

COLUMN

# Neal Milner: Is Bipartisanship In D.C. Even Possible Anymore?

You might say no. You might be right. But there are reasons for hope.

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What with the way national politics are these days, is serious bipartisan policy-making even possible?

The easy answer is no. Under the circumstances, just the question itself has a Pollyannaish, it's-a-small-world-after-all quality about it.

There is a good chance that the easy answer will end up the right answer.



*Members of the U.S. Congress.*

But maybe not. There are some signs that bipartisanship regarding a crucial and typically divisive issue — inequality — could emerge after the 2016 elections.

At the same time, the forces preventing this are still strong and stable. And the strongest obstacle of all is one that gets little attention: It is a kind of political polarization that has less to do with ideology and much to do with trust in government.

This “polarization of trust,” as Marc J. Hetherington and Thomas J. Rudolph label it in their new book [“Why Washington Won’t Work,”](#) limits the willingness of both voters and policy makers to make the ideological sacrifices necessary to reach agreement on policies that try to reduce the gap between rich and poor.

Inequality policy will be a good test of how these forces for and against bipartisanship

play out.

It will be the canary in the coal mine of American political life.

Inequality might be the issue that breaks the partisan gridlock in Washington after the 2016 Presidential election. Or it could be the issue that shows just how polarized and paralyzed American politics remains.

## **Five Signs That Inequality Bipartisanship Might Emerge**

Here are the some signs showing that politicians might be able to work together to come up with policies that address inequality.

First, polls show that a high percentage of both the Republican and Democratic public agrees that something has to be done about economic unfairness.

A very recent [Pew national poll](#) shows that majorities of both Democratic and Republican supporters want the federal government to help bolster the economy. Majorities in each party want the government to help the poor.

There are some large partisan differences, especially over health care, but overall the amount of agreement is surprising.

### **One poll after another shows that American citizens are much more moderate than Congress.**

In fact, one poll after another shows that American citizens are much more moderate than Congress.

Second, some very influential national Republican operatives think that unless the Republican Party quits celebrating Ayn Rand and the big “makers,” and begins instead to focus on the problems of the middle class, the party’s future is doomed.

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Third, there are now enough serious and important, politically connected conservative intellectuals and policy wonks to have a movement with a name — the “Reformicons” (also sometimes written as Reformocons). They have published a collection of essays

and proposals called “[Room to Grow](#).”

This is a significant change for a political party that typically dismisses any discussion of inequality as “class warfare.”

The Reformicons, in contrast, take the need to mitigate inequality very seriously. That alone is a big leap. But they go further.

There are signs that conservative thinkers as well as some of the Republican presidential candidates are taking positions on fighting inequality that are much more sympathetic and nuanced than the traditional Republican approach.

Some of these ideas resemble typical liberal approaches to inequality. Many more are interesting enough so that, under the right circumstances, Democrats in Congress might seriously consider them.

At least some of these proposals, for instance a wage subsidy for people making under \$40,000 a year, severely break with Republican orthodoxy.



Fourth, thanks to Donald Trump as well as the chaotic Republican presidential debate formats, there has been no serious discussion of economic policies among the Republicans running for the presidency. But two candidates, Jeb Bush and Marco Rubio, have expressed Reformicon-like policies. And, of course, Rubio is starting to emerge as the conservative favorite.

In fact most of the policy ideas in Rubio's recent book, "[American Dreams: Restoring Economic Opportunity for Everyone](#)," come from "Room to Grow."

Fifth, the extremely important and large body of research on the importance of character in child development has wended its way into political life, at least at the discussion level. These studies show that developing perseverance and impulse control — "grit" is the catchall term for this — at an early age is significantly related to later success.

Liberals have traditionally worried that Republican policies focusing on character are part of a socially conservative agenda. The findings of this new research might be secular and powerful enough to overcome this skepticism.

So think of these five signs as indications that traditional liberal and conservatives divides might be finessed.

## **But Come On! Wait A Minute. Are You Telling Me That ...**

Before we look at the forces pulling against bipartisanship, let's consider why you're likely to think that this bipartisanship is pie in the sky.

