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A face-off between polarities that yield no ground: an interview with E.J. Dionne

Tom Roberts | Oct. 2, 2012
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The United States seems unusually stuck in a face-off between polarities that will yield no ground no matter how much the electorate demands compromise: big government or small government; end tax cuts for the wealthy or enact more tax breaks for the middle class; cuts in entitlements or endless deficits.

Cast in the language of policy differences, the problems would all seem eminently soluble in the normal give-and-take of a democracy that's had more than two centuries of practice in reaching compromise.

But deeper currents flowing from our collective history, currents more forceful than discrete policy differences, are fashioning today's breaches, contends E.J. Dionne, *Washington Post* columnist and author of the recently released *Our Divided Political Heart: The Battle for the American Idea in an Age of Discontent* (Bloomsbury).

A few days before leaving (while monitoring hurricane reports) to cover the Republican National Convention, Dionne spoke with *NCR* about his book and the state of U.S. politics during an hourlong interview in his office at the Brookings Institution, where he is a senior fellow.

The division and stalemate we're witnessing today stems from an imbalance, Dionne believes, in "the ongoing tension between two core values: our love of individualism and our reverence for community" that have defined American history and American political instincts since the beginning.

He says the balance today tilts heavily, in manifestations like the tea party and the more extreme corners of the Libertarian movement and the Republican Party, toward a degree of individualism that is unprecedented in our modern politics. One of the results, he writes, is that "We are not very skilled at balance anymore. That is why we have lost our gift for reasoning together." In today's politics, he writes, too often the belief is that an answer lies only in one instinct or the other.

At the same time, and in an important sense, *Our Divided Political Heart* is not a book of balance in the "on the one hand, and on the other hand" approach to being fair. Dionne states quite early in the book that he is unabashedly "liberal, in the American sense of that word. It is a label I have embraced in recent years in part because too many liberals, after looking at the opinion polls, have fled from any association with the honorable history that word embodies."

The label is modified, however. He's not one of the screamers in today's highly charged public square. He is a public intellectual, educated early by Benedictines, later at Harvard and as a Rhodes Scholar at Oxford, and who currently also teaches at Georgetown University.

Former President Bill Clinton recently dubbed Dionne "one of our most thoughtful public philosophers." Toward the end of a nearly hourlong question-and-answer session in July at the London School of Economics and Political Science, Clinton was asked what he was reading these days. *Our Divided Political Heart* was the

first he mentioned and he judged it "the best" Dionne had written since his 1991 *Why Americans Hate Politics*. Dionne has published four others between them, dealing with themes of community, religion and making the case for why liberalism and progressive thought aren't dead.

Complex realities

The 60-year-old columnist is also a quite public Catholic, a point of biography important to what he's become. "I grew up a kid conservative," he said in the interview. The irony, he jokes, is that "I became a liberal because I'm Catholic. It was really reflecting on Catholic social thought and poverty" that turned his head. "That was a big piece of why in my teenage years I began to move the other way."

The most recent book, while acutely descriptive of the current state of affairs, derives its persuasive power from a deep reading of the two strains that so fascinate Dionne -- individualism and community -- as they have struggled with and complemented each other throughout our history. One might also find some relief from stale categories in the replacement of "left" and "right" with words that suggest more complex realities.

One high-profile review of the book, however, made the case that the circles the writer inhabits -- Brookings, appearances on MSNBC and "Meet the Press," *Post* columnist -- and his very credentials scuttle the project's ultimate ambition to find some way to talk over the divides.

What's a commentator to do? Are we too divided to even talk about the divisions in a civil way?

"I've been blessed three ways in all of this," Dionne said in the interview. "I grew up in a very argumentative extended family. I always say I grew up believing that you could argue fiercely with someone you actually, truly loved. And in particular, my dad and I loved to argue about politics. It wasn't hostile, we just loved doing it. It was almost a game with us. I joke that my dad trained me to do what I ended up doing for a living."

He also covered politics as a reporter before becoming an opinion writer. In that earlier role he covered a lot of Republicans and conservatives "and we got along quite well, and we could have a great time talking about a campaign."

The third blessing, he said, was that "before this polarization occurred, I got to know a lot of conservative friends. We knew we disagreed and we sat down and argued about stuff, but we were friends. I don't think they thought I was evil, and I certainly didn't think they were evil."

Given all of that, he said, "for me, hating someone you disagree with -- unless they're truly evil, like a Nazi -- is not natural."

