

Polarization & Incivility in American Politics: Is Congressional Gridlock Affecting U.S. State Legislatures?

Lions Club of Pullman, WA

Nicholas P. Lovrich, Regents Professor Emeritus
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SPECIAL THANKS TO:

SAM REED

14TH SECRETARY OF STATE (3-TERM)

ORGANIZER OF MAINSTREAM REPUBLICANS OF WASHINGTON

**"I wish there was a way I
could wave a magic
wand and put back when
people were respectful
of each other and the
Congress was
working for the
good of the
country and
not just along
party lines."**



Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg

NOLABELS.PK



American Politics

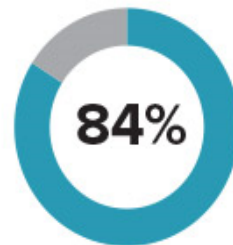


Image source: Atlantic

Bipartisan Agreement that Incivility in Politics is Problematic (2019)

Of Americans Surveyed...

INCIVILITY EXPERIENCES



Experienced incivility



Quit paying attention to politics because of incivility



Stopped buying from a company because of uncivil representatives



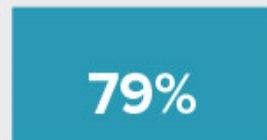
Experienced cyberbullying

Nearly **3X** increase since 2011

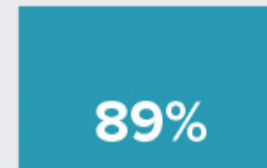
INCIVILITY PERCEPTIONS



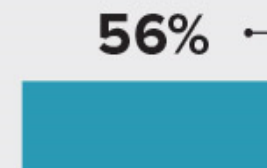
Think incivility has risen to crisis levels



Describe the 2016 presidential election as uncivil



Thinks incivility leads to intimidation and threats



Expect incivility to get worse

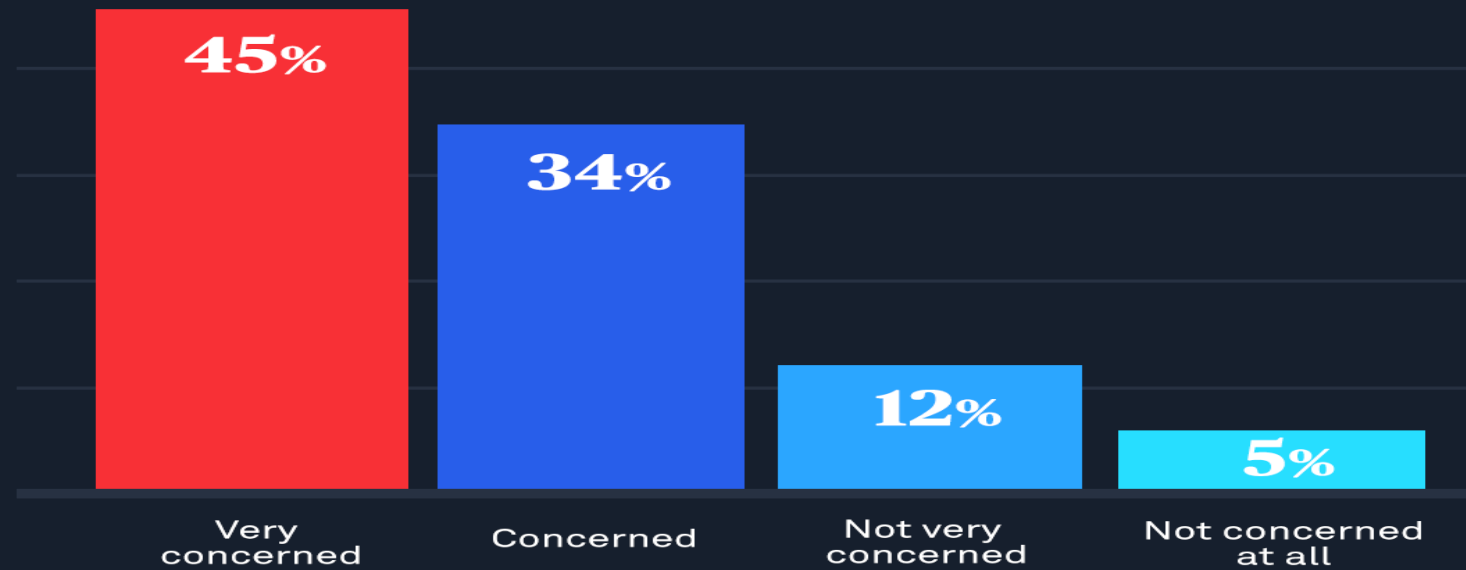
Why?
Politicians 75%
Internet and social media 69%
News media 59%

Source: National Institute for Civil Discourse, ICMA, Weber Shandwick, Powell Tate.

Poll: How concerned are you that the negative tone and lack of civility in Washington will lead to violence or acts of terror:

PBS
NEWS
HOUR

Source: PBS NewsHour/NPR/Marist Survey of 924 national adults, Oct. 28-29, 2018



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If it's in the News, it's in our Polls. Public opinion polling since 2003.

20

31% Think U.S. Civil War Likely Soon

in [Politics](#)

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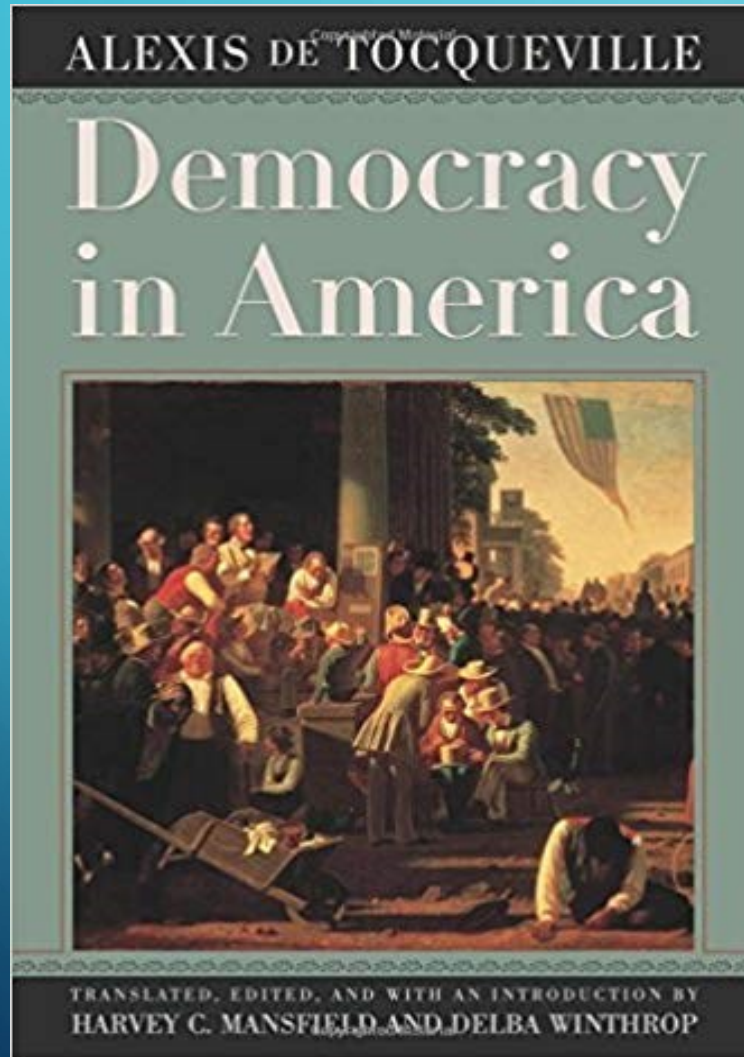
Wednesday, June 27, 2018

Most voters fear that political violence is coming from opponents of the president's policies, just as they did in the second year of Barack Obama's presidency, and nearly one-in-three think a civil war is next.

RELATED ARTICLES

- [Daily Presidential Tracking Poll](#)
- [Under Trump, Voters See A More Divided Nation. But Who's To Blame?](#)

Presumption of Civility a Part of U.S. History



“There is still some memory of the strict code of politeness, but no one knows quite what it said or where to find it.”



