

**Learning To Accept Rejection
(or Governing in the United States)
University of St. Thomas Health MBA Class**

by Bill Dauster, Deputy Chief of Staff for Policy, U.S. Senate Majority Leader Reid

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[posted with permission]

The great science fiction writer Ray Bradbury once said about writing: “You have to know how to accept rejection and reject acceptance.” The longer I work in Washington, the more I’m convinced that this is good advice for working in government, as well. You have to know how to accept rejection.

Many Americans wonder why we in Washington don’t just work together and get things done. The answer is a matter of arithmetic.

First, start with the proposition that our system is uniquely designed to produce rejection.

In December, two Ivy League professors, Alfred Stepana and Juan Linz, one from Columbia and one from Yale, published a paper that examined 23 long-standing democracies in advanced economies. They compared which countries’ governments have more players with veto power.

The professors found slightly more than half of those countries — 12½ countries — have only one electorally-generated veto player. They found 7½ countries had two veto players. Two countries — Switzerland and Australia — had three veto players. And only one country — the United States of America — had four electorally-generated veto players.

And you know which institution the professors single out for special attention? The United States Senate.

The next piece of arithmetic is to add in changes in the media. As television matured from three major networks that dominated national discourse to more than a hundred cable television networks, Americans have moved from a shared reality to an atomistic media.

And that change has become even more accentuated by the development of social media. I saw a poll Friday that found that 71 percent of respondents said that they believed that the political information that they received on social media is more reliable than what they get from traditional news organizations. Think about that: More than two-thirds of respondents said that they trusted a post on Facebook more than what they read in the paper.

So more and more, people shop for points of view where they feel comfortable. And that pulls us apart. People don’t have a shared view of reality to start with.

And as Lily Tomlin said, “Reality is nothing but a collective hunch.”

Or, alternatively, as that other great science fiction author Philip K. Dick wrote, “Reality is that which, when you stop believing in it, doesn’t go away.”

Add to that, the Supreme Court continues to chip away at our campaign finance laws. And in this year’s election cycle, we have seen the rise of the super pacs. Super pacs spend money in an overwhelmingly negative way, accentuating polarization.

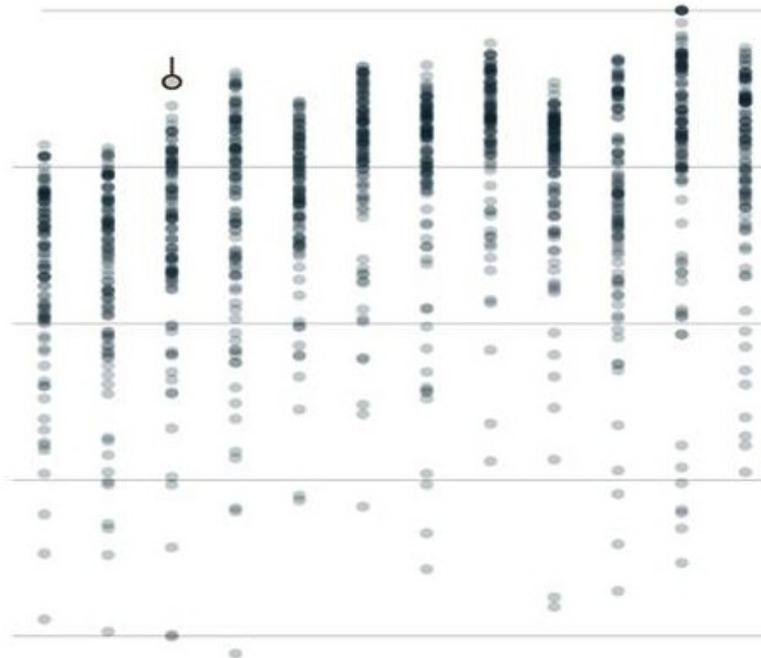
And as campaign finance donors tend to be more representative of moneyed interests, the campaign finance system adds another systemic impediment to legislation that would affect those moneyed interests.

As H.L. Mencken said, “The chief value of money lies in the fact that one lives in a world in which it is overestimated.”

But of course as Woody Allen said, “Money is better than poverty, if only for financial reasons.”

The atomization of media and permissive campaign finance law have helped contribute to the *intellectual cleansing* of the political parties.

