been high, polarization has also been high. When it's been lower (for example in the mid-20th Century), polarization has also been lower.

Political Polarization is also "Made In Washington"

Partisan polarization has increased in both the House and the Senate. Guest experts noted the general increase in partisanship in the United States Senate over the past 40 years. Nearly 80 percent of the votes in 2010 divided a majority of the Republicans from a majority of the Democrats, compared to 40 percent of the votes in the 1970s. From the mid-1950s through the 1970s, the average of Senators voting with his or her party was just over 60 percent of the time. Since 2000, the average has grown to 87 percent.

The situation in the House of Representatives was described in similar terms. Guest experts cited the 95th Congress (1977-1978) when the ideological distribution of Members showed many Republicans on the right and many Democrats on the left, as expected. But there also was a large middle with lots of overlap between Republicans and Democrats. Compare that to the 111th Congress (2009-2010), which essentially shows no middle.

Narrow majorities increase polarization. Stennis Fellows heard that prolonged, evenly-matched competition between the two parties intensifies political polarization. Recent decades have seen narrow Congressional majorities, repeated shifts in party control of Congress, near parity in party identification among voters, and close Presidential elections. In the Senate, for example, between 1980 and 2000 there were six shifts in party control with Democrats in control of the Chamber for six Congresses and the Republicans for eight. The only comparable period was in 1823-1845 when there were five switches in Senate control.

This heightened contest for control is a powerful spur to party organization toward actions that increase polarization. Stennis Fellows heard that a competitive environment gives Senators, for example, a common stake in cooperating as fellow partisans to boost their party's image and undercut that of the opposing party. Senators have every incentive to use the Senate floor and other resources for partisan public relations. But this environment also can create perverse incentives, such as Members with too little time to know legislative issues, or wanting to be protected from votes on certain issues.

Increase in message politics. Guest experts described much of the current activity in Congress as symbolic, aimed at communicating a message to external audiences. Since the 1980s, repeated votes are taken on measures for the purpose of demonstrating what can't pass. Indeed, what distinguishes 'message votes' is that the legislation is not designed to pass. The goal is communication, not legislation. Message politics is seen as particularly valuable to the minority party. Since some of the conflict in Congress seems to be manufactured for public consumption, experts said genuine polarization within Congress might not be as severe as it appears.

At the same time we were told that de-investment in Congressional expertise is understandable when there is so little chance of getting legislation to pass. Why should Members devote time (and staff?) that could otherwise go toward campaigning if the end result will be to accomplish nothing? And that applies to the time and effort expended in developing better relationships with Members on the other side, too.

Procedural polarization. Stennis Fellows heard that polarization is exacerbated by some of the procedures within the institution itself. A major change in the House of Representatives, for example, is the increase in the number of procedural votes recorded and the divisiveness of those votes. Heightened partisan tension in the House over the past 30 years is related to the procedures being used, especially the increased use of closed rules. The Senate's use of more complex unanimous consent agreements and cloture tactics to end filibusters has driven the parties in the Senate further apart.

Leadership's role is expanding. In both the House and Senate, guest experts underlined the fact that leadership is exerting more control. Leaders are more involved today in selecting committee chairmen and even the members of committees than ever. And leadership staff also is more likely to be involved in drafting bills in committee, and in making post-committee adjustments, generally through the Rules Committee. And the whip systems are much more active in counting votes and keeping party unity than in the past.

Furthermore, greater ideological divisions between the parties and stronger consensus within the parties has led to greater authority for party leaders who often see their duty as advancing the party's standing and ideological agenda. A consequence is that Members are likely to see a President of their party as their team captain and try to protect him or her, rather than be a check on the powers of the Executive.

