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The Partisan Industrial Complex

By **David Paul Kuhn**

President Obama's five Sunday television interviews included a telling thread. "The media encourages some of the outliers in behavior, because, let's face it, the easiest way to get on television right now is to be really rude," Obama said on ABC's "This Week," repeating himself on other networks.

Obama was correct, but only in part. It's not only media that "encourages" the "outliers."

The Partisan Industrial Complex is overwhelming American politics. From the partisan media to the modern campaign, an entire industry flourishes on polarization. Partisanship earns and spends billions annually.

As Ronald Brownstein wrote in "The Second Civil War," the "country has been more polarized than it is today. What's unusual now is that the political system is more polarized than the country."

Even as partisanship increasingly defines the American political system, the electorate has become less partisan in recent decades. Independents have swelled to record levels, last seen in the early 1990s. But Washington is more divided than any time since at least the Second World War.

President Barack Obama, only matched by George W. Bush, has the most polarized public approval rating since the advent of polling. Last year marked the most polarized period in Congress since 1953, when Congressional Quarterly first began quantifying partisanship. Lawmakers now vote along party lines 90 percent of the time.

Systemic Partisanship

The most documented explanation for this hyper-partisan era is the gerrymandering of congressional districts. The districts are designed to maximize voters from a single party. Therefore, representatives increasingly depend on partisan voters for reelection. Partisanship becomes both host and parasite.

The base of each party exacerbates this ill, pulling their leaders to their respective flanks. As Obama's approval rating slipped to the mid-50s, the political left urged the president to double-down on his liberalism. Many progressives wanted Obama to take a lesson from W. Bush's divisive push for tax cuts. The tax cuts passed, as Democrats ruefully recall.

Philosophical puritans won the modern Republican Party. Barry Goldwater was trounced in 1964. But that year he won the party from the moderate Rockefeller Republicans and one advocate to his side, Ronald Reagan. Reagan eventually finished what Goldwater began.

The pull of political bases is not new. The change is in how these bases have consumed their parties. According to one study, between 1950 and 2005, the portion of moderate lawmakers in Congress plummeted from about 45 to 10 percent.

Partisanship is the new politics in part because it works--if "works" is defined in the interest of power rather than the public. In 2005, Democrats modeled themselves on the GOP of the early 1990s. Democratic Senate Majority Leader George Mitchell called Republicans "unprecedentedly obstructionist" in 1994. Not long after, Mitchell's party lost their majority.

By the summer of 2005, Bush said Democrats "stand for nothing except obstruction." By 2006, Democrats regained their dominance in Congress. One strategic lesson, among several others, was that entrenched opposition often wins out, if it can hold out.



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The current Republican leadership picked up the same playbook. This past February, not one of the 176 Republicans in the House supported the \$787 billion economic stimulus measure. The GOP is similarly unified in its opposition to Democrats' proposals for health care reform. Once again, Democrats are calling Republicans the "party of no."

Today's Washington is the inverse of Obama's central campaign pledge to "bridge" the partisan divide. The president underestimated not only the ideological gulf separating the two tribes of Americans politics. He underestimated the industry invested in that divide.

The Rise of a Billion Dollar Business

Political Action Committees (PACs) spending power has nearly tripled in the past decade. In 2008, Democratic and Republican PACs spent close to \$60 million. In 1998, partisan PACs spent approximately \$24 million, according to the Center for Responsive Politics (CRP).

There are now some 12,500 registered lobbyists in Washington, according to CRP. And experts believe the actual number is far higher.

The Washington Post placed the real number of DC lobbyists at 35,000 in 2005, a number the Post reported had doubled since 2000. Health care alone, which has become a decidedly partisan debate, employs 3,300 lobbyists today--six lobbyists for each of the 535 members of the House and Senate, according to Bloomberg News.

In 2008, lobbyists spent about 3.3 billion, twice the amount spent in 2001. Partisan "527s," a type of activist organization, spent an additional \$423 million that year, according to CRP.

The partisan beast owes some of its growth to the professionalization of politics. Campaign communication spending alone totals more than a billion dollars annually, according to the American Association of Political Consultants (AAPC). The group's formation itself, in 1969, signified the professionalization of a rising class of strategists.

AAPC estimates that in 2008 political candidates for state and federal offices raised almost \$7.68 billion, an increase of more than 50 percent since 2000. It's political consultants who steward that spending. And as Angela McMillen, the executive director of the AAPC, estimated, 99.9 percent of her memberships' firms are partisan.

A Center for Public Integrity study found that about 600 political consultants and firms earned more than \$1.85 billion in the 2004 election cycle. That number likely rose in 2008. The stars may change in politics but the supporting actors remain; it's their business, after all.

The outcome is a machine that runs on polarization. As Bill Bishop, author of the "Big Sort," put it, "Modern political campaigns continue to be designed to increase political divisions." From micro targeting to get out the vote efforts, the marketing and emerging technologies of politics are principally focused on locating and rallying partisans.

The business of partisanship also increasingly shapes how Americans live. In 2008 and 2004, almost half of voters lived in a county where either the Republican or Democrat candidate won by a margin of 20 percentage points or more. In 1976, a year of more centrist campaigns, only about a quarter of Americans lived in one of these "landslide counties," according Emory's Alan Abramowitz.

The most partisan counties represent different Americas. Obama's landslide counties were urban. McCain's were in small towns and rural areas.

There are conservative and liberal book clubs, even dating services. Liberals drink more Starbucks. Conservatives drink more Dunkin' Donuts. Both the liberal Nation and the conservative Weekly Standard magazines offer annual cruises. In the Standard's words, one can "travel with like-minded conservatives."

