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Tonight I want to do two things:

- Briefly cover some ground with respect to the atmosphere in Congress since the elections.
- And second, take a look around us to highlight the changing political environment nationally and why your involvement in the next election is so important as part of framing the political panel discussion that takes place tomorrow morning (“Leveraging the Political Process”).

The Republican majority is more conservative and the Democratic minority is more liberal.

Polarization has driven both parties further apart.

Voting records generally resembles one of only two types: either a Republican or a Democrat platform, with very little combination.

Deadline legislating as Congress finds itself backing up against reauthorizations and fiscal cliffs - leaving little space for more ambitious legislation.

Obama’s veto pen is an extension of his second-term strategy in the face of Republican opposition and to safeguard his legislative record.

Obama has threatened to veto all GOP appropriations bills unless Republicans agree to reconsider the sequester-level spending caps.

Emboldened by Obama’s veto threat Senate Minority Leader Reid announced plans to block the entire appropriations process.

The biggest showdown waits till fall when the need to fund:

- FY 2016 with the Appropriations endgame,
- The Debt Ceiling comes due and
- Budget Reconciliation comes to a head.

For the moment, a rare alignment of policy goals between Republicans and the Obama administration on trade and cybersecurity contribute to a political climate yielding results - - - temporarily.

However, there is another troublesome alignment I have mentioned before to this audience - the far left---far right convergence.

From education, cellphone data collection, free trade, financial services, foreign policy and criminal-sentencing reform, opposite ends of the ideological spectrum have come together and are influencing the outcome of policy debates.

Candidates from the left and the right, at times sound nearly identical populist, anti-trade, anti-Wall Street, antiestablishment themes.

Populism takes center stage

The progressive populist wing of the Democratic Party is ascending.

Elizabeth Warren's signature line, "the game is rigged" has become NYC Mayor de Blasio's "urgent call for change."

Warren is using her star power to:

- Shift the debate left
- Push Hillary Clinton left and
- Push the Democratic Party to the left.

Under intense pressure from the populist wing, congressional Democrats in voting down trade measures delivered a stunning temporary defeat to the President on the biggest economic policy of his 2nd term.

Those votes don't mean the populists are firmly in control but, it does suggest the Party is embracing the populist, progressive message.

The trade drama is the most visible skirmish in a broader intraparty battle, with:

- Organized labor,
- Environmentalists' and
- Economic populists on one side, and
- A dwindling corps of moderate, centrists Democrats on the other.

Increasingly, the political momentum and passion within the Democratic Party has moved towards progressives.

The Congressional Progressive Caucus saw the trade votes as a big moment for the coalition that Obama helped forge, turn and oppose the leader who brought them together.

Jim Dean, the chairman of Democracy for America, warned Democrats that if they back trade bills; "we will encourage our progressive allies to join us in leaving you to rot, and we will actively search for opportunities to primary you with a real Democrat."

The Democracy Alliance has the greatest progressive reach having pumped about \$500 million into various liberal organizations with the aim of returning to:

- "The New Deal approach of regulating finance,
- Taxing the rich,
- Encouraging unions, and
- Investing in infrastructure."

The AFL-CIO is soliciting funding from the Democracy Alliance for its political and legislative efforts and, along with a few other unions has succeeded in being named one of only 34 organizations the Alliance members will steer funding to.

The Democrats family feud has spilled out into the open in Maryland to replace retiring Senator Barbara Mikulski.

Progressives see that Senate race as a proxy for whether the party embraces the populist progressive wing or, follow the Wall Street wing that's led the Party since Bill Clinton was President.

Markos Moulitsas of Daily Kos joined by MoveOn and Credo Action endorsing Donna Edwards over Chris Van Hollen, defined the Maryland race: "to finish getting rid of the dinosaurs so that . . . as a party [we] can move forward with a cohesive, positive and popular message."

Independent from the Democratic Party these groups are determined to lay the groundwork for a liberal version of the Tea Party.

Partisan Divide

In the 2012 election, the highest levels of party loyalty and straight-ticket voting took place since voting patterns began to be tracked. (1952: American National Election Studies).

For more than a decade, the percentage of rural Americans voting Republican has grown sharply while urban Americans have shifted to Democrats.

High levels of straight-ticket voting reflect a fundamental change in the way Americans relate to political parties.

Growing numbers of Americans have been voting against the opposing party rather than for their own party.

In essence, this is negative partisanship.

Several years ago, I discussed the book, “The Big Sort: When Personal Preferences Build Political Partisanship” (2009) with you.