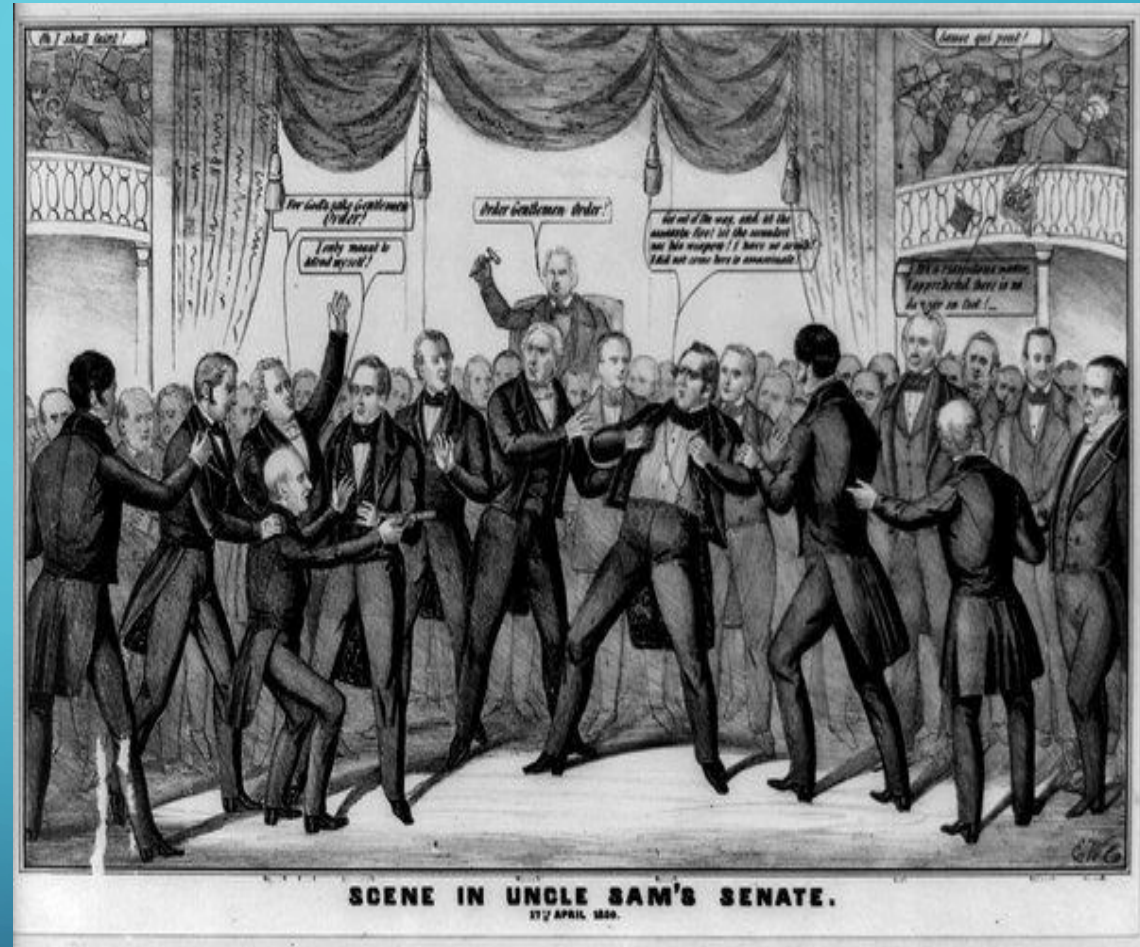
Duel Between Aaron Burr and Alexander Hamilton, July 11, 1804



The Caning of Senator Charles Sumner by Representative
Preston Brooks, May 22, 1856

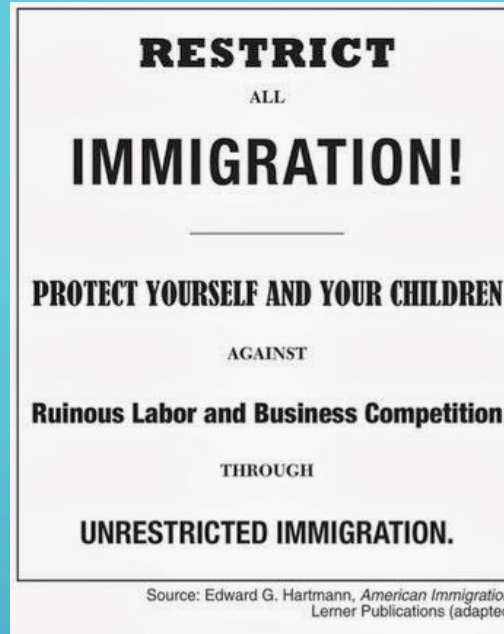
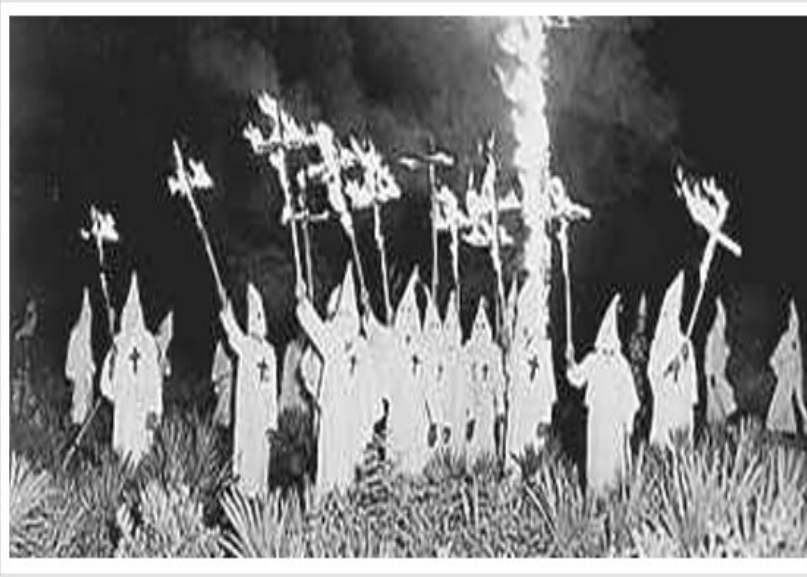


Brawl on the Floor of
House of Representative,
February 6, 1858



Gun play in the U.S. Senate, April 1850

Polarized Politics in the 1920s in America



Remember the 1960s?



The Rise and Fall of Nasty Politics in America

Daniel M. Shea, *Colby College*
 Alex Sproveri, *Allegheny College*

It is fair to say that a great swath of forest was sacrificed for the study of negative campaigning. As we might hope and expect, a great deal has been learned since our initial assumptions that negative ads would be the downfall of our republic. (For an excellent review of this literature, see Geer 2006). This *PS* symposium and a spate of recent work (for example, see Herbst 2010; Shea and Fiorina 2012; Sobieraj and Berry 2011), suggest growing interest in a somewhat different form of negativity: the tone of political discourse, or what we might call levels of civility in politics. Much of this work has centered on the impact of nasty politics on individuals (Forgette and Morris 2006; Mutz 2007; Mutz and Reeves 2005; Fridkin and Kenney 2008). Might vitriol turn off citizens and lead to increased levels of distrust and cynicism?

An important part of this exploration is tracing the use of nasty political rhetoric over time. Here we see the literature less developed, with the notable exception being Atchuler and Blumin (2001). A number of case studies imply our politics has always been a bit rough (Cummins 2007; Scher 1997), which has become the traditional wisdom. Pundit and scholar Michael Barone recently noted, "From time to time, I go back to find the golden age of civility and it has proved elusive" (as cited in Gerhart, Oct. 12, 2009). Susan Herbst notes, "Most scholars and writers . . . bemoan a decline of civility in American politics and social life, [which] is a shame, since so many historians have documented phenomena to disprove this view, such as the horrendous dirty presidential campaigns of the past" (2010, 23–24). Beyond assuring us that we will get through this tough period, recounting the tales of incivility in the past does not account for change or variations.

Data presented in this research challenges this assumption by defining *periods* of "nasty politics." Instead of dismissing the current period as "more of the same," or pointing to vague notions of "rough periods" in our history, our aim is to quantify the high and low points of civility in politics. By relying on a novel content analysis approach, we uncover evidence of the periodization of uncivil rhetoric and find that these periods neatly fit traditionally defined critical realignment periods.

THE CURRENT CONTEXT

Mudslinging in politics, suggests Scher is "as American as apple pie" (1997, 27). The 2008 race was no exception. Several forces primed the pump for a nasty campaign—such as record breaking spending in both the general election and in the