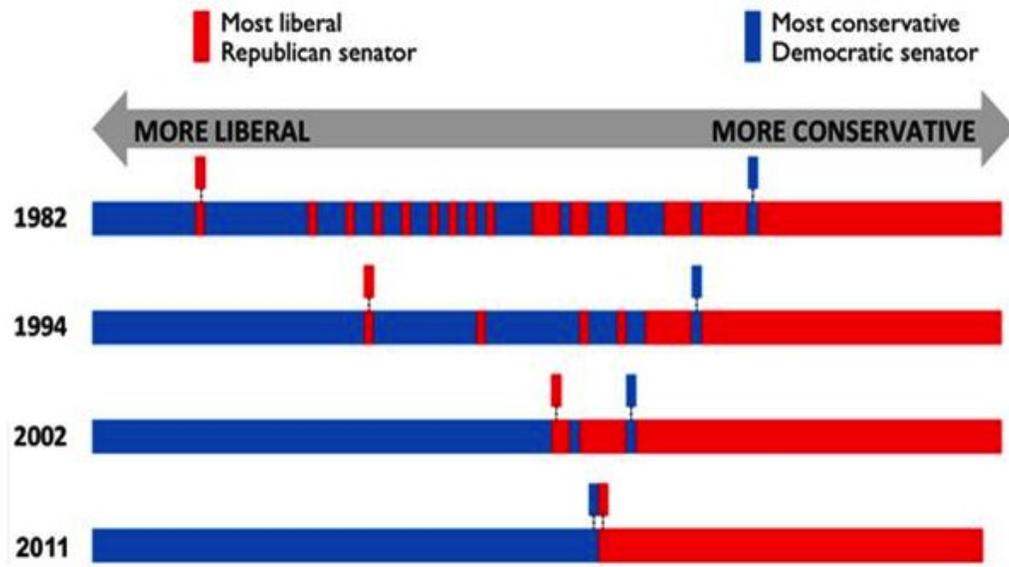
The folks that people elect to political bodies are increasingly people of strong views. This chart from the New York Times shows the percentage of times that Senators vote with their parties.



In 1989, most Senators voted with their party between 80 and 90 percent of the time. By the last Congress, most Senators voted with their party between 90 and 100 percent of the time.

This next chart tells a similar story.

National Journal Vote Ratings in the Senate 1982 – 2011



In 1982, half the Republican Caucus was more liberal than the most conservative Democratic Senator. And most of the Democratic Caucus was more conservative than the most liberal Republican Senator.

Between then and now, moderates from both parties have lost elections or have otherwise left the Senate. So today, no Republican Senator is more liberal than any Democratic Senator. And no Democratic Senator is more conservative than any Republican Senator. The two parties have retreated to their respective corners. Is it any wonder that they come out fighting?

Listen to what Senator Olympia Snowe — a moderate from Maine — said upon announcing that she would not seek another term in the Senate. She said:

"I . . . find it frustrating . . . that an atmosphere of polarization and ‘my way or the highway’ ideologies has become pervasive in campaigns and in our governing institutions.”

So far, I’ve tried to be nonpartisan in this an analysis. But I would be remiss not to note one particular aspect of this polarization. I owe this observation to longtime political observer Norm Ornstein, author of the forthcoming book “It’s Worse than It Looks.” Mr. Ornstein calls what’s been happening “asymmetrical polarization.” What’s been happening is not just each side retreating to its corner, but the right has been moving even further right.

So to return to this chart of Senators on the liberal to conservative scale, what’s been happening is that not only have the blue been gathering with the blue, and the red been gathering with the red, but the whole bar has been moving to the right. So an individual red Senator who was in the middle of the Republican party in 1982 would find himself or herself on the far left hand side of the Republican party today.

And as Pat Paulsen said, “Assuming either the Left Wing or the Right Wing gained control of the country, it would probably fly around in circles.”

So let’s sum up the arithmetic. You add together multiple veto parties, plus atomistic media, plus permissive campaign finance law, plus intellectual cleansing, plus asymmetrical polarization, and what do you get?

Gridlock.

And here’s how gridlock looks on the Senate floor. The Majority Leader brings up a bill on highways. The Republicans don’t simply oppose the highway bill. The Republican leader offers an amendment on contraception. Then a young Republican Senator offers an amendment on Iran. And then another Republican Senator offers an amendment on the Keystone pipeline. Pretty soon, you can’t see the highway bill for the amendments.

A friend of mine who works on the Hill explained it this way:

Let’s say, hypothetically, my wife and I disagree over what to have for dinner. She wants chicken. I want fish.

Footnote: In my family, my wife decides all these things. Any similarities between this hypothetical and reality are purely coincidental.

Returning to the hypothetical

Before we can decide the chicken-fish decision, I insist on telling her what I want to do for summer vacation, the movie we’re seeing this weekend, and what to do about her mother. And I tell her no one gets any dinner until she agrees to resolve those things first.

That would, of course, be ridiculous. But that’s the process that now passes for normal in the U.S. Senate.

Another result of all this gridlock is Churning Majorities. When Congress is constantly bickering over chicken or fish, the people want to throw the rascals out. When the new rascals confront the same gridlock and can’t get anything done either, the people want to throw the new rascals out. So the majority switches back and forth more than it used to.

