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Elections and the Electorate Today

Editor: Elizabeth Beck

INSTITUTE OF POLITICS
UNIVERSITY OF PITTSBURGH

INTRODUCTION

KUKOVICH

On March 17, 1995, the Institute of Politics convened a forum of elected officials and community leaders to discuss the relationship between elected officials and the citizenry. This led to some fascinating insights into how elections are waged and won today and what participants see in the minds of today's electorate.

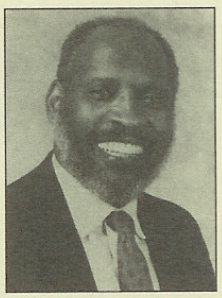
THORNBURGH

PARTICIPANTS:

SBRAGIA

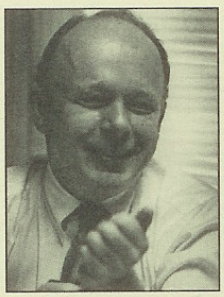
THE HONORABLE RICHARD THORNBURGH (RT), former Governor of the State of Pennsylvania, Attorney General of the United States, and Undersecretary General of the United Nations.

THE HONORABLE ALLEN G. KUKOVICH (AK), member, Pennsylvania House of Representatives.



MILES

JOHN R. DENNY (JD), executive director, Republican Future Fund. **GEORGE L. MILES, JR. (GM),** president and chief executive officer, QED Communications. **ALBERTA SBRAGIA (AS),** director, Center for West European Studies, University of Pittsburgh.



CRAIG

Moderator: **JOHN G. CRAIG, JR. (JC),** editor, Pittsburgh Post-Gazette.

Key Issues

Is the relationship between government and citizens healthy? Some panelists thought it was while others disagreed.

RT: There certainly wasn't a feeling of helplessness on the part of voters who turned out in extraordinary numbers....

I don't know that there's more polarization, generally, among the American public today than there ever has been. On specific issues there is, and that's lamentable.

AK: Candidates don't have time to go out to local fire halls and local communities to press flesh. They have to spend an inordinate amount of time with large contributors.

GM: If you asked the person on the street about government, and whether or not their vote makes a difference, I'm willing to make a bet that they would feel that their vote does not make a difference.

Participants agreed that technology has helped to shape politics and that the outcome of this is both positive and negative.

RT: The challenge of technology in politics today hasn't *begun* to be mastered, and it's not just television.... Polling, focus groups—these things have become *highly* sophisticated, and we haven't begun to grapple with the consequences.

GM: What scares me about television is that we're starting to package our candidates...like a product. I think this is a disservice to the public, that we never get a chance to really understand issues and to think through them. This has a polarizing effect.

JD: I think there's a greater linkage today between people and their government, mainly because of technology. The best thing I think technology can do for us is to make our elected officials absolutely accountable.

The role of the Christian Coalition and single-issue groups was discussed.

JD: What we're finding now...is a redefinition of what single issue really means. Now, single issue means more than that a group is concerned with one single issue. In fact, the group may be concerned with many issues: taxes, prayer in school, and guns, but they have turned it around to mean that if you *disagree* with them on *one single issue*—maybe out of a dozen—then you're wrong and they're right.

AS: Here I blame both parties.... One of the reasons for the intensity of these groups is that they have been excluded from the discourse for so long and so explicitly. Given the very strong religious impulse of American society, to have a political system that so explicitly excluded them was inevitably going to lead to intensity.

RT: I think that we have a potential of overreacting to these groups in a way that deprives us of the contributions that our religious traditions can make to the political process.

Extremism and tolerance were discussed in relation to single-issue organizations.

GM: We're on extremes of issues, and we're looking at sound bites, instead of saying okay, put that aside for a moment, let's discuss what we do. Affirmative Action is a good example of an inability to find common ground.

JD: We see good people who...do not want to run when the ugliness of intolerance continues to grow, which it has.

AK: Now what we have are these extreme groups taking the most extreme positions.... They might be able to create

candidacies, but they can't create people who are actually going to sit down and govern and solve the problems that face us as a citizenry.

RT: The history of extreme groups in this country is that they self-destruct.

All of the panelists indicated that current economic changes are bringing a sense of insecurity to citizens.

RT: We are indeed today the strongest country in the world economically, militarily, etc. People look to this country as an exemplar of democratic principles, market economy, and strength of character—and yet we're still affected with this angst about what our own future is.

AS: I do think that there is a much greater fear—partially because the value of education is so much greater.... Economically there's a real insecurity. This has intersected with phenomenal changes in the family.

The issue of accountability was a recurring theme in the discussion.

AS: Most of our great leaders change their minds. If we are going to hold leaders accountable—if we mean by that that we don't want them to contradict themselves, then that really worries me.... So I would be much happier with a leader who said "I would change my mind and here's why."