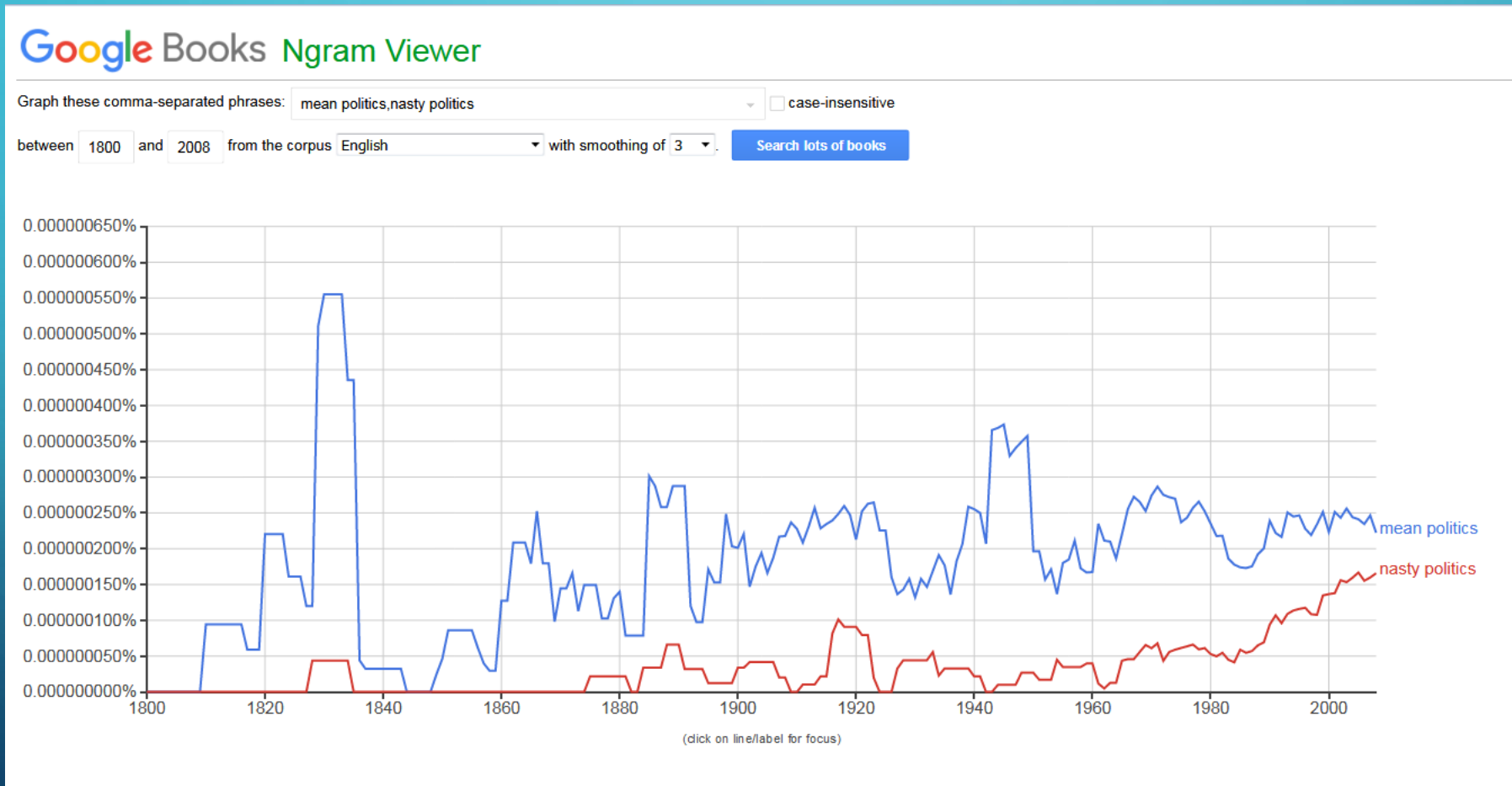
Democratic primary, difficult cross-cutting issues, a steep economic downturn, a tough Democratic primary, the prominence of radio and television political talk shows, the heightened use of blogs, and a novel form of political rhetoric used by Sarah Palin. Few future historians will suggest the 2008 campaign as exceptionally nasty, out of the ordinary. Rhetoric during the post-election period is a different story, however. By the spring and summer of 2009, most people had agreed that politics took a nasty turn—centered principally on the president's signature policy initiative: health-care reform.

To get the word out and to win public support for their plan, Democratic congressional leaders hosted a series of town hall meetings across the country in the summer of 2009. Many of these meetings were organized, thoughtful, and civil. Others were not. Many degenerated into angry protests. In early August, for instance, a health-care town hall was held in Tampa, Florida. It was sponsored by Democratic representative Kathy Castor and Florida state representative Betty Reed. A massive crowd, upwards of 1,500 people, packed the meeting room and spilled into the street. As Castor began to speak, scuffles broke out as people tried to get into the meeting room. Her introductory remarks were drowned out by chants of "Read the bill, read the bill!" and "Tyranny!" An event organizer came to the microphone to admonish the crowd: "If pushing and shoving continues, we will have to clear the room. The police will make the decision if it is still safe." At one point, a freelance videographer was pushed to the ground. Another man was treated for minor injuries after a scuffle left his shirt partially torn from his body. "That's the most violent anyone has been towards me," noted the man. "It was surprising, to say the least" (FoxNews.com, 2009).

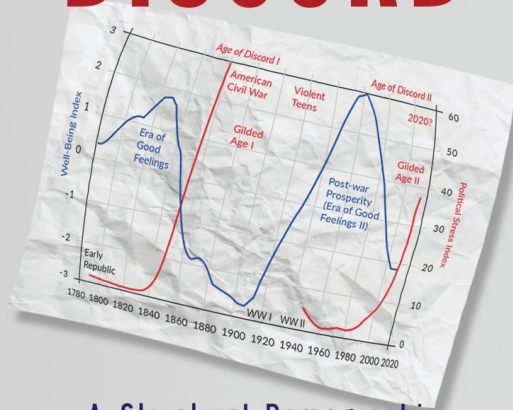
Pennsylvania senator Arlen Specter confronted hostile crowds at a number of his events. In Philadelphia, Specter was accompanied by Department of Health and Human Services secretary Kathleen Sebelius to a town hall meeting. Over and over again, both were shouted down by angry protesters. A week later, some 300 people packed a community college auditorium in Lebanon, Pennsylvania. Barely able to address the crowd due to persistent interruptions and shouts, Senator Specter became increasingly frustrated. At one point, an irate constituent jumped to the aisle, waving a set of papers in Specter's face. Security guards quickly jumped in, holding the ranting man back. In a rage, the man told Specter, "One day, God is going to stand before you and he's going to judge you and the rest of your damn cronies up on the hill, and then you will get your just dessert" (Rucker, 2009).

