

[← Back to Original Article](#)

Gingrich and the roots of political polarization

When Newt Gingrich arranged for House members to go home for the weekend, a sense of congressional collegiality was replaced by cutthroat competition.

September 22, 2009 | Johanna Neuman | Johanna Neuman is a former Times staff writer based in Washington. She contributes to The Times' Top of the Ticket blog.

In the wake of Rep. Joe Wilson's outburst against President Obama on the House floor, a pundit war has erupted over who is to blame for the partisan state of the nation's politics.

But the truth is that the roots of our current political polarization date back decades, when a confluence of events turned Washington from a parochial Southern town where power was guarded zealously by those at the top into a media-savvy place where bit players like Wilson can captivate national attention.

The politics in Washington were always cynical. Now they're also angry. "It's well beyond 'the loyal opposition' now," said Democrat Vic Fazio, who served as the representative from California's 3rd District for 20 years, ending in 1999. "It's visceral."

I've made a point the last few weeks of asking people across Washington who's to blame for the increasing dissonance in our politics. Why is it, I asked, that the extreme wings on the right and left are driving the nation's politics even as public opinion clings to the good common sense of the center?

The answers ranged from Fanne Foxe, the stripper who jumped into the Tidal Basin in 1974 after Wilbur Mills, the hard-drinking Democratic chairman of the House Ways and Means Committee who was escorting her, was pulled over by the police, to Brian Lamb, the man who invented C-SPAN in 1979, opening government to public scrutiny and spawning a generation of posturing politicians.

But the man who got the most votes as the man who ruined Washington was Newt Gingrich.

It wasn't that the Georgia Republican who engineered the toppling of Democrats from power in 1994 deliberately undermined political civility; it was that the crop of legislators he helped into power came in under redistricting plans that virtually guaranteed safe seats, which granted politicians a newfound power to ignore the center.

In fairness, upheavals had already started to shake up the scene long before Gingrich's arrival. President Lyndon Johnson's success in winning landmark civil rights legislation in the 1960s led to a realignment -- Democrats lost the South, Republicans lost the Far West, and both parties hardened their politics along the lines of Barry Goldwater's admonition that "extremism in the defense of liberty is no vice." The twin legacies of Vietnam and Watergate coated the town with a cynical aftertaste. And Ronald Reagan swept to office in 1980 in a landslide that allowed Republicans to wrest control of the Senate from Democrats for the first time in 28 years.

But it was Gingrich who presided over what was perhaps the most dramatic change: the Republican takeover of the House. Democrats until then had run the House for all but four of the preceding 72 years.

Gingrich's genius was not only to play to C-SPAN cameras or carry out the "Contract with America" or lead a populist revolt against the kind of gentleman politics practiced by then-GOP Minority Leader Bob Michel. Gingrich's lasting contribution was to change the congressional calendar.

It used to be that most lawmakers had homes in Washington, and their families socialized on weekends. In that kind of atmosphere, legislators came to view their counterparts across the aisle not as villains but as fellow actors in the nation's political drama. Gingrich's predecessor as House speaker, Tom Foley, a Democratic congressman from Spokane, primarily visited his constituents during summer recesses or on long weekends. But Gingrich believed that his 73 Republican freshmen were vulnerable to the same attacks they had used in toppling Democrats. Fearful they would be tagged as "out of touch with constituents," Gingrich encouraged lawmakers to spend more time in their districts. Roll-call votes -- that too was an innovation of the C-SPAN times -- would never take place on Mondays and only rarely on Fridays.

On many levels, changing the schedule made sense. Ever since the 1960s, as Rutgers' Ross Baker observed to me recently, politics had been moving from the parties to the candidates, making politicians directly answerable to voters, giving birth to the permanent campaign and the advent of cutthroat political consultants such as Republican Lee Atwater in the 1980s and Democrat James Carville in the 1990s. Amid the increasingly partisan tone, the entry of large numbers of women into the workforce in the 1970s meant that congressional spouses (and most were women) suddenly had their own careers, and they were less willing to uproot families for a stint in Washington.

However logical the shift in congressional schedule, it also had unintended consequences.

In earlier days, Reagan and Democratic Speaker Tip O'Neill often met at day's end to swap stories, two Irishmen capping the slings and arrows of the day's political warfare with a smile. It is hard to imagine House Minority Leader John Boehner coming to the White House to tell Obama a joke, or Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid sharing an end-of-the-day Coke with George W. Bush.

The clamor of cable television and Internet bloggers has also bred an instinct for the jugular. The news cycle is 24/7, competition for attention is fierce, and divisiveness sells. Following the news now is like dining with John McLaughlin.

Of course, this is not the first time in Washington that polarization has trumped accommodation. Before the Civil War erupted, rhetoric on the Senate floor was vicious. Ditto during the Cold War era, when Wisconsin's Joe McCarthy sowed dissension and fear with wild accusations that colleagues were coddling communists in the State Department and even the Army.

But in those days, politicians felt loyalty to a political party. Now they run against party, against Washington. And, of course, they go home every weekend.

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