Dionne, of course, could not have known while writing the book what would result from the Republican Party nominating process. But the two tickets now competing for the presidency are perhaps the most graphic endorsement for the prescience of his arguments.

Former Gov. Mitt Romney and Congressman Paul Ryan (who notably claims his views were fashioned in large measure by author Ayn Rand) embody what Dionne describes as a growing "radical form of individualism that simultaneously denigrates the role of government and the importance most Americans attach to the quest for community." The name "tea party" itself suggests, Dionne writes, "that the current elected government in Washington is as illegitimate as a distant unelected monarchy was two and a half centuries ago. And it hints that methods outside the normal political channels are justified in confronting such oppression."

President Barack Obama, of course, is a former community organizer and Vice President Joe Biden is famously the one who harkens back to the days of robust labor unions, neighborhood Catholicism and a blue collar, lunch-

pail America that has largely disappeared.

The 'Long Consensus'

No one is footnoting their remarks, but the commentariat from moderate to left is certainly echoing the central theme of *Our Divided Political Heart* from campaign speeches to Lawrence O'Donnell promos for MSNBC. Suddenly, everyone is noticing that the election choice is between, as Clinton put it in his convention speech, "the Republican narrative," which holds that "all of us who amount to anything are completely self-made," and the Democrats' view of everyone and the government "working together to promote growth and broadly shared prosperity. We think 'We're all in this together' is a better philosophy than 'You're on your own.' "

The larger point of Dionne's book, however, is that the country rarely works well (civil rights and its purely communitarian demands would be one exception) when one or the other of those strains is out of balance. What is at risk today is what he terms the "Long Consensus," a 100-year period, he writes, beginning with the 1901 presidency of Theodore Roosevelt, during which "the United States became the most powerful nation on earth, its influence enhanced not only (or even primarily) by its advanced weaponry and the martial courage of its men and women in uniform, but also by its economic might, its democratic norms, its cultural creativity, and a moral and intellectual vibrancy that is the product of our constant struggle to preserve liberty while building and rebuilding community."

"It seems to me the fight in this election," he said in the interview, "is a fight between one ticket that stands pretty clearly for individualism -- and many parts of the Republican Party for what I call in the book 'radical individualism' -- versus a party that still honors the old balance. I'm especially upset in the book with conservatives precisely because, in the past, conservatives were very alive to the issue of community."

One of the people he admires (and a name that surfaced several times in the conversation) is William F. Buckley Jr., founder of the modern conservative movement in the United States. "Some years before he died," Dionne said, "Buckley wrote a book called *Gratitude* in which he argued that we all owe something back to the society that had protected us and nurtured us. And I swear that the founder of modern conservatism would probably lose a Republican primary right now if he ran on what he wrote in that book."

If a political/historical treatise can have a twist at the end, Dionne provides it in the idea that the current standoff will give way to a demographic resolution.

His hope is in the balance -- and liberal instincts -- found in the millennial generation, defined here as those born 1981 or later.

It is a generation with an increasing number of Latinos in the mix and one that is more comfortable than any before it with differences of gender, race, ethnicity and the whole range of sexual orientations.

It is also a generation that has consistently polled high in its interest in helping others, a "sense of communal obligation," he writes, "made manifest in their exceptional devotion to service -- as volunteers in tutoring programs, soup kitchens, homeless shelters, environmental initiatives and community organizing."

Dionne said he first became aware of the information being gathered about millennials in the early 1990s, especially of their interest in service. Some cynics say the polls reflect that young people were required in high school and college to do service projects. That may be the case, Dionne said, "but service transforms people. When you're in contact with people who are not like you or who have been in trouble in a way you haven't been in trouble, it makes you look at the world differently. I think that's true of a large number of people in this generation."

He also believes there is a residual good effect for a generation that's fought two wars in the last 10 years. "More of them have given service to their country in the military, which also transforms you. ... There's something very different about this generation."

On the brink of spending two weeks amid the sharp elbows -- not to mention the blizzard of tweets and Facebook postings -- of modern presidential conventions, how does it feel to bear the mantle of "public philosopher"?

"I first heard that Clinton had said this from a friend who was actually in the audience at the London School of Economics and sent me a text. ... I was torn between a deep, yet false, pride, and laughter. Obviously I was touched by it and would love to believe that it's true, but I hope I have enough self-knowledge," he said with a laugh, "to have qualms about it."

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