I am guessing that if I asked you why you were pessimistic, at least part of your own explanation would demonize your political opponents. You see them as more than wrong. In your eyes they are venal, crazy, immoral and inherently untrustworthy, and of course uncompromising.

I'll give you some reassurance. You are not a bad citizen if you believe this. You are in fact a pretty typical one.

In fact that sort of demonization is one element of the super-obstacle, the polarization

of trust.

Before we get to that, though, let's consider some of bipartisanship's more commonly discussed challenges.

## Two Solid Obstacles

There are two significant barriers to bipartisanship. One, not surprisingly, is ideological. The other, the polarization of trust, makes it that much harder to overcome ideological differences.

Ideology is the most apparent obstacle. Reformicon proposals rely on the market more than Democratic proposals do. The new Republican tax proposals, Marco Rubio's, for example, favor the wealthiest much more than do typical Democratic proposals.

And Democrats will take a hard, and traditionally skeptical look at any policy that involves character education no matter how good the research has been.

But the ideological differences between the reform-minded Republicans and the rest of the Republican Party might be even greater.

However solid their right-wing credentials are, and they are really solid, the Reformicons are preaching to a conservative movement that still considers inequality policies class warfare and that opposes any tax increase of any kind. "No new taxes" continues to be a Republican mantra.

According to George Packer, who recently wrote about these Republican reformers [in The New Yorker](#), "The Reformocons court right-wing censure simply by acknowledging that the middle class is under pressure, and that government has a role beyond cutting taxes."

**“The Reformocons court right-wing censure simply by acknowledging that the**

Still, under the right circumstances, policy makers even in highly partisan settings make ideological sacrifices. Even when polarization

**middle class is under pressure, and that government has a role beyond cutting taxes.” — George Packer, The New Yorker**

is based on ideology, there is still some wiggle room.

The polarization of trust, however, substantially reduces that willingness.

Trust in government has been decreasing quite steadily since surveys began to measure this in the 1960s. In the recent Pew Poll 89 percent of the Republicans and 72 percent of the Democrats said they distrust government some or all of the time. (Members of both parties expressed greater trust when asked about specific government functions, such as keeping the country safe from terror, or responding to natural disasters, or ensuring safe food and medicine.)

But over the years, even as overall trust diminished, a person’s willingness to trust government stayed pretty much the same whether her party or the opposition was in power.

When Democrats controlled government in D.C., the percentage of Republican citizens who trusted government did not decline much. When government was Republican-controlled, Democrats continued to trust government about to the same degree that they did when Democrats were in power.

That pattern has changed dramatically. Now when Republicans are in power, the percentage of Democratic voters who trust government goes way down. Think George W Bush.

And when Democrats are in control, the percentage of Republicans who trust government drops almost totally off the charts. Think Obama, of course.

There is no longer, in Hetherington’s and Rudolph’s words, a reservoir of trust that remains when power changes hands.

Political elites, including those in Congress, with their extreme partisanship bordering on hate, behave in ways that reinforces this polarization.

Polarization of trust is deeper and more intractable than ideological polarization because your opponents are not just rivals. They are hateful.

Here are two examples of how this plays out. One is that there has been a considerable increase in the percentage of parents who do not want their children to marry someone who votes for the opposite party. The other is that surveys show that Republicans rank Democrats lower than atheists.

Polarization of trust means that you are unwilling to be ideologically flexible because you do not trust the other side at this very fundamental level.

You don't make ideological sacrifices for untrustworthy scumbags.

Now go back and reconsider how you demonized the other side when I asked whether bipartisanship is possible. Good chance that your demonization is an element of this polarization of distrust.

## **2016 And Beyond**

Is bipartisanship likely? Will the gridlock in Washington end? Hetherington and Rudolph are pessimistic. They see no way to overcome the polarization of trust in the near future.

I agree with them, but it is useful to look at inequality, or for that matter other divisive political issues like climate change where there seems to be movement on the part of some conservatives, outside of the optimism/pessimism box.