EVIDENCE THAT PERIODS OF INCIVILTY COME AND GO IN AMERICAN POLITICS

“Mean” and “Nasty” Politics In Print

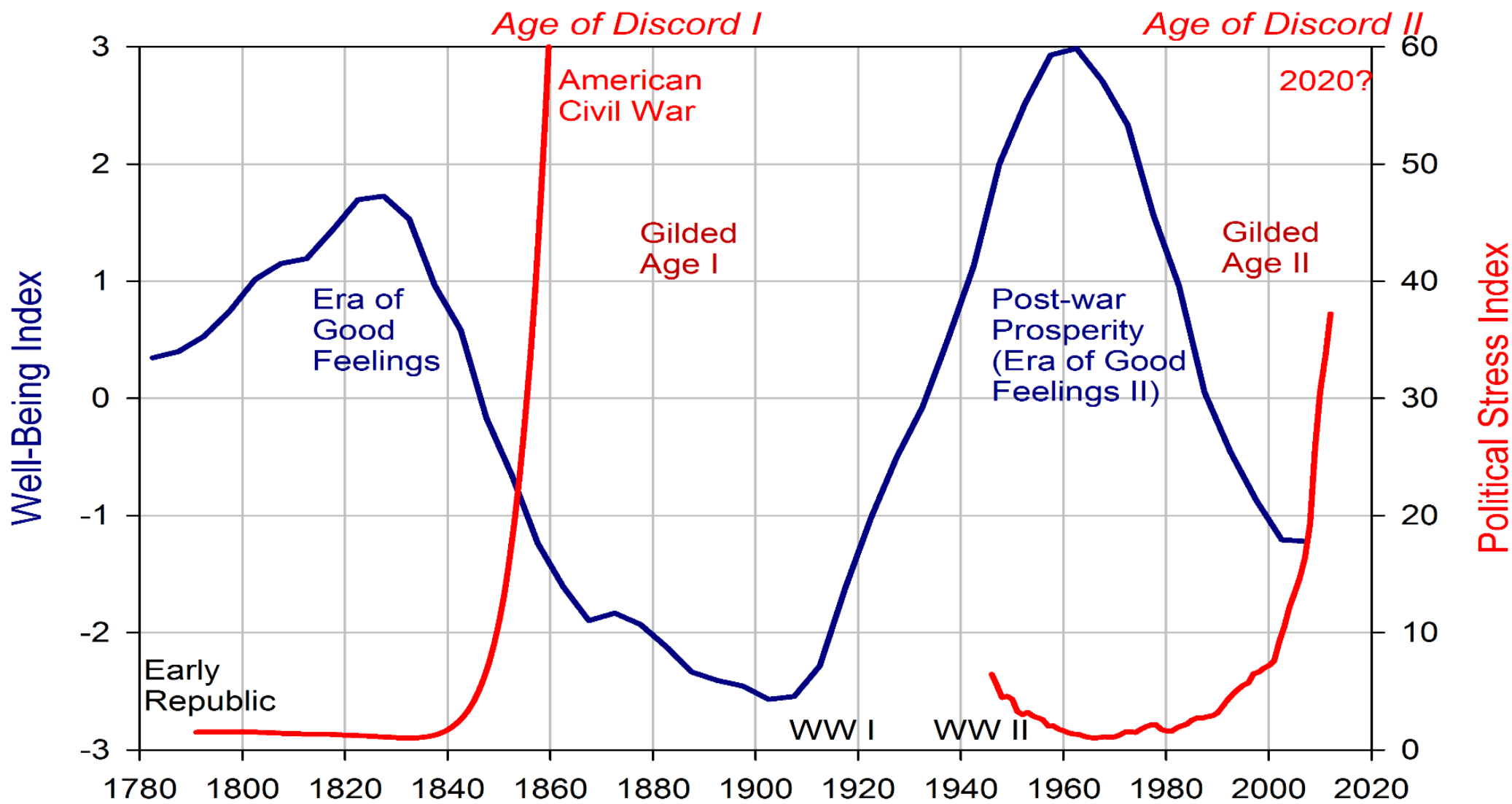


AGES OF DISCORD



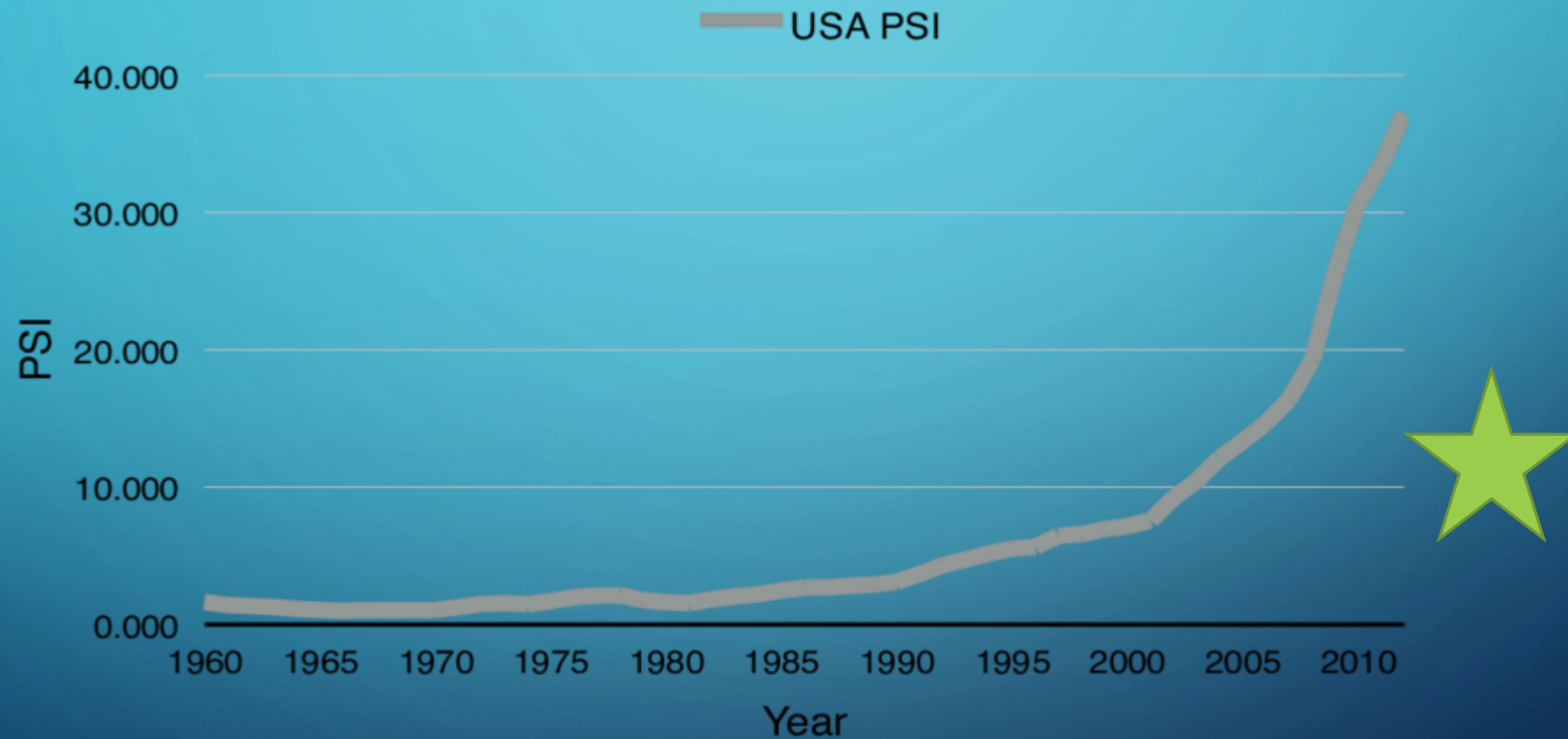
A Structural-Demographic
Analysis of American History
PETER TURCHIN

*THE CYCLICAL NATURE OF
POLITICAL INSTABILITY IN
THE U.S.: A VERY WELL
DOCUMENTED HISTORICAL
PHENOMENON (2016)*



Source: Turchin, 2016

Political Stress Index in the U.S., 1960-2010: Current Condition of High Stress Reflective of a New Cycle of Discord



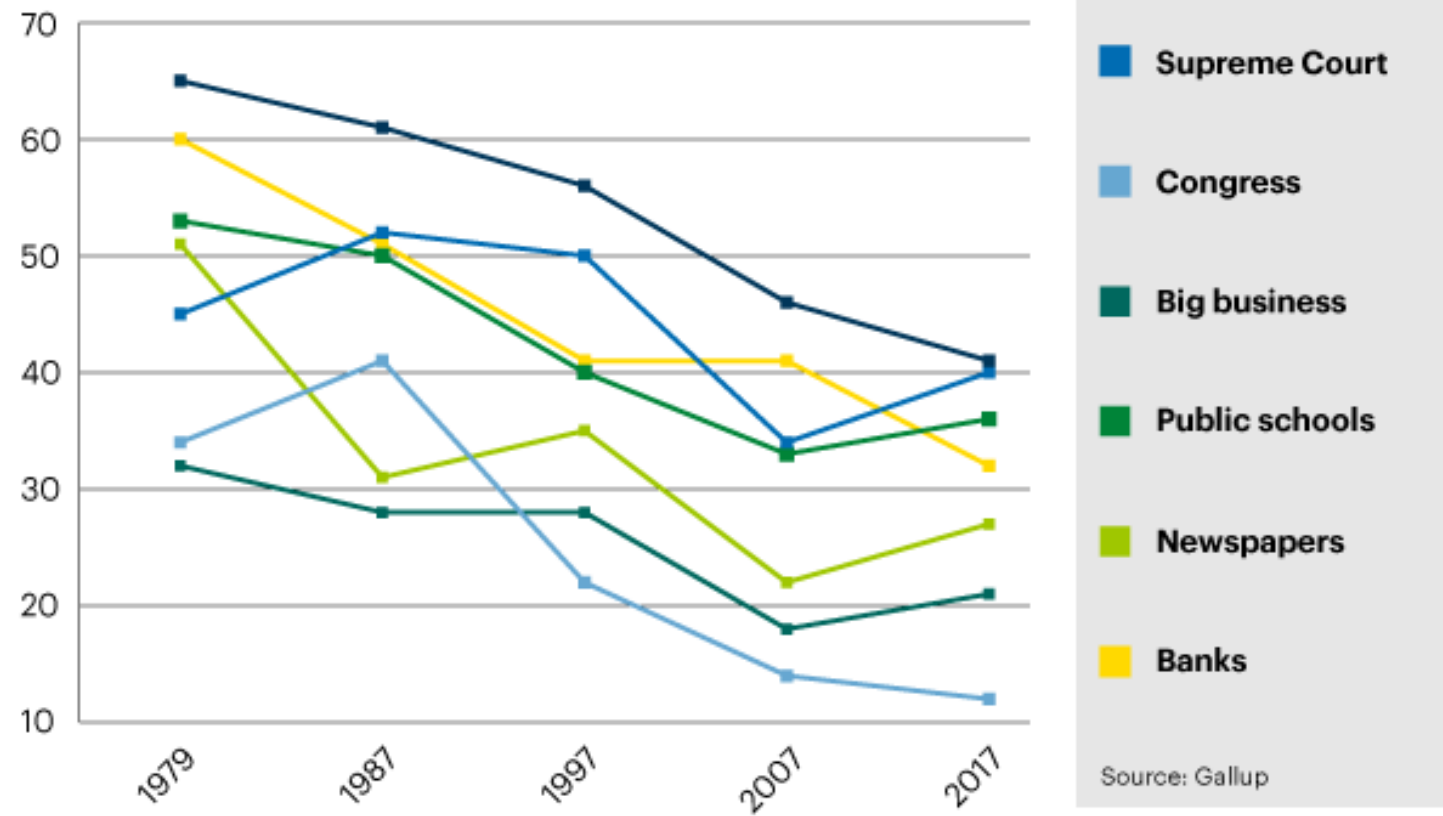
Source: Ortmans, et al., 2017 (data from Turchin)