Former Governor Thornburgh seemed to sum up the feelings of the participants when he said a commitment to civil discourse was needed in order to grapple effectively with the fundamental issues facing society.

DISCUSSION

For your interest, some of the thought-provoking statements in the following discussion have been highlighted.

JC: Were the election results in November [1994] evidence of general disenchantment by the people of the United States with government? Are links between ordinary citizens and government breaking down? Do we believe that people's attitudes toward government are different than they were 20 years ago, and if so, why? Let's just start addressing the questions. Does anybody here think things are, in fact, much different than they ever were?

RT: I think it can be argued that the 1994 Congressional elections were a countertrend in that respect. The notion that there was a professional governing class in Washington, the movement for term limits, and the idea of "throwing the rascals out" came to a head in that election. You saw an extraordinary change, and I'm not talking about the partisan change. The fact that so many veteran incumbent legislators were dislodged, I think, represents a breakthrough in terms of reestablishing the links between ordinary citizens and their government. There certainly wasn't a feeling of helplessness on the part of voters who turned out in extraordinary numbers.

AK: If I could differ from that just a little bit, I think it's true that [the 1994 November elections] were significant in terms of an anti-incumbent sentiment, but voters did *not* turn out in great numbers to turn out the incumbents. As a matter of fact, the vote was depressed.

What was significant was the large shift in the amount of dollars spent in the three weeks prior to the election. Historically, over the past 15 years, a lot of corporate contributions had gone to incumbent Democrats. Three weeks before the November 1994 election, that

money dried up for incumbents and shifted to Republican challengers.

JC: Did the money shift because it was trying to influence the outcome, or did the money shift because it saw the outcome and wanted to be on the right side?

AK: I'm not sure.

JC: What would you bet?

AK: I would bet that when corporate contributors realized that the people they wanted to have in power had a real chance [of winning], they then made real contributions instead of *just* buying access to the incumbents.

I think the disconnection between voters and government is because of money. More than anything else, money determines what happens in politics. It's very difficult for an active Republican or active Democrat at the grassroots level, who wants to contribute $25, to think they are connected to their government, particularly when voters see Tom Ridge hold—as he did this week—a $5,000 a plate fund-raiser; or to be bipartisan when Ed Rendell, the Democratic Mayor of Philadelphia, held a lobster dinner at his house for 24 people at $25,000 a plate.

RT: I have trouble with seeing the 1994 Congressional elections as a *bought* election. Allen, I don't think that thesis has gained much currency. More was involved than simply a shift in donation patterns.

GM: Let me tell you, I am not a politician and you gentlemen are. I don't know the answer as far as the money goes, but I do think there has been—and is—a reality gap between government and the people. I also think that the low turnout was significant. We didn't really have great turnout in the election so you can't say that there was an *overwhelming* shift.

The other thing that scares me is that the entire country is becoming polarized. That scares me probably more than anything else. Our government is not accessible.

JC: What level of government are you talking about?

GM: I think all levels of government. The people have no access to their government at all, and I think television has played a major part in the distrust of some government leaders.

AK: Just to follow up on what George is saying. I took a look at a state legislative race in the Lehigh Valley where a Democratic incumbent was defeated. The incumbent was disappointed because he had beat a Republican candidate in '92, but then lost in '94. When he looked at the numbers, he saw that the Republican vote was almost identical in '94 to what it was in '92, but that there was a much lower turnout on the Democratic side. I then started to look at a few other races and saw the same thing. I looked at 80 state House races, and in every one of those races, I saw that the Republican turnout was almost identical in '94 to what it was in '92—but the Democratic drop-off was fairly significant in each one of those races.

RT: The Republican turnout or the Republican vote?

AK: The Republican vote.

RT: That's not turnout. That doesn't take into account the fact that people who voted for Clinton in '92 may have voted for a Republican in '94.

AK: That's true....

JD: I would say that we wouldn't be looking at the whole picture if we didn't put the '92 and the '94 elections together. In '94 the voter turnout actually increased, as it had in '92. Nationally there was a 2.5 percent increase. Here in

Pennsylvania it was five percentage points higher in 1994 than it was in the comparable year of 1990. I'm not saying it was a great turnout, but it's going up, at least in two elections. I am also not suggesting that two elections make a trend.

However, I think there is a connection between the '92 and '94 elections. The '92 election was billed as the year of change. The '94 was billed as the year of the angry voter. And there is one common thread that ran through both of those elections—accountability. George Bush lost because voters saw that he was not accountable to his promise of no more taxes. Then the voters saw Bill Clinton, and the message he gave voters is that he is not accountable as the new Democrat that he pledged to be. Once again in '94 it came back to the issue of accountability. And the voters were mad.

