

Unwillingness to compromise makes today's landscape unique, political theorist says

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President Barack Obama laughs with former presidents Jimmy Carter, Bill Clinton and George W. Bush prior to the dedication of the George W. Bush Presidential Library and Museum on the campus of Southern Methodist University in Dallas in this 2013 White House photo.

The strident polarization—evident by the close 2016 presidential election—is not what makes this time unique in American politics, according to a University of Kansas scholar of political theory. It's the

lack of willingness and effort to seek and find political consensus.

"We've always had the partisanship. That's been constant," said Paul Schumaker, professor of political science. "However, what we've often had in the past is a much stronger commitment to civic ideals that are dominant, but often latent, in American political culture. I call these ideals the pluralist political consensus. Historically, American democracy has worked best when people see the need to limit their partisanship and find some common ground."

In his recent article "John Rawls, Barack Obama and the Pluralist Political Consensus," published in the journal *American Political Thought*, Schumaker argues that President Obama—through both rhetoric and policy decisions—has largely sought to govern as a pluralist and has tried to encourage people to think about ideas or values they have in common even if they are on opposite sides of the political spectrum.

"Obama has done a remarkable job trying to capture and articulate pluralist ideals," he said.

In his research, Schumaker compared Obama's campaign rhetoric and his policy orientations as president to the renowned philosophical work of Rawls. Rawls had argued that political stability requires commitments to consensual elements within a political culture that can appeal to or at least be accepted by those having political, religious, moral or philosophical disagreements.

Schumaker said that while Obama's political views were mostly liberal, he did seek to appeal to ideas that most people would agree with, such as trying to address economic inequality without significantly undermining our free-market economy.

"Obama recognizes that we are a society that has compassion for the poor, people who have disabilities, and young people in need of public assistance, and that such compassion can be expressed by providing programs paid for by progressive taxes," Schumaker said. "I believe Obama was a master at finding that language and proposing those programs that spoke to the aspirations of the vast majority of people."

Obama's pluralist orientation was also evident on other policy decisions. To get the Affordable Healthcare Act passed, he gave up on including a public option, and on financial regulation the Obama administration stopped short of breaking up major banks as part of the oversight legislation.

In our polarized environment, Obama's pluralism was often underappreciated, Schumaker said. Liberals criticized him for caving in, but conservatives didn't acknowledge his efforts to find common ground.

Polarization has been especially evident leading up to and in the wake of the 2016 presidential campaign, as indicated not only by the closeness of the popular vote, but by the acrimony between Donald Trump, Hillary Clinton and their supporters.

Schumaker points out that presidents—more so than members of Congress and the courts—have been most likely to seek moderation and consensus. Congressional Republicans, for example, have been more content opposing Obama and gambling they would win the next election than trying to compromise with his administration.

Following Rawls, Schumaker's work revolves around finding an underlying consensus of ideas accepted by those divided by ideology. Like other political theorists, Schumaker said he would watch closely to see what, if any, consensus is possible in the current political environment.

"People who are concerned that our political system is broken can point to different causes," he said. "One element is that party leaders often pander to core partisan constituents, who can pretty much consume news and commentary provided by those politicians and media outlets with which they agree. Few people hear the other side anymore."

He said with so much blatant partisanship and little apparent appetite for pluralism or consensus, it will be important to look for ways outside our political institutions to try to moderate people's political attitudes.

"The best antidote I can imagine is more emphasis on liberal arts education," Schumaker said, "where we are committed to teaching people about the importance of understanding the other point of view and accommodating different perspectives."

More information: Paul Schumaker. John Rawls, Barack Obama, and the Pluralist Political Consensus, *American Political Thought* (2016).

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