Rather than being caused by politicians, “The Big Sort” authors concluded partisanship is:

- “A reflection of real differences in the way Americans live and
- Their decision to surround themselves with similar thinkers.”

After examining all the data on redistricting its authors concluded, that Congressional Districts actually grew even more partisan in years where there was no change in boundaries.

In 2012:

- Over 90% of Democrats and Republicans supported their party’s presidential candidate.
- Close to 90% of them supported their party’s House and Senate candidates,
- And, 83% cast a straight-party ballot for President, House, and Senate.

Political strategists conduct polarizing, base-mobilizing campaigns exacerbating partisanship. These hyper-partisan voting patterns suggest another close election in 2016 with the same set of swing states as in 2012 ultimately deciding the outcome.

There is another group that needs paying attention to; the Millennials:

The Millennials

Their views have been shaped by:

- The 9/11 attacks,
- The US going to war in two countries, and
- Enduring the worst economic downturn in more than 70 years and,
- Groundbreaking technologies that is reshaping how the world works, conducts business and lives.

Millennials' lack trust in American institutions.

They believe that “elected officials [are] motivated by selfish reasons” and that “political involvement rarely has any tangible results.”

Ron has invested considerable time with Millennials and found they don’t see government as a way to improve their communities, their country, or the world.

They are both socially liberal and economically conservative.

Stealing from a piece Ron wrote for The Atlantic:

- 51 percent believe when government runs something it is usually wasteful

- 86 percent support private SS accounts
- 74 percent would change Medicare to private insurance.
- 63 percent believe free trade is a good thing.

Millennials represent another group we need to engage whenever possible.

Fewer “Swing” Seats, More Polarization

All of these trends have led to the disappearance of the “political middle.”

Congressional Quarterly has been tracking the demise of the “middle” in Congress since 1982 when some 344 members occupied the middle (between the most liberal Republican and most conservative Democrat). - - - which had shrunk down to less than a dozen members (11) in the last Congress (113th).

[By 1994, the middle shrunk to 252, followed by more shrinkage in 2002 standing at 137 members before plunging dramatically following the 2010 elections to 16 and finally less than a dozen members (11) occupied the middle in the last Congress (113th).]

The 2012 midterms continued this ongoing partisan partitioning of the country into durable red and blue spheres dominated by each party.

It is because of the partisan partitioning, a political research project from Emory University (Alan Abramowitz and Steven Webster) concluded that in general elections, the vast majority of the American public is going to vote against a party, not for one.

Their conclusion: "Negative partisanship is likely to remain an important feature of American politics for the foreseeable future."

This increase in non-cooperation leads to an electoral paradox.

Elected representatives are increasingly unable to cooperate at a national Congressional level but are re-elected at least 90% of the time.

Here's another unrelated political fact of interest:

You have all heard Stu Rothenberg say “as far as general elections are concerned, most of you don't matter."

Here's why:

Democratic strategist Doug Sosnik, a former Clinton White House political director, pulled together numbers spent on television advertising in the 2012 presidential general election - - -

- Of the \$896 million, \$474 million (53 percent) was spent in just three states: Florida (\$173 million), Virginia (\$151 million), and Ohio (\$150 million).

- Just 7 states were recipients of \$756 million spent on presidential general-election TV ads, or
- 84 percent, of the total spent. - - - [North Carolina took fourth place (\$97 million); behind it came Colorado (\$73 million), Iowa (\$57 million), and Nevada (\$55 million).]

Deal-Making

Time is now closing in on moving a legislative agenda before the presidential race takes center stage.

McConnell must contend with four Senators running for the White House hijacking the agenda at any time to make a political point as a Presidential candidate.

Congressional Republicans need to show they can govern and avoid high profile fights that are only popular to the party's base.

Republicans must come to grips with the reality that their "majority" power is limited by:

- The filibuster,
- The veto pen and,
- In the House, their own ideological fissures.

The “art of the possible” today requires legislation conservative enough for the House, yet progressive enough to garner the sufficient support from Senate Democrats to get to 60-votes and finally, gain the signature of President Obama.

With political momentum within the Democratic Party moving towards the populist progressives, Obama can’t count on the caucus’s unwavering support during his remaining term.

The dynamic means Obama must contend not only with a more powerful Republican majority in Congress, but with an emboldened left wing of his own party.

Across all these dimensions, each political party is operating with an electoral coalition defined as much by its limits as its strengths.

As long as that's true, I think American politics is more likely to produce a polarized stalemate than a comprehensive advantage for either side.

Across all these dimensions and developments we must conduct our business representing our members.