I realize that this talk may be getting a little depressing.

And as you can tell from this talk, I firmly believe as the English novelist Arnold Bennett wrote, “The best cure for worry, depression, melancholy, brooding, is to go deliberately forth and try to lift with one’s sympathy the gloom of somebody else.”

But don’t give up all hope. Some things still can get done. Not many, but some.

For example, that highway bill. We did end up getting that done. It's an example of an opportunistic temporary majority. We were able to assemble that majority because conservative Senators like Jim Inhofe — the Ranking Republican Member of the Environment and Public Works Committee — likes highways, too.

As Senator Inhofe said, "I have always said that conservatives should be big spenders in two areas: national defense and infrastructure."

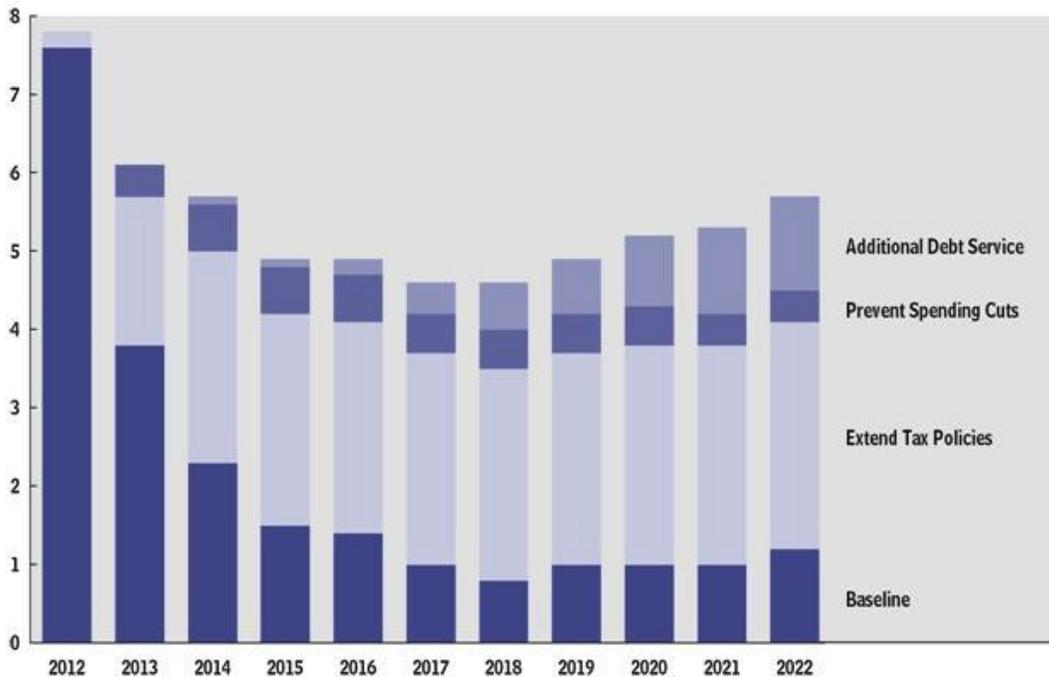
And so, you can see from that quote that we would have another opportunity for a temporary majority for the defense authorization bill, as well.

And as the famous traveler Charles Kuralt said, "Thanks to the Interstate Highway System, it is now possible to travel from coast to coast without seeing anything."

One last cause for optimism: There is reason to learn to love the default setting. Part of the ability to live in and love Washington comes from learning to enjoy *inaction*. And at the end of this year, *inaction* will get a lot done.

This is an idea popularized by Jonathan Chait in the *New Republic* early in 2011. But it's one to which many progressives have warmed.

In this next chart, prepared by the Congressional Budget Office, the dark bars show what would happen to the deficit if Congress does nothing. The lighter bars show what would happen if Congress does something.



The dark bars show what the deficit would be if the Bush tax cuts expired and the across-the-board spending cuts we negotiated in August and already baked into the cake do take effect. The dark bars show that in order to get significant military spending cuts and tax increases, progressives only have to *prevent* laws from moving through both Houses of Congress and getting enacted. And I hope that one thing I have demonstrated today is that preventing laws from moving through both Houses of Congress and getting enacted is something that Washington is very good at.

So if Congress just does what it's good at, we should be able to bring the deficit to within manageable levels again.

Full disclosure: In the actual event, it will be messier than that. There will be haggling, bargaining, and stomping of feet. There will be all the things for which people dislike Washington. And the result will in all likelihood be different from the simple default result you see in this chart. But as long as the Republicans do not sweep both Houses of Congress and the Presidency, the result will be some spending cuts, and some higher taxes on richer folks, and a lower deficit for the Country.

And that's a level of inaction with which many folks will be quite happy, thank you very much. And that's one reason why, in Washington, you have to know how to accept rejection.