GM: Is the other side of it though, that the loyal opposition is doing a better job of getting its message out than Clinton who is unable to get out his message?

JD: I think the opposition did much better in '94 than it did in '92 in using the communication technology that is out there and available. In '92, Clinton was masterful using this communication technology. We [Republicans] didn't use it as well in '92, but we used it very effectively in '94.

But my other point is that if Republicans are not accountable then Republicans will be out in either '96 or '98. It is an issue of accountability, and I think that we may see voter turnout continue to trend upwards.

JC: Is the fact that voter turnout is increasing, evidence that the links between people and their government are breaking down?

JD: I think it's the opposite....

RT: I do too. To go back to what I started with, I think these were empowering elections. People found that they weren't helpless. They could turn people out who had not served them well, or who they perceived had not served them well or had broken their promises or had betrayed their principles. That's what voting is about. You vote the good guys in and the bad guys out. For a long time people had a feeling they couldn't vote the bad guys out. And that's where the term-limit movement came in.

JC: Are there other things to suggest that there is a breaking down of links or that people are feeling disenchanted with government?

AS: I would suggest that we have to be a bit more differentiated in the analysis. I think we tend to assume that voters and non-voters are the same, and I am not sure they are—especially in this past election. Based on the preliminary data, the differences in attitudes between voters and non-voters, in this last election, was much greater than in previous elections.

The questions are whether voters are representative of the more general electorate or not, and whether or not there is a mandate. If the people who went to the polls, and who were angry, and who perhaps felt disjuncture, are representative of the larger population, then I think there may be a mandate. But in fact, it might be a selection of people who went to the polls. The people who did not go to the polls may mobilize if they see public policy being passed with which they do not agree. You could then have a counterreaction.

AK: What we're seeing is that people with higher incomes are turning out at a slightly higher percentage. The people with lower incomes are not turning out. They feel disenfranchised, and this is growing.

In the last election, there were a lot of single-issue candidates especially on the statewide races. You combine that with

the money that was spent to depress the vote. Negative ads are used not to turn people out to vote favorably but to depress the potential votes that an opponent might have. The millions of dollars that are being put into TV are not getting people to get up out of their chairs and vote. They're having the opposite effect.

JC: I'm going to interrupt you. I want to try to keep a factual underpinning to this. Alberta, you said that there was a difference between attitudes among people who voted and people who didn't vote. What you didn't say is what the difference was. Were the people who voted more disenchanted or less disenchanted than the people who didn't vote?

AS: I don't feel comfortable speaking to that dimension on the data that I've seen, particularly in terms of attitudes toward government, which is different from disenchantment. You might disagree with policy but can still feel that your government can be responsive to you.

JC: One of the conclusions that Allen made was that people who didn't vote were disillusioned. It may very well be that they're satisfied. What does the data indicate about people who don't vote?

JD: We are making a statement that voter turnout is directly determined by people's attitudes towards government. I don't know if it is. It could be that people are too busy to vote. That sounds very unpatriotic. But you've got, for example, two parents working, taking care of two or three children, and in many cases their own parents. Each of their kids is in at least three events after school that they have to get to. These people are very busy. There is so much information out there—over 500 channels. By the time the voter has any chance to really focus in on elections, presidential or school board, it may be the day before the election, and there's just too much going on in their lives, perhaps, to vote.

JC: Well, is the answer to my question, that you don't know?

JD: Correct.

JC: All right, so you [all] are not willing to stick your neck out far enough to say whether people not voting is evidence of disenchantment. Right?

GM: I think there's another piece there, and that is that people feel that the government is so overwhelming they do not have access to it....

JC: Who, George? What people? What is the factual basis for that statement?

GM: I think that if you asked the person on the street about government, and whether or not their vote makes a difference, I'm willing to make a bet that they would feel that their vote does not make a difference.

The other issue goes back to accountability. I think about it from a government perspective. For example, take this last election, the Republicans now have to start laying out their plan for major cuts, tax breaks, and a balanced budget. I don't know how that's going to be done! So my question is, **can** you actually lay out directives that you will be accountable for?

AK: It's hard to document a response to your question, John. I can give all kinds of anecdotal explanations, but I can't verify the motives of people who stay home.

With respect to Pennsylvania politics, it seems that there is an effort by the Christian right wing to take over the Republican party. The Christian right wing takes very extreme positions that don't address the problems of the mainstream. At the same time, the Democratic party, I think, has sold out on a number of issues. It's targeting its message to those people who are most likely

to vote, and they tend to be people who are more conservative and have more money. Consequently, the messages that are going out from Democratic and Republican candidates are **not** the real issues—the big issues that affect everybody's life.