Central Stress-Inducing Factors in Contemporary U.S. Politics

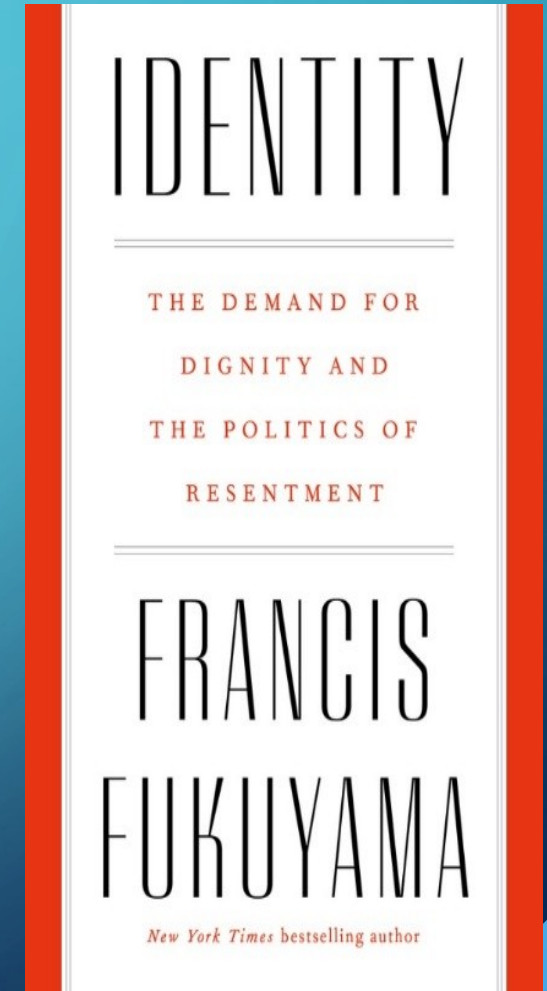
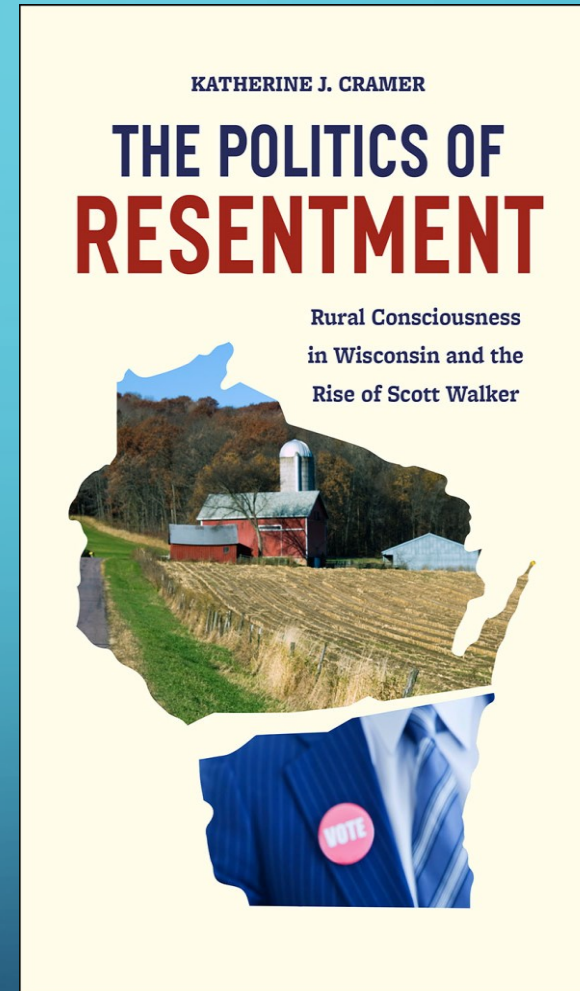
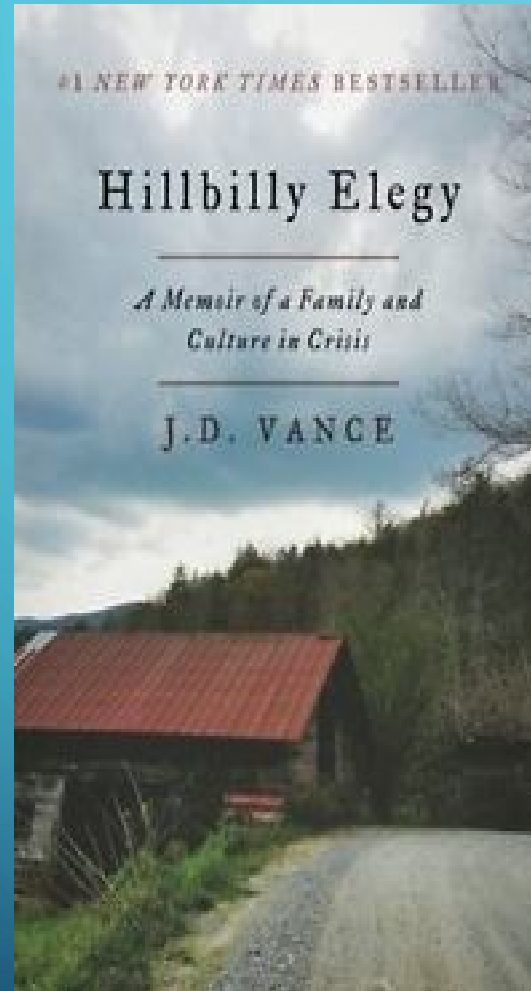
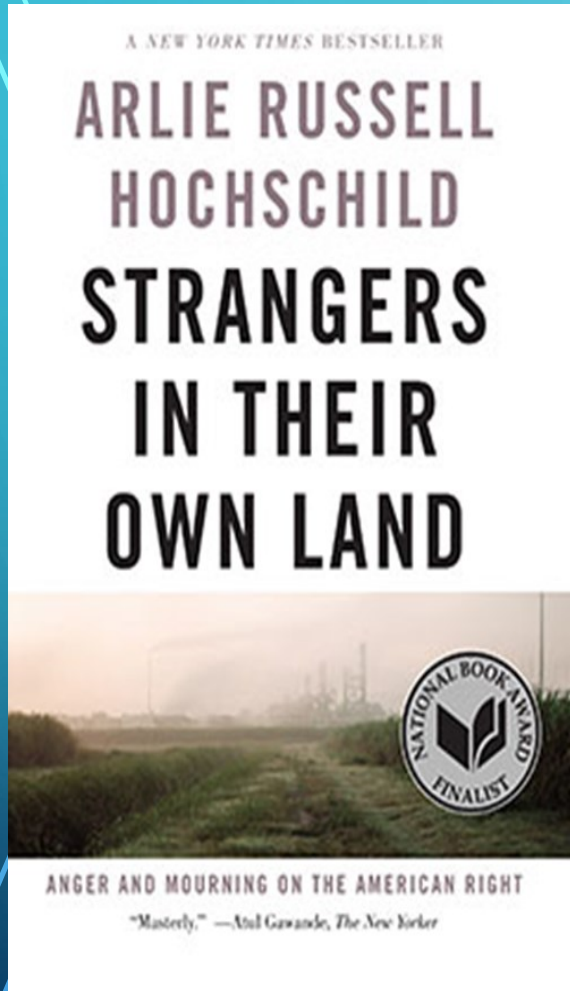
**Political Polarization, Declining Trust in Public
Institutions, and Increasing Inequality/Declining
Economic Well-being – all likely Contributing to an
Increase in Contemporary Public & Civil Society
Incivility**

AMERICA'S DECREASING TRUST IN OUR INSTITUTIONS

Percentage of Americans who say they have a great deal or quite a lot of trust in the following institutions:



Academics: The Politics of Anger, Fear, and Resentment






CENTRAL QUESTION

***HAS GRIDLOCK &
HYPER-POLARIZATION
TAKEN PLACE AT THE
STATE LEVEL?***

- ALAN GREENBLATT'S JUNE, 2017 ARTICLE IN GOVERNING POSES THE CORE CONCERN

**“CHECKS AND
IMBALANCES:** WITH A CONSTITUTIONAL CRISIS CONSUMING WASHINGTON, STATE LAWMAKERS ARE UPENDING THEIR OWN NORMS AS WELL.”



WHAT IS HAPPENING IN OUR 50 STATE LEGISLATURES?