Inequality is a canary in the coal mine, in the sense that it indicates something crucial about the future of American politics.

But unlike an actual canary in a coal mine, issues like inequality or climate change are not simply going to live or die. They will still be around no matter how much of gridlock there is.

So their fate will involve a mixture of these forces for change and forces of resistance over time.

Even if bipartisanship ultimately fails, it will be important to see just how this mix plays out and whether there are small cracks in the armor that might become important in years to come.

The way politics operates today that is as reassuring as you can get. Trust me.

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## About the Author



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### Neal Milner

Neal Milner is a former political science professor at the University of Hawaii where he taught for 40 years. He is a political analyst for KITV and is a regular contributor to Hawaii Public Radio's ["The Conversation."](#) His most recent book is [The Gift of Underpants.](#)

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**Jan Mitchell** · School Of Communication Electronics

Thank you for that.

Bipartisanship must succeed if we are to see any semblance of hope in governance of the USA. The political rhetoric gets horribly shrill on both sides of the aisle, demonizing anyone perceived as being bipartisan in the least. Sadly, much of that can be attributed to the media and social engineers - if they can even be separated.

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**Robert Roast** · Deering High School

As long as voters send the same radicals from both parties back to congress we will never get the parties working together for the American people. If your radical there is only one way, the radical way.

Like · Reply · Nov 25, 2015 2:19pm



**Rick Tubania** · University of Hawaii at Manoa



the prime reason for the congress gridlock is due to the tea baggers - these foolish folks who only believe in opposing anything not within their philosophy, even though it might be good for the country as a whole.

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### Frank De Giacomo

As long as rich folks and corporations are funding elections that is the only by bipartisanship that we'll have. The electorate will simply move to more third party and anti-establishment candidates (aka outsiders). Liberals want to fix government. Conservatives want to blow it up. Think FDR and the New Deal vs. Harry Truman and McCarthyism...or Germany after WWI

Like · Reply · Nov 25, 2015 5:41pm



### Kenneth Conklin · University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

The call for bipartisanship is a call for groupthink -- suppression of minority views in favor of a mentality of go along to get along, don't rock the boat. Did anyone notice that every example given by Mr. Milner was leftwing? This online newspaper, Honolulu Civil Beat, is a great example of the concept of bipartisanship as touted by the lefties. There is almost never an article supporting a conservative perspective. And anytime a commenter posts a comment in opposition to the leftwing viewpoint, the commenter gets loads of crap dumped on his head, usually personal attacks. I oppose the ... [See More](#)

Like · Reply · 1 · Nov 26, 2015 7:40am



### Lana Ah Lan DeSilva

"Bipartisan" is the "new" buzzword that Liberals use so that they can further mock and ridicule those with whom they disagree while they hypocritically teach their children and/or grandchildren not to succumb to peer pressure and to stand up for what they believe in.

Furthermore Civil Beat writers are overwhelmingly Liberals with few exceptions like Tom Yamachika J.D. There are intolerant commenters like Moki Hana who does not use their real name Mokihana Aki yet the Civil Beat editor allows their anonymity while requiring us Independents (as well as Conservatives) to use our real name.

The "new" Civil and civility where being highly principled is mocked and ridiculed under the guise of "bipartisanship".

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### Andy Parx

Compromise is not compromise when an intentionally economically-opressed group of people are essentially asked to remain oppressed, only slightly- but ineffectively- so.

If someone is trying to kill you and is the only one who is armed it doesn't do anything to negotiate the type of effective weapon they use. If you are hungry and have no shelter it is not a valid "compromise" to accept a crust of bread and a tumble-down lean-to when the oppressor's part in the compromise is to go from not allowing you to have anything to "okay- you can have a sh\*t sandwich today."

When unity is the only operative part of political party's actions the concept of bipartisanship itself is a deception. We need to talk about non-partisanship because "bi" partisanship assumes only two sides- something absent in the constitution but created for the benefit of the

"duopoly" since the country was born.

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