Combine that with the tremendous undue influence of money. Most of candidates' days are spent on the telephone begging for money and not thinking about the issues or the agenda or the vision for this state. Additionally, candidates don't have time to go out to local fire halls and local communities to press flesh. They have to spend an inordinate amount of time with large contributors.

JC: Was it your experience that that was the case?

RT: I have some thoughts about fundraising and money, but let me just mention what I think is a historic perspective on this problem of distance from government. Traditionally, I think people who feel removed from their government or feel that their government is inaccessible are talking about Washington. Maybe they feel removed from Harrisburg, but they don't feel that way about their state legislator, their city councilman, or whatever. A result of this feeling of distance is the unwinding of the centralization that has taken place since the 1930s. Part of the Republican appeal was the notion of turning things back to the states so that they could be a little more responsible and, indeed, accountable. I suspect the average person on the street feels closer to his Mayor, maybe even his Governor, than certainly he does to his President or his Congressman or his Senator.

JC: Do you think he knows who they are?

AS: Just on that point, I was with a Washington delegation on the day of Mayor Caliguiri's funeral, and they were astonished by the percentage of the population that showed up for his funeral. I think it was calculated to be either five or 10 percent of the entire population. And I remember how astounded the Washington delegation was, and they saw it as a sign of precisely what you're saying. Now a part of that could have been Mayor Caliguiri's personality.

AK: They didn't feel closer to City Hall necessarily, they felt closer to that individual. There are studies that show that in most legislative districts only about 40 percent of the people even know who their state legislator is.

JC: Is the communication system, and television in particular, changing the election process in a fundamental way?

AK: Yes, I really think it is. I'll be partisan for a second and say that I think it really hurts the Democratic party. Instead of relying on the more grassroots community involvement, they are relying on television. I think it hurt Wofford and Singel in '94. They bought into that game of raising money to buy TV time. That strategy does not generate people to the polls in the way people working their community does. In the '90s, there has not really been a grassroots effort to turn somebody out, except in the case where you have single-issue groups who are working the grass roots *for* somebody. I think that has significantly changed since the time that you were Governor.

JC: Okay, but the question, Allen, is that in this last election, Michael Huffington from California raised the most money, and he happened to lose.

RT: He lost in a Republican year....

JC: The bulk of this money raised goes into television commercials—is that fact of any significance?

RT: Yes. Campaigns cost too much, and are nonpartisan in their soaking up the

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funds. Ninety-five percent of the money goes into television. Why this country hasn't long since forced radio and television stations and networks to make time available on a free or reduced-cost basis, I'll never know.

JC: What kind of time, Dick? Commercials or time actually to sit down and talk about issues?

RT: Make the time available, and let the candidates use their own discretion.

GM: I think you're absolutely right. What scares me about television is that we're starting to package our candidates....

AK: Like a product.

GM: Like a product. I think this is a disservice to the public, that we never get a chance to really understand issues and to think through them. This has a polarizing effect.

JC: You had programs on WQED. Nobody watched the damn things.

GM: I think providing candidates with free time is one of the services that public television can provide.

RT: That's not going to solve it, George, because the First Amendment problems still exist. A Michael Huffington who can spend $26 million of his own money is still going to gain access; and so is Ollie North, who can raise $17 million. I mention those two because they spent the most money in the Senate campaigns last year, and both lost in a Republican year. I think that is a very positive development.

JC: I think these things are so ubiquitous that perhaps they actually are counterproductive. I don't know if that is true. What's the evidence?

AS: That I don't know. What hasn't been fully acknowledged by most of our generation is the impact of television, especially of cable television on society in general. Here we are speaking about elections in a compartmentalized fashion, but what is going on in elections is part of this larger transformation that is going on in communications. When I was a teenager we watched ABC, CBS, or NBC. Now you cannot assume a commonality of news sources as there is absolutely no commonality.

RT: One of the advantages of the good old days was that everybody talked from a common database. But I guess what we're leaving hanging in the air is whether or not having that limited base to draw on is preferable to having this whole panoply of sources out there. I don't know the answer to that.

AK: I think it *was* preferable when people got their news from *reading* rather than from watching TV.

RT: I'll buy that.

JC: You're saying that's what you miss?

AK: Absolutely.

RT: But, Allen, you know, we can't be Luddites.

RT: I think the challenge of technology in politics today hasn't *begun* to be mastered, and it's not just television. It's transportation—the Tarmac candidates. The presidential candidates never show up anywhere but an airport Tarmac. Polling, focus groups—these things have become *highly* sophisticated, and we haven't begun to grapple with the consequences.

JC: Are people not better informed than they were 30 or 50 years ago?

AK: No. I think we're less informed.