TWO NOTEWORTHY STUDIES:

- **NCSL 2015-2016 STUDY —**
SURVEY OF STATE
LEGISLATORS (N=1,620);
10 STATE CASE STUDIES
- **WSU FOLEY INSTITUTE
STUDY OF 2018-19 —**
SURVEY OF STATE
LEGISLATIVE LOBBYISTS
(N=1,200+); 12 STATE
“OVER-SAMPLE” CASES
WITH 30+ RESPONDENTS

THE NCSL STUDY HIGHLIGHTS

SETTING: 2015-16 LEGISLATIVE SESSIONS IN STATE LEGISLATURES

STUDY CONDUCTED PRIOR TO THE 2016 NATIONAL ELECTION

ELECTION ADDED TO THE ONGOING POLARIZATION OF THE POLITICAL PARTIES
AND HEIGHTENED PUBLIC POLITICAL DISCOURSE INCIVILITY

HIGHLIGHTS:

1. DISTINCTION BETWEEN **POLARIZATION**, **INCIVILITY** AND **RESPONSIBLE DECISION-MAKING** IN STATE LEGISLATURES; PUBLIC INTEREST IS BEING SERVED
2. STATES HAVE BEEN AFFECTED, SOME MORE THAN OTHERS, BUT HAVE FOR THE MOST PART BEEN ABLE TO MAINTAIN THEIR TRADITION OF RESPONSIBLE COMPROMISE IN THE INTEREST OF THE PUBLIC INTEREST (hopefulness) 40

NOTE: GARY MONCRIEF AT BOISE STATE UNIVERSITY INVOLVED IN BOTH STUDIES



THE WSU FOLEY INSTITUTE-SUPPORTED STUDY: 2018-19 NATIONAL SURVEY OF STATE LEGISLATIVE LOBBYISTS

Multi-institution effort by a team of 20 scholars at 11 universities in 11 states supported with funding from the *National Institute for Civil Discourse* at the Univ. of Arizona and ongoing support from the *Thomas S. Foley Institute for Public Policy & Public Service* and the *William D. Ruckelshaus Center* at **Washington State University.**

RESEARCH TEAM & THEIR UNIVERSITY AFFILIATIONS

UNIVERSITY OF ARKANSAS – William Schreckhise

UNIVERSITY OF KANSAS – John Pierce & Burdett Loomis

BOISE STATE UNIVERSITY – Gary Moncrief, Stephanie Witt, Luke Fowler & Jaclyn Kettler

BRADLEY UNIVERSITY – Megan Remmel & R. Craig Curtis

OREGON STATE UNIVERSITY – Brent Steel & Claire McMorris

UNIVERSITY OF UTAH – Christopher Simon


KENT STATE UNIVERSITY – Daniel Chand

UNIV. OF NEVADA, RENO, UNLV, & WESTERN NEV. COLLEGE – John Tennert & Robert Morin

SHIPPENSBURG UNIVERSITY – Michael Moltz

DUKE UNIVERSITY – Leslie Winner & John Hood

WASHINGTON STATE UNIVERSITY – Francis Benjamin, Steven Stehr, & Nicholas Lovrich



NATIONAL SURVEY OF STATE LEGISLATIVE LOBBYISTS, 2018-19

**HIGHLIGHT: LOBBYISTS ARE MORE PESSIMISTIC THAN LEGISLATORS REGARDING
PROSPECTS FOR GRIDLOCK AT THE LEVEL OF STATE LEGISLATURES**

SURVEY CHARACTERISTICS:

- COMPLETED SURVEYS = 1,200+ (on-line Qualtrics + mail follow-up)
- RETURNS FROM ALL 50 STATES
- AVE. RESPONSES PER STATE = 25+
- OVERSAMPLES (30+) for AR, KS, ID, WA, UT, CA, **NV**, IL, IA, OH, PA, OR & NC
- MANY FORMER STATE LEGISLATORS; **DIVERSE** GROUP, INCLUDING AGENCY LIAISON PERSONNEL, NON-PROFITS, PUBLIC INTEREST GROUPS, ETC.
- RICH COLLECTION OF COMMENTS AND COMMENTARIES

HIGHLIGHTS FROM LOBBYISTS' SURVEY

QUESTION: HOW IMPORTANT ARE CIVILITY AND CIVIL DISCOURSE IN PRODUCING GOOD PUBLIC POLICY? [Mean Response]

NOT AT ALL IMPORTANT (1) UNCERTAIN (5-6) ABSOLUTELY ESSENTIAL (10)

Natl. average

8.33

NEVADA (N=35)

8.65

WASHINGTON (N=59)

8.35

WISCONSIN

6.9

SOUTH CAROLINA

9.7

QUESTION: WHAT IS THE LEVEL OF CIVILITY AMONG LEGISLATORS DURING THE LAST TWO LEGISLATIVE SESSIONS?

VERY UNCIVIL (1)

UNCERTAIN (5-6)

VERY CIVIL (10)

Natl. average

5.44

NEVADA

5.76

WASHINGTON

5.92

OKLAHOMA

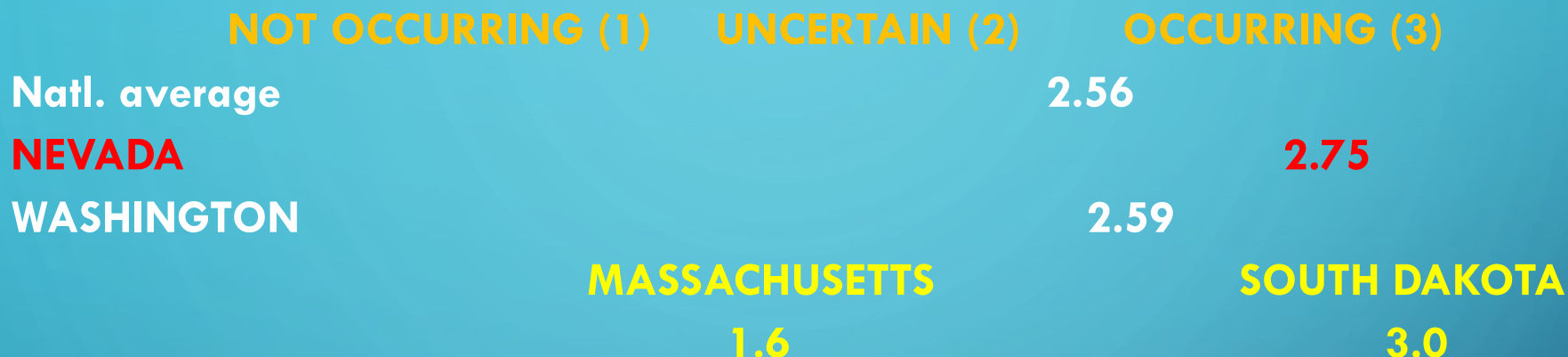
2.9

MARYLAND

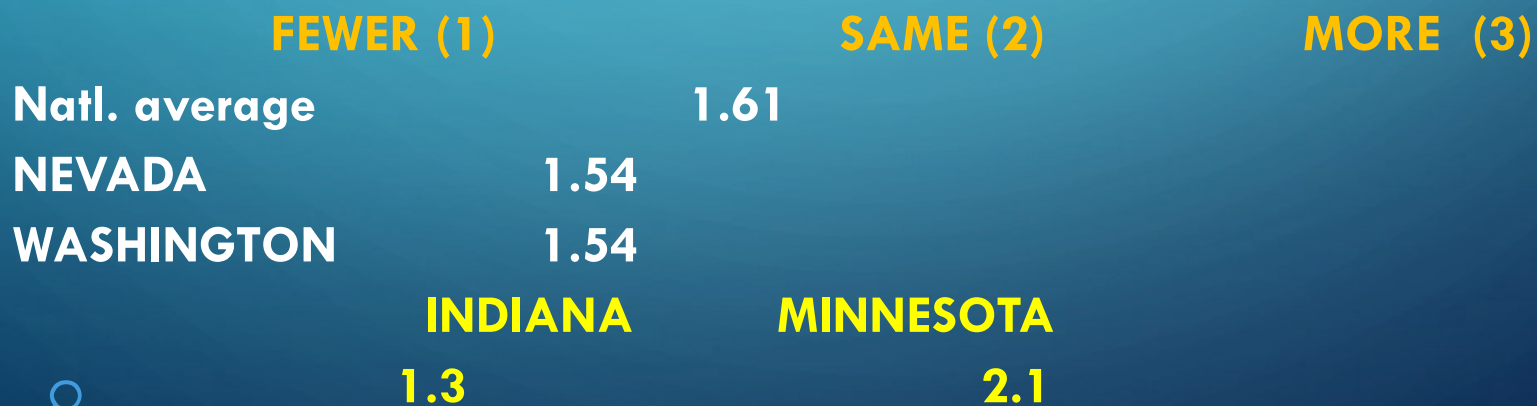
7.3

HIGHLIGHTS (CONTINUED)

QUESTION: ARE THE NORMS OF FAIR PLAY BREAKING DOWN?

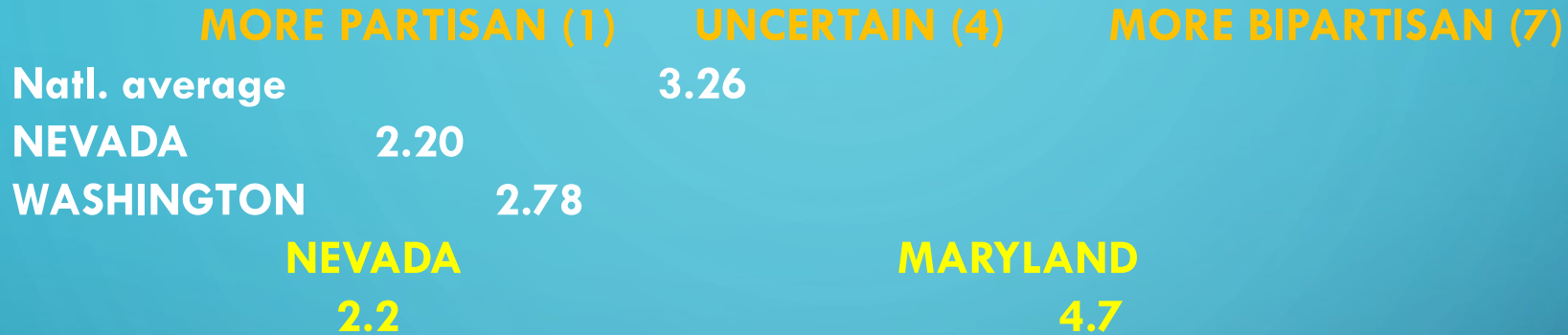


QUESTION: ARE THERE NOW FEWER OR MORE NON-PARTISAN AREAS?