Committee roles are diminishing. Guest experts cited the changing role of committees as one factor in greater polarization in Congress. When Democrats had large majorities in the House, for example, ideological splits were such that committee chairs that won their posts by seniority could oppose their party leadership on issues with impunity. It was possible to put together a winning coalition that spanned the two parties. A committee chair and ranking Member often would have stronger relationships than the Chair would with his or her own leadership. It was also a time when the expertise on issues resided in committees, which further encouraged cross-party relationships. But what was gained in bipartisanship often came at the expense of political accountability, we were told. If Republicans and a group of conservative Democrats could form effective majorities, and vice versa, what did the parties really stand for?

Is a return to 'regular order' possible? Stennis Fellows heard that a return to 'regular order' in the House is probably not possible — you cannot simply go back to 'the good old days' since the underpinnings no longer exist. But guest experts suggested that elements of the old system could be reintroduced into today's more polarized party structure. Improving opportunities for personal, cross-party relationships was suggested as a good start. At the same time they cautioned that for any form of 'regular order' to work, there has to be some good faith among Members. Otherwise, opening up the process just provides another opportunity for message politics.

Growing brinkmanship. Along with the rise in message politics and position taking, there is another factor that guest experts told us is increasing polarization – brinkmanship. Congress has long used some form of brinkmanship to force action, mostly by having deadlines that work up against a recess or adjournment. But Stennis Fellows were told that it now has been taken to an entirely new level. The debt limit debate, the continuing resolution and the payroll tax cut last year are examples of people looking into the abyss and, at the last minute, working something out. But to be effective, brinkmanship needs credibility and that requires that every so often you drive the vehicle off the cliff. With the seriousness of the upcoming fiscal cliff (sequestration, tax cuts, etc.), this prospect is especially troubling.

Is gridlock 'a feature or a bug' in our constitutional system? Stennis Fellows heard that gridlock is more inherent in American democracy than in parliamentary systems where the governing party has the ability to implement ideas and policies between elections without as many obstacles. Our system is also subject to non-majoritarian procedures, such as the Senate filibuster that purposefully make legislative action slow. This fundamental structure of our government is poorly understood or appreciated by many voters.

New and Old Media:
Reinforcing Political Polarization or Helping To Overcome It?

The fragmentation of the media marketplace and the new choices that consumers have, Stennis Fellows were told, has led to changes in the way news organizations operate. As attracting a diverse mass audience has become more difficult, these organizations are going after a particular audience profile. At the same time, listeners and readers have become more segmented by ideology, a trend that has been greatly accelerated by the Internet.

Audiences are choosing among these new sources based more on their own political and ideological views. Increasingly people believe that media coverage has become more partisan and that powerful people and organizations are exercising more influence over the press. Guest experts observed that conversations that unfold in social media spaces are often identified with particular partisan viewpoints, leading to like-minded people conversing with each other rather than considering different perspectives. They said the most active participants in on-line conversations tend to be the most partisan.

An explosion of information. Guest experts detailed how the Internet – which is used by 83 percent of Americans (and 95 percent of teenagers) – has created an explosion of sources of information. Polls show overwhelmingly that people are pleased by the diversity and level of choice in information that it has given them. Not only are they receiving more information, but also two-thirds of Americans are creating their own content on the Internet, many through social networks. With the rise in social networking (half of all adults use social networking sites) and mobile technology (327 million wireless devices in 2011 in a country of 314 million people), most of us now can be almost perpetually connected.

More information more knowledge. Despite all the new information created by the Internet, Stennis Fellows were told that voters are no better informed in terms of political knowledge than they were in the pre-Internet age. Several studies have shown that when it comes to basic political knowledge – who is the Speaker, who is the head of Russia, what party controls the Senate, etc. – there has been no difference over the past 20 or 30 years in the proportion of people who know and those who don't. In fact, the greatly expanded alternatives of the Internet (games, entertainment, etc.) have possibly diverted attention from politics. For those only casually connected to politics, the risk is greater than it was in the 1960s (when the network news shows were a common feature of daily life) that they might not have basic awareness of political issues, or that the information they have is not from a journalistically-objective source.