JD: Oh, I disagree. I think that we are much more informed. Thanks to C-SPAN, the American people know what Congress is like. They see it and watch it. We ought to open up the halls of Harrisburg and City Hall to television.

GM: But John, 40 percent of the folks out there cannot get C-SPAN.

AS: It's a select group that watches it.

JD: I think at least the possibilities of what to watch are much greater.

JC: The fact is that images are now made available to more people than ever before in the history of the United States. You can now put people in touch with things in ways that would never have been possible before. This is true whether or not someone has cable because there are all sorts of alternatives. The interesting question is whether people are perhaps getting too much information. That is, familiarity breeds contempt. The problem may be a very, very efficient communications system that has taken away the mystery.

RT: Let me just raise one small, maybe nonpolitical, point. There are recurring tales of polls taken among school children about who the president is and who was George Washington. These results are usually dismal. If we look to television or the news media as the sole educational process for the American public then we miss the failure of our public school system to educate people about the thing that we used to call civics. I think that's got to be part of the problem when it comes to answering your question, "Do we have an informed electorate, an informed public out there?" You can't lay it all on television.

AK: No, but I do think the burgeoning of technology and information makes it *more* difficult actually to get information out to people. You're right, the opportunity is there, but people aren't taking advantage of that. I can draw an analogy from when I practiced law. When the PUC asked for rate hikes, the utility company provided so much information that you couldn't arrive at a decent decision. I think that's what is happening now. There's just too much information.

JC: Let me ask you a question. Let's take the OJ Simpson trial. Now it may not be perfect, but would you say that it has had as much impact on the American people as say the McCarthy hearings did during the Eisenhower Administration?

RT: Yes, but the McCarthy hearings, Watergate, Iran-Contra, those all had governmental implications.

AK: I think people are probably just as interested in looking at it [the OJ Simpson trial] for entertainment value. But compared to Watergate, or the McCarthy hearings, it's different.

JC: How about presidential debates?

AK: Oh, people probably pay much more attention to [the OJ Simpson trial] than to any kind of debate. Look, we live in a society that has a short attention span. People are not getting politics from well-reasoned treatises and lengthy debates, they get it from eight-second sound bites and 30-second attack ads.

RT: When did they get it from well-reasoned treatises and debates?

JC: What were the "Golden Days" of the informed voter?

GM: Well, I'm not sure if there ever were. The thing that bothers me is that we are not delivering with the technology we have. We have technology right now that could deliver, and we deliver talk shows and sensationalism.

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JD: We talk about high technology, but there is also low technology. Low technology is important, and what I mean by that is direct mail, mail that is targeted to very specific types of people from special-interest, single-issue-oriented groups. This is very prevalent. I just want to put a plug in on single-issue campaigns since I was told that's one of the reasons why I am here, and it is what the Republican Future Fund is most concerned about. Extremism is having an impact on voter turnout. It is important to note that one person's extremism is another person's reasonable approach to something.

What I see as a real threat is the *change* in what we mean by single-issue-oriented groups. Before, single-issue-oriented groups might have been the NRA whose only issue is guns or the pro-life groups whose only issue is abortion. What we're finding now, for example, with Pat Robertson, the Christian Coalition, and the Religious Right, is a redefinition of what single issue really means. Now, single issue means more than that a group is concerned with one single issue. In fact, the group may be concerned with many issues: taxes, prayer in school, and guns, but they have turned it around to mean that if you *disagree* with them on *one single issue*—maybe out of a dozen—then you're wrong and they're right. This has become a very difficult thing for candidates to deal with. These groups are gaining strength using technology and attacking anyone who disagrees with them on *one* single issue. These groups have the wherewithal to communicate fairly hard, aggressively, and effectively with voters, distorted as the message may be.

JC: Other than that you disagree with them, what is the problem?

AS: Let's go back to what has been called the "Golden Era" of politics. I think that most people [believed] that if they could find a candidate who agreed with them on seven out of 10 issues, then they'd say well that's about as good as we can get, right. These new groups, I think, aren't willing to do this.

RT: They're absolutists.

JC: What's the problem with this? I don't understand.

AK: Here's the problem. It used to be that different parties, people of different philosophies, could sit down and negotiate and that there was an obligation to govern. Now what we have are these extreme groups taking the most extreme positions to create PR spin, to raise money, to gain power for power's sake. They might be able to create candidacies, but they can't create people who are actually going to sit down and govern and solve the problems that face us as a citizenry. That's the problem.

RT: That's nothing new. You've had extremists in politics in this country from the beginnings of our country.