The result is segregation by choice. It's the partitioning of not merely thought but American experiences. Each tribe has come to view the other as nearly foreign. And what is foreign is therefore dismissed. The cost is compromise. And the outcome is a paralysis of governance.

The Blob: Partisan Media's Growing Influence

The modern partisan media is both indicative of the problem and a prime instigator. The media of the 19th century was hijacked by partisanship as well. One Philadelphia editor accused Andrew Jackson of murdering his own troops. But a new breed of objective journalism, however flawed, became preeminent in the last century. Radio and later television, amid the decline of newspaper competition, eventually centralized news.

Walter Cronkite famously declared that "the only rational way out" of the Vietnam War was "to negotiate." Afterward, Lyndon Johnson told an aide, "If I've lost Cronkite, I've lost Middle America." No commentator has commanded that impact since.

It's not that Americans are no longer getting their news from television. Seven in 10 Americans say they still gather most of their news on the tube, according to the Pew Research Center. It's who is watching what.

Liberals watch MSNBC. Conservatives watch Fox News. And CNN is left in non-partisan purgatory. MSNBC earned more weeknight viewers than CNN for the first time over a full quarter, as of the close of June.

To be sure, Fox holds the most sway. Three times as many Republicans as Democrats, 34 percent to 10 percent respectively, get the bulk of their news from Fox. Three times as many Democrats as Republicans say MSNBC is their primary news source as well, but the numbers are only 9 to 3 percent. This explains, somewhat, why Obama spoke to every network but Fox on Sunday.

Fox's programs now hold every spot in the top 10 most-viewed cable news shows, according to Nielsen. Fox's top three shows are also its most ideological: The O'Reilly Factor, Hannity and Glenn Beck. Combined, the three shows have about 7.6 million viewers.

MSNBC's ratings fall far short of Fox's. But MSNBC's most popular shows, therefore its greatest investment, feature its ideologically liberal stars--Keith Olbermann and Rachel Maddow.

That investment in ideology begs another question. Partisanship is demonstrably sought. Ideology is a litmus test for new primetime stars. But is partisanship also contrived or exaggerated to increase profits?

Olbermann came from ESPN's "SportsCenter," a background that made him great on television. But ESPN is not a hive of political experience. Fox's rising superstar Glenn Beck has turned his show into an oppositional machine. Beck successfully galvanized campaigns to push out Obama administration officials and helped rally conservatives to protest the president.

Beck reportedly once described himself as a "rodeo clown." It's fair to ask, how much of Beck's showmanship is just show? Only he knows. The personal politics of Al Franken, in the time before he was a senator, were always more moderate than his image as a liberal activist.

Show or substance, this Beck sells. His Fox ratings are skyrocketing. This week's cover of Time magazine brandishes Beck. Headline: "Mad man."

Radio tells the same story. The top ten talk radio shows are all conservative, according to the radio trade publication Talkers. Fox's Beck and Sean Hannity make both lists. Rush Limbaugh continues to command the top spot. Limbaugh's radio audience is roughly equivalent to the population of America's three largest cities, earning at least 15 million listeners weekly.

It was Limbaugh's ideological format, which proved so profitable, that hundreds emulated. Talk radio has grown more than three-fold since 1990, according to Tuft's Sarah Sobieraj and Jeffrey Berry.

Fox, in fact, modeled its format on talk radio. And increasingly, online news is modeling its format on both mediums.

Liberals appear to have the lead online. The liberal HuffingtonPost, according to Alexa.com, now gets more readers than The Wall Street Journal, the Los Angeles Times and The Washington Post. Huffington leads the list of online news blogs as well, with Michelle Malkin's conservative website ranking third. Liberals raise more contributions online than conservatives, sometimes drastically more.

The ideological business models online are also winning more readers. One quarter of online news consumers typically visited websites that matched their political views during the 2004 campaign. By 2008, a third of online news consumption was directed toward like-minded websites. The trend is strongest for college-age Democrats and Republicans, as well as those who are most engaged online.

The publishing industry has tapped into the same model. Take a look at the New York Times bestseller list. Three of the top 10 non-fiction books on last week's list were ideological.

Consider the titles of these polemic reads. Number one was Michelle Malkin's "Culture of Corruption." Ranking seven and eight, respectively, are "Liberty and Tyranny," by Mark Levin and "Catastrophe" by Dick Morris. By the titles alone, one might think that the **United States** was being invaded.

Ideologues are also increasingly prevalent within the chattering class. Last year, the British Telegraph ranked "the most influential US political pundits." Topping the list was Karl Rove, who W. Bush called the "architect" of perhaps the most partisan campaign strategy in the modern day.

The nation has seen more divisive eras. One of Thomas Jefferson's hacks described John

Adams as a "hideous hermaphroditical character." Andrew Jackson's wife was repeatedly accused of adultery. Nineteenth century Congress saw brawls. Representatives carried guns. Calling someone a "liar" actually led to duels.

It's the contrast with the relative comity of more recent decades that raises eyebrows. Certainly, political tectonics had a role. The Southern Democrats who stood against the New Deal and the Great Society became Republicans. Northeastern Republicans became Democrats. But it was the arch partisans, like those who backed Goldwater and George McGovern, who helped drive the moderates out.

Decades later, there is a massive industry existentially invested in partisanship. Republican Rep. Joe Wilson yells "liar" during President Obama's health care address. Wilson apologizes that night. GOP greybeards scold him. But one week after, Wilson and his opponent raise more than \$3 million combined. Partisanship literally paid off.

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