Misinformation. Erroneous or misleading information has a better chance of spreading on the Internet due to the fast pace of news and a multitude of sources. And although corrections, rebuttals and fact checking can also come more quickly, the Internet has a way of preserving – and re-tweeting – bad information.

Political campaigns have seized on the ubiquity of Internet connections. Campaigns are now building activities around mobile access, texting, recruiting, on-line fund raising and other activities. The dynamics are changing rapidly.

The on-line world is mostly NOT about politics. Stennis Fellows heard that most people are engaged in social media for reasons other than politics. Of the top 50 Twitter users in terms of followers, for example, only one is not in entertainment or sports – President Barack Obama, with about 12 million followers. Only one news organization breaks into the top 50 – CNN's Breaking News feed, with 6 million followers. The social media also are youth-oriented. Half of all Twitter users access the service on a mobile device and those users tend to be young – ages 18-24, or younger. And since voting, and political participation in general, is lowest among that age group, it stands to reason that the Twitterverse is not chattering about politics – it's music, entertainment and sports.

Social media may lead to a broadening of civic participation. One of the most profound effects of social media on civic life is that longstanding patterns of who becomes a 'civic participant' in a community are changing. For many years, education and income were reliable indicators of the likelihood of being involved in civic life. Today, the people who are involved in civic life on social networking sites, on Twitter, and blogs are more diverse. How long these new participants may stay engaged or whether their participation will change the nature of the deliberations is still unknown. But for now, social media seems to be broadening participation in political discourse and leveling the playing field a bit. When everybody can be a pundit and everybody can be a player in the media business, it is unclear how people will be influenced.

Twitter vs. Facebook. Guest experts discussed an important distinction between two major social networks, Twitter and Facebook. They noted that on Twitter, you can be anonymous – even a dog can tweet through its master's voice! It is also entirely public. But on Facebook you must be a person in order to establish an account and you can ensure that only certain people see certain things. Facebook also acts to keep invective under control, unlike Twitter. As a result the political content on Twitter tends to be highly partisan, almost as if the users are making comments in more extreme terms than they would use in person. Furthermore, some interaction on Twitter, for example re-tweets, is also very partisan, with little connection between users on the right and the left.

At the same time. guest experts felt the potential is there for Twitter to be used to counter polarization and to connect people across the political divide. Too much of Twitter, they said, is about "I just did this", or similar statements. But Twitter can be used to be about conversations, such as "I'm facing this question, what do you think?" The key to unlocking Twitter's potential is to use it to foster conversations. Another noted aspect of Twitter was that few topics stay trending for more than 40 minutes, but those that do trend longer engage an especially diverse audience. So watching Trending Topics and jumping into conversations can be a way to reach across partisan lines, especially early in a conversation before the partisan clarity of an event is established.

Traditional media are still central. Contrary to popular presumptions, Stennis Fellows heard that the rise in social media does not replace traditional media. Online content often comes from traditional media. Social media serves to amplify traditional media more than replace it. Traditional media, for example, originates most of the trending topics on Twitter and, therefore, is still driving much of the conversation.

Guest experts also noted a danger in the consolidation of mainstream media mostly taking place at the local level. Consolidation diminishes the number of voices being heard and challenges the traditional local media business model where cross subsidies once financed coverage of City Hall, for example. Much civic information starts with local newspapers. But with newspapers struggling financially and civic coverage shrinking, the other parts of the news ecosystem don't necessarily compensate for the reduced coverage.

Transparency can be a double-edged sword. Transparency and two-way conversations between citizens and elected officials were described as fundamental changes brought by the rise in social networking. The guest experts said people don't trust officials who do not share information through social media. And since many people are reading online conversations, many are judging how officials respond and interact. Engagement and openness is becoming an expectation and its influence can reach those beyond the immediate conversations. This has the potential to increase public understanding and trust on complex issues.