AK: No, Dick, I think it's dramatically new. When I first got to the General Assembly over 17 years ago and I saw some of the Goldwater conservatives across the aisle, I thought, my goodness, how am I going to work with these people? Today I miss those people. Because even though we may have disagreed, they did have an obligation to govern. You could sit around the table with them and they realized, look, we had to do a budget. We had to solve this problem. We might have different philosophies, but eventually the problem would be solved. Today, some of these leaders have no concern about governing whatsoever. They're concerned only about promoting their own personal power agenda, and that is distinctly different.

GM: The problem is that we have no place where we are sitting down thinking about common ground for our citizens. We're on extremes of issues, and we're

looking at sound bites, instead of saying, okay, put that aside for a moment, let's discuss what we do. Affirmative Action is a good example of an inability to find common ground.

AK: So what you're saying is that a TV station is not going to send its camera out if you want to sit down with somebody to negotiate a settlement about affirmative action.

GM: They'll do the sound bite.

AK: But they will send it out if they think they can get a sound bite of extremists on the other side.

RT: Sure, that's another problem. Good news is no news, and what they want is controversy. But look, I think historically maybe you're right, maybe this is a qualitatively different kind of extremist. I doubt it, but even if that's true, the history of extreme groups in this country is that they self-destruct. They really fall of their own weight. They've come and they've gone, and we've gone through periods of concern about them. You're going to have a very good test laboratory to look at this thesis in the 1996 presidential elections. Ralph Reed of the Christian Coalition said that there will be *nobody* on the Republican ticket who is pro-choice. I think that chances are that there *will* be somebody on the Republican ticket who is pro-choice, probably as a vice-presidential candidate. Maybe these guys are *so* powerful and so ominous that they can derail a victorious campaign. My sense is they won't.

I have to differ somewhat with John Denny on the concern about these religious groups. I'm sure you're familiar with Stephen Carter's lament that religion and the values that are expressed through our religious traditions are excluded from political dialogue. I think that we have a potential of overreacting to these groups in a way that deprives us of the contributions that our religious traditions can make to the political process. I say that, satisfied in the notion that these extreme groups are going to self-destruct, because that's been the lesson of history. And I think that we've got to keep our wits about us in terms of accommodating the big tent, if you will, not just within the Republican party, but within our society. People have all kinds of different religious views, all kinds of different moral views, all kinds of approaches to what constitutes the American way of life.

JD: What I'm most concerned about is not extremism. It's intolerance. Nobody is against Christian values or Jewish values or whatever the values are. It's the idea that values are imposed on someone and that there is intolerance of other values. We see good people who don't want to serve in public office. They do not want to run when the ugliness of intolerance continues to grow, which it has.

AK: It's already started to happen.

JC: Is it your contention, John, that you can't have a democracy when a person believes something so strongly they are willing to die for it?

AK: I don't think he's saying that at all.

JC: Well, what he's saying is that people really won't sit around a table with you, Allen, and negotiate anything that they believe in. And John's deploring the fact that there seem to be things that are non-negotiable.

AK: No, no, what John's saying, and I agree with him is that there are certain principles—whether I agree with those principles or not—that might be worth not compromising for at all. The threat to democracy are those groups who are intolerant of anybody or anything that is

not a part of their agenda. And John is again right, it's growing.

AS: Here I blame both parties, and not being an activist I suppose I can do that. One of the reasons for the intensity of these groups is that they have been excluded from the discourse for so long and so explicitly. Given the very strong religious impulse of American society, to have a political system that so explicitly excluded them was inevitably going to lead to intensity.

RT: Hear, hear. Absolutely.

AS: If you react with the same intensity you will polarize. I think analytically you're right, but if you respond to them, then psychologically you're just going to intensify their feelings of exclusion.

GM: That goes back to my earlier points: polarization and common ground. We're moving to a polarized society. We have no one really out there calling for common ground. How do we sit around that table? How do we get this dialogue going? Technology is not delivering this, and our leaders are not asking for it.

AS: Technology is part of the problem. I remember when the liberals in the Democratic party made fun of Tipper Gore [on the issue of song lyrics]. She was ridiculed, and yet I don't know a single mother who did not agree with her.

GM: That's exactly right.

AS: If you were a Democrat, people would assume that you would laugh at her. The cultural pressure is very bad.

JC: Let's say that you all agree that there are increasing anxiety and polarization. Is it possible that this is a product of something slightly different? Perhaps the ending of the Cold War, or the idea that people feel vulnerable in ways that they haven't felt vulnerable before? That is, people are worrying about the country becoming poorer and have a kind of intuitive sense that the American honeymoon is really over.

GM: I think people around the world feel as vulnerable as we do in a lot of different ways. So it's not something that's peculiar to our society. But, as we move forward, we need to figure out a way to come together because we are so diverse. I also think that polarization is everywhere not just in Pittsburgh, or in this country, but around the world.