HIGHLIGHTS (CONTINUED)

QUESTION: DURING YOUR CAREER, HAVE LEGISLATORS BECOME MORE PARTISAN OR MORE BIPARTISAN?

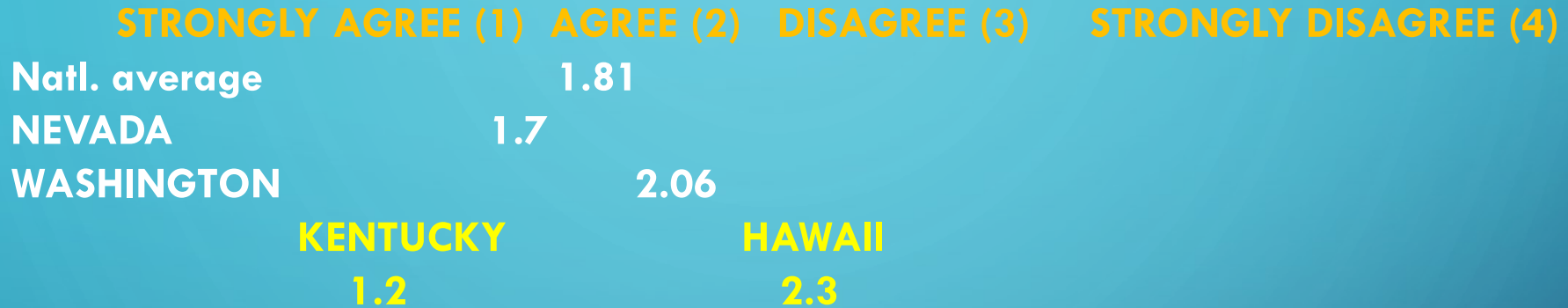


QUESTION: COMPARED TO TEN YEARS AGO, ARE LEGISLATIVE LEADERS MORE OF LESS CIVIL?

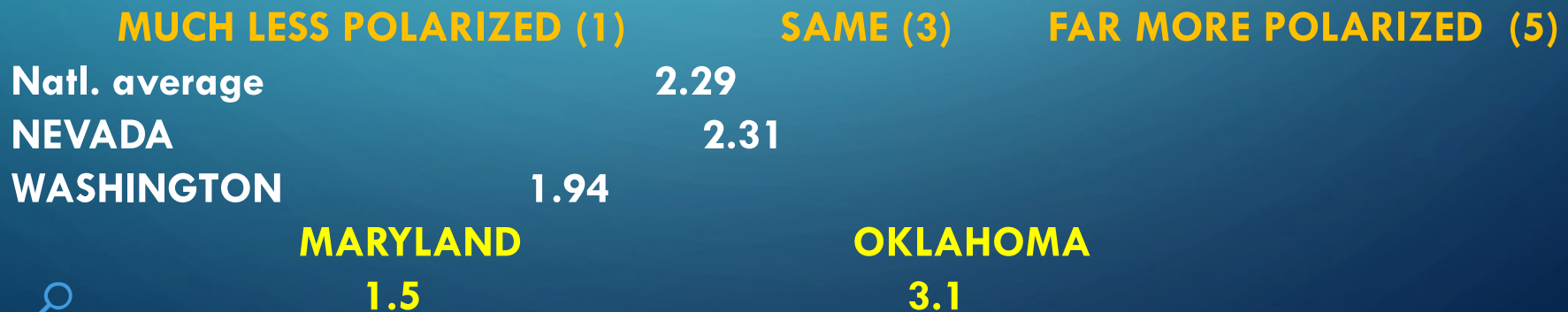


HIGHLIGHTS (CONTINUED)

QUESTION: ARE LEGISLATORS REFLECTING THE POLARIZED ENVIRONMENT OF THE U.S. CONGRESS?



QUESTION: COMPARED TO THE U.S. CONGRESS, TO WHAT EXTENT DO YOU FEEL PARTISAN POLARIZATION IS TAKING PLACE IN YOUR STATE LEGISLATURE?



HIGHLIGHTS (CONTINUED)

QUESTION: DOES A DECREASE IN LEGISLATORS' RESPECT FOR LEGISLATIVE TRADITIONS, NORMS AND CUSTOMS CONTRIBUTE TO INCIVILITY?

	STRONGLY AGREE (1)	AGREE (2)	DISAGREE (3)	STRONGLY DISAGREE (4)
Natl. average		2.24		
NEVADA		1.96		
WASHINGTON		2.41		
ALASKA	1.7			
MASSACHUSETTS		3.0		

QUESTION: WOULD REACHING ACROSS THE AISLE AND VISITING OTHER LEGISLATORS FROM THE OPPOSING PARTY IN THEIR LEGISLATIVE DISTRICT PROMOTE CIVILITY?

	POOR IDEA (1)	UNCERTAIN (3)	EXCELLENT IDEA (5)
Natl. average		3.69	
NEVADA		3.58	
WASHINGTON		3.92	
NEW HAMPSHIRE		2.9	
INDIANA			4.3

NEVADA LOBBYISTS COMMENTS

CITIZEN LEGISLATURE

NEVADA NEEDS A MORE EDUCATED LEGISLATURE, FULL TIME OR MORE FREQUENT THAN ONCE EVERY 2 YEARS

IT KILLS NEVADA THAT WE HAVE A PART-TIME LEGISLATURE THAT PAYS NOTHING, AND OFTEN COSTS MONEY TO SERVE.

TERM LIMITS

TERM LIMITS = MANY NEW LEGISLATORS. MANY BILLS INTRODUCED IN THE FINAL 2 WEEKS

PARTY CONTROL

ONE-PARTY CONTROL OF LEGISLATURE AND GOVERNOR'S OFFICE - D TRIFECTA = NO REASON TO COLLABORATE WITH THE OPPOSITION

URBAN VERSUS RURAL NEEDS, AND PARTY DIVIDE FROM URBAN (DEM) TO RURAL (GOP)

STOPPING THE OTHER PARTY FROM DOING SOMETHING/ANYTHING IS NOW THE STANDARD FOR WHETHER YOU/YOUR PARTY IS GETTING SOMETHING DONE/WINNING/SUCCESSING⁴⁹

AS LONG AS PARTIES CAN EAT THEIR OWN AND DRIVE GOOD PUBLIC REPRESENTATIVES TO THE RIGHT OR LEFT FOR FEAR OF LOSING THEIR ELECTION THERE WILL BE NO BIPARTISAN WORK DONE.

NEVADA LOBBYISTS COMMENTS

PROCEDURES

IN 2015 LEGISLATIVE LEADERSHIP DECIDED TO ABANDON ALL PREVIOUSLY ESTABLISHED RULES OF CONDUCT IN THE FINAL DAYS OF THE LEGISLATURE, PREVENTING PEOPLE FROM BEING HEARD.

OPERATING UNDER DYLAN'S RULE WITH ALL THE POWER GOING TO THE COMMITTEE CHAIRS AND LEADERSHIP SUCKS

IT HAS BEEN OUR TRADITION TO HAVE INTERMIXED SEATING & IT IS VERY EFFECTIVE.

GERRYMANDERING = SAFE D OR R SEATS, AND NO NEED TO MODERATE VIEWS.

PARTISAN ISSUES

THE BREAKDOWN DUE TO HYPER-PARTISANSHIP...ON BOTH SIDES...IS ACCELERATING.

SINCE EVERY ISSUE...**EVERY ISSUE**...IS VIEWED BY NEARLY EVERY LEGISLATOR AS A PARTISAN ISSUE, IF YOU DON'T/WON'T PLAY THE PARTISAN GAME, YOU (AND YOUR ISSUE) ARE ESSENTIALLY SIDELINED.

DUE TO PARTISAN ISSUES, SOME LEGISLATORS SIMPLY CHOOSE NOT TO MEET WITH YOU TO HEAR YOUR CONCERNS.

PARTISANSHIP

BIPARTISANSHIP, CIVILITY, COMMON COURTESY ... HAS GONE THE WAY OF THE *DODO BIRD*, OR THE *FLOPPY DISK*

YOU CAN'T SOAK THE CURRENT AND NEXT GENERATION IN 100-PROOF PARTISANSHIP AND EXPECT THEM TO SUDDENLY GO BIPARTISAN WHEN THEY GROW UP. HYPER-PARTISANSHIP IS BECOMING A WAY OF LIFE.