At the same time, when every detail of the deals that are being cut are made public, and quickly, it deprives today's Members of some of the political cover Members used to enjoy. This can impact the ability to work across the aisle. Stennis Fellows were told that transparency in deal making can be 'revolting,' and may do little to restore the image of Congress. If the process is seen as tainted, then any deal, even if it's in your interest, won't be supported.

★ Polarization and Compromise

Who is polarized? Stennis Fellows heard that a deeper analysis of data on polarization revealed five groups who were involved and affected in different ways by political polarization: Liberals, Conservatives, Moderates, Libertarians and Populists. Liberals are those who are liberal on both social and economic issues, while Conservatives are conservative on both social and economic issues. Moderates are moderate on both dimensions, while Libertarians are more conservative on economic issue and more liberal on social issues, and Populists are conservative on social issues but liberal on the economy. Party activists tend to be Liberal (Democrats) or Conservative (Republicans), but even combined they do not make up a majority of the population. Liberals and Conservatives tend to be more comfortable with polarization. They are more intense about who they support; know who their enemies are; more likely to cast straight party tickets; and will readily say they prefer either Fox News or MSNBC. Even their heartbeat increases when they see a representative of the opposition party, we were told!

While activists and elected officials may have a single ideology when it comes to social and economic issues, most members of the public do not. While activists on both sides are comfortable with polarization, that is not the case with Moderates, Libertarians or Populists. They are more cross-pressured and more ambivalent. Over time, we were told, Conservatives and Liberals have been drawn into the system in a way that Moderates, Libertarians and Populists have not. These three groups are much less likely to engage in political activity like being a campaign volunteer or donating money, but when it comes to voting – the only political act that most Americans engage in – there is almost no difference between the Conservatives and Liberals on one hand and members of the other three groups.

Polarization is nationwide, not just in Washington. Stennis Fellows heard that state legislatures are showing the same polarization as we see in Washington. Over the past 15 years, State Senates have become even more polarized than the U.S. Senate and a fair number of State Houses are just as polarized as the U.S. House of Representatives. This even extends to presumably nonpartisan judicial clerks, where studies have found them to be more and more identifying with a political party today than ever before.

Redistricting is neither the problem nor the solution. Guest experts dismissed redistricting of Congressional districts as a major source of polarization. They cited evidence of heightened polarization in the Senate, which is not impacted by redistricting. States are becoming increasingly polarized. In the 2008 Presidential election, only six states were decided by a margin of less than five points. On the other hand, one-third (17) of the states were in one camp or the other by a margin of 20 points or more. That is a significant change from the much larger number of relatively competitive states in the 1960s and 1970s.

Steve Rosell

Evidence of gerrymandered districts impacting polarization is either lacking or weak. Furthermore, districts that are evenly balanced between conservatives and liberals are just as likely to elect polarizing politicians since the strategy is often to focus on voter turnout (getting to 50 percent plus 1) rather than producing politicians who might win votes from both Conservatives and Liberals.

Campaign financing reform alone would not likely result in less polarization according to research cited by guest experts. While the growing impact of large donors who are ideologically oriented may be an obstacle in reducing polarization, it is not a major cause of polarization.

Third Parties are a possible response to polarization, but easy to head off. With the parties becoming more polarized as they try to solidify their bases, disaffected voters could come into play according to the experts. But both parties have a lot to lose from a third party and have been effective in finding ways to make it difficult for a third party to be successful.

Ideological boundaries are becoming more important and harder to bridge. The experts noted that political involvement is increasingly ideologically- and policy-oriented. This is reflected in the growing number of ideological interest groups (and their donors) which largely only deal with either Democrats or Republicans, not both. We heard that an analysis of the social networks of Senators from the same state but different parties revealed that they interact with different groups of people (i.e., their networks do not overlap).