AK: I'm not sure how to answer your question. I do think the fall of Communism in Europe took away a common enemy. A lot of politicians and other groups have responded by looking inward, which I think has led to some of that divisiveness. They attack within the structure.

But, again most of our conversation is targeted towards those who vote. It is hazardous to democracy itself that over half the eligible people just aren't participating in the process anymore. When you look at the fact that people with incomes over $75,000 a year voted at a much higher level than those with incomes under $25,000, you can see why politicians of both parties, again target their messages to a narrower group.

JC: Isn't the middle class more at risk economically today than it was 20 years ago?

AK: Absolutely.

JC: Isn't that an explanation then for maybe one of my points?

AK: No. I think the middle class looks to Washington, DC and Harrisburg and sees Republican and Democratic leaders bickering with each other and not addressing the real problems. So the real fears that people have, even those with jobs—who are worried if they're going to

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keep their jobs, or who are working more hours and have less disposable income—are not being addressed by either party. People are throwing up their hands and saying "why should I participate?"

JC: What do the rest of you think? Has the world really changed in some profound way, say in the last decade, for Americans?

RT: Our political process by definition is polarized. We have a two-party system, and a lot of those partisan differences reflect real differences in principles between the two parties. I don't know that there's more polarization, generally, among the American public today than there ever has been. On specific issues there is, and that's lamentable.

There is no question that the American public, in general, is anxious about the future. I think part of that is due to the fact that we have enjoyed such a high-level standard of living in the post-World War II era. We are indeed today the strongest country in the world economically, militarily, etc. People look to this country as an exemplar of democratic principles, market economy, and strength of character—and yet we're still affected with this angst about what our own future is. I'm puzzled by that. I suspect part of it is a loss of some of the spirit of this country. We're not as willing to take on the tough issues as we used to be, and our institutions have deteriorated.

AS: I think the comment that you made at the beginning was very apt because I think we've had these economic changes. I do think that there is a much greater fear—partially because the value of education is so much greater. If you have children who don't do well in school now, it's very difficult. Whereas my parents—if we did well in school—were happy and, [if you didn't do well in school then there was the belief that] "we can always find something for you to do."

GM: Sounds like my dad.

AS: Right, and if his grandson doesn't do well in school, then the choices are much more limited. So I think economically there's a real insecurity. This has intersected with phenomenal changes in the family. What you are saying assumes a two-income and two-parent family. If you look at for example, the University of Pittsburgh secretarial and administrative staff, it is extraordinary how many single mothers you find. Many people are struggling to work and yet have home situations that are just ghastly—ghastly in terms of what would have been thought ghastly 20 years ago but now is pretty routine. And so you've got the intersection of this economic change with this fundamental change in the family, and the importance of this can't be overestimated.

RT: The deterioration of the family has the highest cost to our society as a whole.

JC: Is this reversible?

RT: Sure.

AK: Absolutely.

JC: Do you really believe that the United States can insulate itself from poverty in other places, say Mexico. Isn't this part of the reason people are uncomfortable? Or maybe you can isolate the United States?

RT: Backing away from America's role in the world is a failure of our leadership.

GM: Leadership has a lot to do with it across the board.

The comment you made about the good old days did get my emotions up. By George, I sure hope that we never return to those days. We'll all be in trouble if the good old days take us back

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25-30 years. I probably wouldn't even be able to sit at this table, and women would also be in bad shape.

I think what's happening in our society is that we are in the redefinition phase. Families, work, and living together are all undergoing redefinition.

> "WE'LL ALL BE IN TROUBLE IF THE GOOD OLD DAYS TAKE US BACK 25-30 YEARS. I PROBABLY WOULDN'T EVEN BE ABLE TO SIT AT THIS TABLE, AND WOMEN WOULD ALSO BE IN BAD SHAPE."
>
> —GEORGE MILES

AK: Dick and George both mentioned leadership, and that's crucial because I can't think of any real political leaders today. Everybody is basically a follower, whether it's following polls, focus groups, what have you. I don't see anybody with real political courage to take some unpopular stands.

I mentioned earlier about how we've become a short-attention-span society. The average American now watches TV four hours a day. That's not really startling. What is startling is that they change the station every three-to-eight minutes. That was a statistic from two years ago—it's probably worse now. That means that political leaders and corporate leaders are concerned about the short term. Those long-range gutsy decisions that are based on what's in the best interest of the common good are not being made by anybody in this country, private or public sector.

GM: Allen, the only other thing I would like to add are news organizations and how they cover the elections like a ball game.

AK: It's like a horse race.

GM: Exactly.

