A HOUSE DIVIDED
Political Scientists Probe the Roots and Effects of Polarization

BY LARRY TEITELBAUM
For three years, a reporter in Texas studied the political preferences of every American county over the last generation. What he found in the bedroom community of Montclair, N.J., was startling: the town that had evenly split its presidential vote in 1976 had gone 78 percent Democratic in the last election.

That pattern was repeated in a majority of the nation’s 3,100 counties, revealing a decided preference among Americans to live among like-minded people. Politics by zip code, with a continental divide east, west, north and south of the Rocky Mountains, is a natural form of gerrymandering that portends more intense partisanship.

Enter Diana Mutz with a new model for political accommodation. Mutz is the Samuel A. Stouffer Professor of Political Science and holds appointments in the School of Arts and Sciences and the Annenberg School for Communication. She proffers an unlikely venue for reversing partisan drift: work.

As Mutz sees it, the workplace is like a petri dish for political tolerance. “We don’t pick our co-workers. They aren’t necessarily like our friends, who will tend to be very similar to us. These aren’t people we necessarily have to go home to and continue to get along with in the way that we do in our intimate relationships, so people feel more free to disagree at work than in their voluntary associations and in their neighborhoods.”

In a study published last year in The Journal of Politics, Mutz and Jeffery Mondak of the University of Illinois analyzed social-network data and found a surprising degree of political talk at work. For instance, the American National Election Study of 2000 showed that nearly half of the workers questioned discussed politics with a co-worker. Mutz and Mondak found that sharing political perspectives at work, where there is more disagreement than in any other social context, increases tolerance for opposing viewpoints.

Intrigued, Mutz wants to examine more closely whether the unique, politically mixed nature of the workplace can be used to counter polarizing influences in American politics. In advance of the 2008 presidential election, she intends to tap into the zeitgeist with a unique experiment. The idea is to bring political speakers to workplaces and compare before and after attitudes to determine if employees gain a better appreciation of all sides of an issue from talking to co-workers about them.

Mutz, who joined the Penn faculty in 2003, has been studying mass political behavior for more than a decade. She is author of Impersonal Influence: How Perceptions of Mass Collectives Affect Political Attitudes, which was named best book in political psychology by the American Political Science Association, and the recently published Hearing the Other Side: Deliberative versus Participatory Democracy. In the latter book, she explores tensions in the American polity, contending that people would rather avoid conversations involving political disagreement, so they can maintain harmony in their relationships. The problem arises when people limit political conversations to those who share their views; it intensifies their beliefs, causing more polarization.

One effort to bridge that gap — to tone down the rhetoric and encourage broader political participation — is taking place at Blue Cross of Minnesota through a six-year-old nonpartisan program called Citizen Blue. Nearly 600 employees meet once a month to listen to presentations on a range of issues. They’ve heard former Republican congressman Tim Penny talk about Social Security reform after he served on President Bush’s task force, a panel of local journalists expound on how the media shapes public policy debates and candidates discuss their party platforms. Although the company has not polled participants, Blue Cross spokeswoman Laurie Halverson says the program has softened employees’ political stances, sometimes changing their views of the other party.
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Election Survey

As a barometer of public opinion during presidential campaigns, the National Annenberg Election Survey has emerged as a frontrunner. The huge study produces an almost prophetic snapshot of the electorate’s mood. In two election cycles, the survey has managed to become a go-to source for real-time information on the campaign and a mother lode of material for academics to analyze and debate.

“It’s the largest concentration of research resources, certainly for the study of public opinion and elections — apart from the U.S. National Election Study — in the world,” says Richard Johnston, a professor of political science.

Johnston and his colleague Diana Mutz are architects of the 2008 study, helmed by Kathleen Hall Jamieson, director of the Annenberg Public Policy Center. Johnston is well equipped for the job. He’s written five books on public opinion, party politics and elections, including Letting the People Decide: Dynamics of a Canadian Election. He’s conducted studies of Canadian elections and served as an adviser to election studies in New Zealand, Great Britain, Germany and the United States. And, most importantly, he designed the National Annenberg Election Survey in 2000. That’s largely why Penn recruited him from the University of British Columbia, where he was head of the political science department.

In 2000 and 2004, Annenberg researchers interviewed 82,000 people, including large numbers of important voting blocs, all of whom were asked about their perceptions of the candidates and opinions on prevailing issues. The Annenberg Survey made some surprising findings in the last election: one-third of NRA members supported extending the assault weapons ban, and 62 percent of military families in the sample said President Bush underestimated the number of troops needed to gain control of Iraq.

In 2008, Johnston observes, there will be plenty of subplots to explore in what promises to be a wide-open race in a volatile political climate. He says it will be interesting to see whether Republican conservatism has run its course or if the Democrats can put forth a populist agenda with substance. But, considering the origin of the study, there will be a lot of emphasis on the role of media. Researchers will follow the news and analyze the content of ads in the top 100 media markets to determine, in Johnston’s words, “whether elections are informative or deceptive enterprises.” —LARRY TEITELBAUM

Mutz hopes that other employers will follow in the footsteps of Blue Cross of Minnesota. She says a number of foundations are concerned about polarization and the declining quality of discourse, and have been pouring money into town meetings and voluntary associations to encourage more involvement in political and community activity. Similarly, she believes corporations also have a stake in improving civic life, given the hit they have taken to their reputations in recent years.

“This is new territory,” says Mutz. “The last study that was done on political discussions in the workplace was in the ’50s. … Our research suggests that we ought to make use of the workplace as a context for talking about politics more than we do now. It’s really the new public forum.”

Up the street from the Annenberg Public Policy Center, where Mutz is director of the Institute for the Study of Citizens and Politics, one of her political science colleagues, John Lapinski, is conducting an exhaustive study of a different workplace: Congress.

In what amounts to an unprecedented performance review of the House of Representatives and Senate, Lapinski has spent five years collecting data on every law passed between 1877 and 1994 — nearly 38,000 in total. The purpose of this “empirical reality check,” as he calls it, is to confirm what many political scientists suspect: polarization depresses major legislative activity.

According to Lapinski, the norm for Congress in the postwar period had been to pass 10 to 20 pieces of consequential legislation every two years. But that record of accomplishment changed with the Reagan administration. Since the 1980s there has been a marked increase in polarization and steady erosion in legislative output. From the 1980s through 1994, Congress has passed fewer than 10 major bills per session, and at times nothing of consequence.

Foreign affairs remain unaffected as leaders rally around the flag, but there is a noticeable impact on domestic legislation, although partisanship appears to drive more pork barrel spending. “It’s almost as if the Congress can’t agree on some of the big domestic issues, but they still divvy up the money,” says Lapinski. “Members of Congress want to be re-elected.”

Lapinski, an election analyst with NBC News, came to Penn from Yale University in 2006. In addition to lawmaking in Congress, Lapinski’s research interests include congressional and presidential campaigns and elections as well as American political development. He is co-editor of The Macropolitics of Congress and is working on a book called Southern Nation: On Policy, Representation and Lawmaking, 1877-1965.

Meanwhile, Lapinski is gathering new data on congressional legislation from 1994 onward to bring his project up to date. He says a lack of effective lawmaking carries bigger consequences today than it did in the 1890s, when the federal government administered the budget and not much else.

“Oftentimes you see voters being a lot less polarized than the people who represent them in Congress,” he says. “That’s when people start thinking that maybe democracy is not working as well as it should be.”

Larry Teitelbaum is editor of the Penn Law Journal