Failure to compromise. Stennis Fellows were told that the refusal to compromise in order to send a message is a major problem. It is easy to take the position that one represents the district or state well if one doesn't compromise. However, in national polling of attitudes toward Congress, 75 percent of respondents indicated they wanted to see their Representative compromise in order to get something done rather than stick by their principles.

Compromise is the vital ingredient in a successful democracy, yet Stennis Fellows heard that it is virtually impossible to achieve in a closely-divided, winner-take-all, partisan environment in which parties are struggling to maintain or become the majority. An example cited was the Supreme Court nominations of Felix Frankfurter, Louis Brandeis and William Douglas. All were very controversial at the time but were ultimately confirmed almost unanimously. Contrast that with the extreme partisan divide in the more recent confirmations to the Court.

Finding common ground. Many policy disagreements in the past were resolved by Members working together to find common ground to pass legislation. Today, such compromise is more often viewed negatively as a betrayal of party or ideological principles. And constant media and special interest attention tends to bring swift and strong opposition to attempts at compromise.

Perhaps what is most troubling is the way polarization seems to restrict the bargaining dynamic and the way Members work together. The inability of Congress to work through polarization and find common ground is probably the main reason for the public's negative view of Congress, the guest experts said.

IV. Conclusion –
Working Effectively Despite Political Polarization

The 112th Congress Stennis Fellows concluded that "Moving Beyond Political Polarization" requires finding ways to get the job done by working across political polarities; it does not mean eliminating polarization, which has been an enduring feature of our system throughout most of our history. Working through polarization more effectively is a clear challenge facing the 112th Congress Stennis Fellows and other staff leaders as they serve Members of Congress now and in the future.

During the Fellowship, these staff leaders came to appreciate the way in which dialogue can be used to uncover common ground and lay the foundation for working together to bridge more contentious issues. They also identified it as a potent tool to help restore respect to the political process – respect for Congress as an institution and for others in the process, including political opponents.

Stennis Fellows hope to continue conversations begun in dialogue with guest experts and each other, and expand that dialogue to include others who share their concern about the future of Congress as an institution of American democracy, not only within Congress but also "beyond the Beltway" with citizens who have so much at stake.

Stennis Fellows agreed that ideas related to internal Congressional rules and procedures, such as reconsidering changes that have impacted 'regular order' in the House and Senate, should be explored as a way of helping Congress work through political polarization.

In their final retreat, Stennis Fellows reflected on the need to make public service leadership more inclusive by involving a greater diversity of people in the process. Beginning with a look within their own ranks of senior-level Congressional staff, the Stennis Fellows noted that attracting greater diversity would strengthen capacity to meet current and future challenges including those related to political polarization.
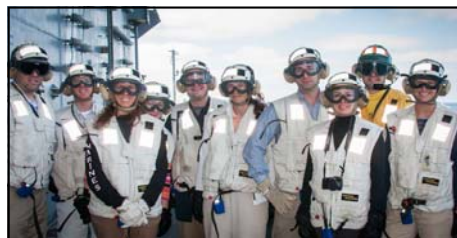
The Fellows found that the relationships they formed across traditional boundaries of party and Chamber were one of the most valuable aspects of their Fellowship. These staff leaders are committed to continuing those relationships and to seeking more opportunities to build similar connections among staff and Members.

In looking ahead, it is likely that the effect of polarization on the legislative process will ebb and flow, as it has throughout most of our history. But staff leaders in Congress must continually seek ways to effectively work within this changing environment. Stennis Fellows are committed to applying the insights they gained through this Fellowship to their own spheres of leadership as they work to make the legislative branch of government more effective in meeting the nation's challenges. Drawing on their experience of forming lasting relationships across lines of party and Chamber, Stennis Fellows concluded that there is much common ground and potential for more effective collaboration despite political polarization.

112th Congress Stennis Congressional Staff Fellows Dinner at the Miller Center, University of Virginia remarks by Governor Gerald Baliles

http://www.stennis.gov/programs/stennis-congressional-staff-fellows-program/355-baliles

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