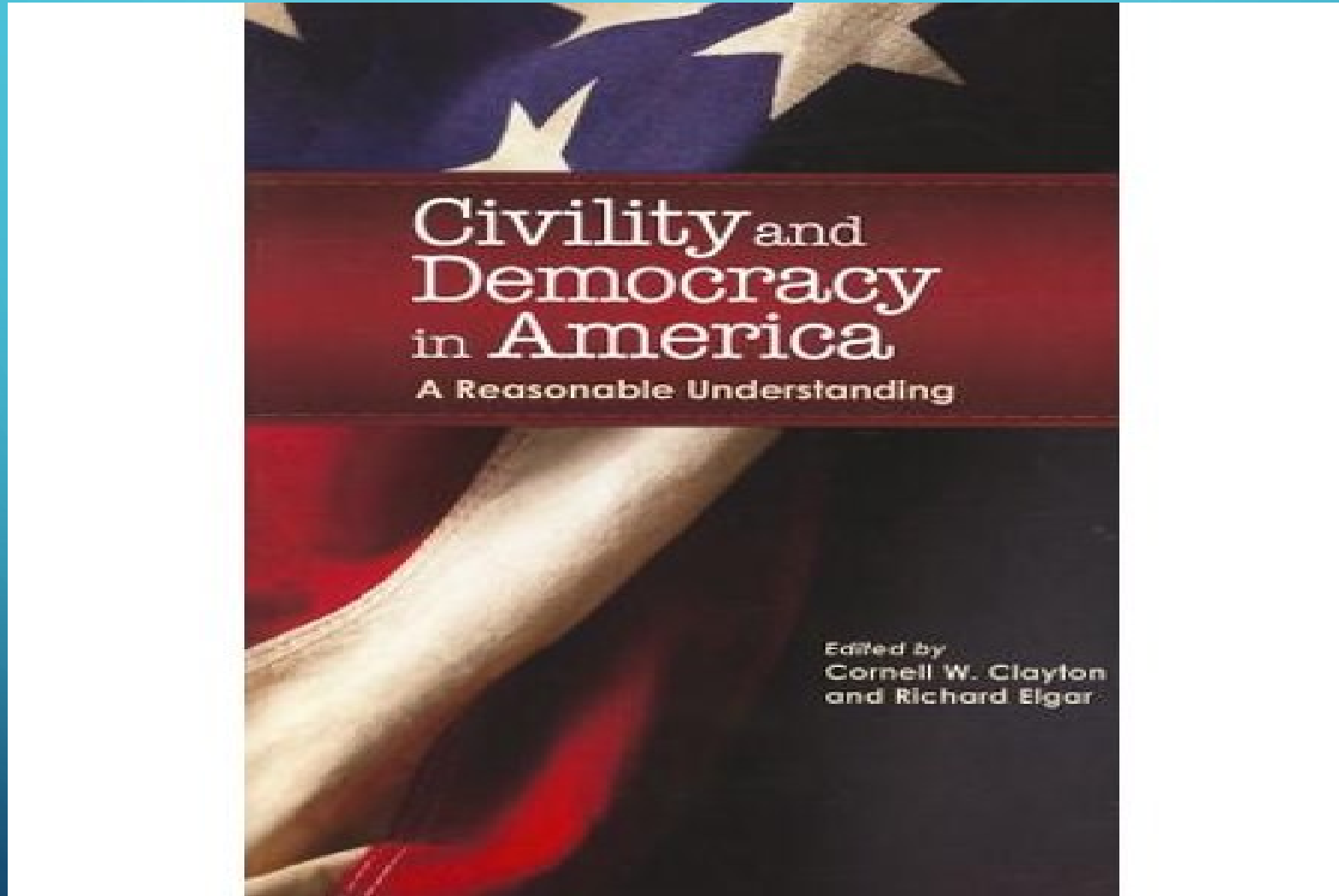
NEVADA IS A FAIRLY CIVILIZED LEGISLATIVE STATE – **HOWEVER**, INCREASING PARTY HOSTILITY FROM CONSTITUENTS AND SOME MEMBERS OF LEADERSHIP HAVE CAUSED A DIVIDE THAT IS SOMETIMES INSURMOUNTABLE.

ONE MAJOR AREA OF CONCERN NOT FEATURED IN THE SURVEY QUESTIONNAIRE

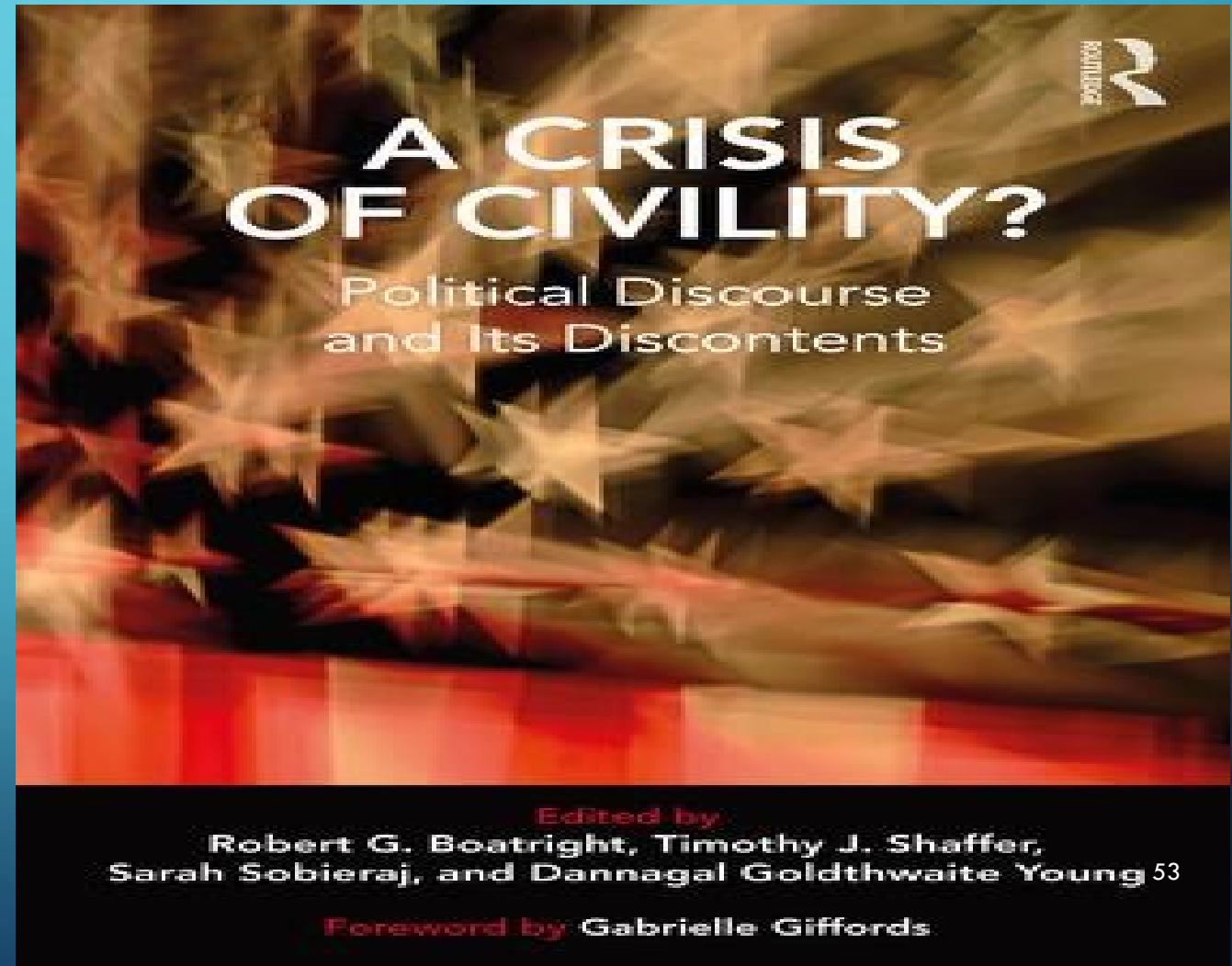
Insight from sharing survey results with a group of experienced Washington state legislative lobbyists; concerns raised about sustaining the tradition of collaborative public policy making in Washington

- Negative effects reported on collaborative public policy processes
 - ☐ Good faith bargaining actors more difficult to engage
 - ☐ Less inclination of legislative committees to accept negotiated legislation
 - ☐ Less deference to the process, and more “grand-standing” by legislators
 - ☐ Less reliance on legislative staff “institutional memory” for guidance

FURTHER READING: WSU PRESS (2012)



RESEARCH ANTHOLOGY: MULTI-DISCIPLINARY STUDIES
EDITED BY ROB BOATRIGHT & COLLEAGUES AT NICD
(ROUTLEDGE, 2019)



THANK YOU FOR YOUR KIND ATTENTION

REACTION PANEL COMMENTARY

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