

Why We Can't Get Along

Think partisan politicians are out of touch with the voters?
The opposite is true, says political scientist Alan Abramowitz '69.

Interview by Karen McCally '02 (PhD)

People often assume that partisan polarization reflects a disconnect between politicians and voters. The opposite is true. The most politically engaged and informed citizens are the most polarized. Political moderation is most prevalent among those who are less politically engaged and less informed. Politicians are reflecting trends among the most engaged citizens.

The kind of polarization we have now is very different from what we had 50 years ago. The public was deeply divided in the 1960s. But the divide didn't fall along party lines the way it does now. It cut across party lines. What we're seeing today is a growing divide between Democrats and Republicans, and that has had a major effect on partisan politics and electoral politics.

There are a number of factors that have contributed to this kind of polarization. First, there's a growing racial divide between the parties. There were obviously great divisions over race and civil

rights in the 1960s, but the difference now is that non-whites, who make up a growing share of the electorate, are heavily concentrated in the Democratic party, while the Republican party remains an overwhelmingly white party. That's very significant politically. And it's likely to continue.

The public is also closely divided. In every election, everything's at stake. There's a sense that every vote is potentially a vote that could affect control of Congress, the White House, and the courts as well. If the stakes are that high, it compounds these divisions.

Someone like Rick Santorum certainly puts a much greater emphasis on social issues than Mitt Romney. But if you look at their actual positions on these issues, they aren't that different. Increasingly, people who are conservative on social issues tend also to be conservative on economic issues. You don't find many Republicans any more who are social liberals and economic conservatives. And there certainly aren't many who are economic liberals and social conservatives. You might find more of those in the Democratic party, but there you don't find many either.

Alan Abramowitz '69

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On political compromise: "A lot of times you find that compromise means that the other side should give us what we want; as in, 'We'll be glad to help them give us what we want. We'll be happy to cooperate on that.'"

On personal politics: "My family were strong Democrats. My father was a very strong and early supporter of civil rights, and I absorbed a lot of that. I've remained definitely on the left, politically, but I think of myself as a political realist in terms of what's possible."



Dick Niemi [the Don Alonzo Watson Professor of Political Science] came to Rochester during my senior year, and I took his course on methods. We had to choose an area of research and write a review of the literature. I chose voting behavior, and that's where my interest in elections and voting behavior started. I also took [Distinguished University Professor Emeritus] Dick Fenno's course on Congress and then served with him on a committee on congressional elections research in the 1970s. The political science department was a great department when I was a student, and it still is now. 