JC: Let's suppose we have a good leader and the good leader says, "If you look at the last 20 years, you see that the average standard of living of the American household has gone down [either because people are living in single-parent families, or because wages have gone down]. The way I see it, it's going to continue to do so. Therefore, society has to readjust to deal with this reality. So you've got to figure out some way to get yourselves organized to deal with this new reality." Can a leader do this?

AK: Well, first of all, I question whether you can have a good leader with the campaign finances the way they are today.

JC: Okay, but you're avoiding my question?

AK: No. Before you get to that point, I think we've got to have a new way of funding campaigns so that more people can get involved in the process, so there's a greater sense of ownership among people. *Once* that's achieved, perhaps then you can get a good leader. Assuming you can do that, your question becomes very important. And, I don't know if I have an answer to that. Whoever that good leader is, it's going to have to be more than just a good national leader.

JC: Well is it even a relevant question or is it just crazy?

JD: I think that accountability is the most important thing to voters—the idea that public officials will keep their word. Accountability is critical to making a strong leader in today's environment. To try to tie this discussion back to linkage, I think there's a greater linkage today between people and their government, mainly because of technology. The best thing I think technology can do for us is to make our elected officials absolutely accountable. When you have technology that records what a public official says, and this can be pulled up within 15 minutes on a PC, the public can then see if you are contradicting yourself or have broken your word. I think that's going to be very powerful. If you campaigned a hundred years ago, and you're on one end of the state you could say one thing and then go to the

other end of the state and say something else, and nobody would know. But if you do that now, more and more, you're really in danger.

JC: I've been instructed that we need to sum up and I thought maybe you just did that, John.

JD: I did. I'll yield.

JC: George, would you like to make any kind of summary statement?

GM: I just want to make sure we get to the point on the issue of common ground and real leadership. These are really important issues.

The other part of this is the whole issue is accountability. I think that technology can make sure that a candidate is not saying two different things and speaking out of both sides of their mouth. However, what is accountable, and to whom it is accountable, are important questions. And, with the diversity of our population, that is a very tough question. In a business, it's easy for me to say I'm going to be accountable because I will deliver to my shareholders; but it is difficult to define accountability when trying to govern a diverse population. Maybe what we're going through is redefinition of accountability.

JC: Al, do you have a final word on anything?

AK: Yes. Following up on what George has said about being accountable and to whom. I think the problem is that there really are no leaders. Elected officials are more concerned about campaign contributions and gaining votes. And what we need are individuals who have a vision of what is in the best interest of the common good. I don't have an answer as to how we get there, but I think we have to make the point that we're going to look for those kind of leaders: leaders who will be more concerned about doing what's right than just doing the easiest thing to get themselves reelected.

JC: Dick, do you have anything to add?

RT: I've got three prescriptions for leaders and followers alike. One is to help the American people develop a greater sense of community: as a nation, in an individual's own political subdivisions, and on their own street. That sense of community has given way to a very troublesome sense of isolation. Secondly, I would like to see a recognition of the cost we pay for the weakening of the traditional institutions, beginning with the family but including our churches, our community organizations, all the things that are indicated in Tocqueville's characterizations. The real strength of this country was those institutions. And thirdly, I think more civility in public discourse. Less noisemaking and sound biting and more thoughtful exchange of ideas. I don't think there's anything wrong with controversy, anything wrong with the partisan impulses that we display, both during elections and in governing. However, it is a counterproductive force when it becomes filled with hate and venom.

COLLECTIVE: Well said.

JC: Alberta, we're going to you.

AS: Well, I second what the Governor said and I would just like to respond to your comment about accountability because it strikes me that most of our great leaders change their minds. If we are going to hold leaders accountable—if we mean by that that we don't want them to contradict themselves, then that really worries me. If we hold them to that standard, then that means they'll never learn anything new, they'll never change their minds, the world won't change, and they won't change. So I would be much happier with a leader

who said, "I would change my mind, and here's why." That would make me more comfortable. And then I would think that person had the potential to be a leader. Otherwise, I think you get the single-issue people that you've spent this FORUM criticizing.

JD: I would like to take a moment to clarify my last comment, because it seems to have been misinterpreted. I believe that accountability is an important element of leadership, and that it was a major factor in the '92 and '94 elections. Voters want their elected leaders to be accountable and are willing to hold them accountable, and technology has helped to enable voters to do this. Now it is much more difficult for candidates to contradict themselves and not be held accountable for their statements.

This should not be misinterpreted to suggest that candidates or elected officials should not be allowed to change their minds or opinions on something. One's ability to change one's mind is a great attribute—it is a sign of real intelligence. Compromise is not only necessary but honorable. However, I believe that we must all be concerned and critical of those individuals and organizations that practice intolerance and with the new definition of single issue—meaning that you cannot disagree on any one issue or you are targeted for defeat.

JC: Thank you all very much.

F·O·R·U·M

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