

It's not politics as usual anymore

A stunning election last fall gave way to a tumultuous transition and a raucous, dysfunctional, but never dull first 100 days of the Trump presidency. Much of the Obama legacy was quickly dismantled via executive orders, but the GOP struggled to move its legislative agenda, and the country seems as politically divided as ever.

How divided are we?

Increasingly, Americans have constructed what The Associated Press called “intellectual ghettos,” where audiences seldom intersect. “What’s big news in one world is ignored in another. Conspiracy theories sprout, anger abounds and the truth becomes ever more elusive,” wrote reporter David Bauder. While conservatives can take their world view from Laura Ingraham, Rush Limbaugh or a host of other conservative outlets, progressives can dive into their own thought ghetto by immersing themselves in a world bounded by the Huffington Post, Daily Kos, Talking Points Memo and Salon.



The silos are discrete universes that seldom talk to one another or seek to persuade or engage those of other viewpoints.

But this divide is increasingly geographical as

well. In 1976, only about 26 percent of the population lived in what author Bill Bishop calls “landslide counties,” where the margin of victory was more than 20 percentage points. That proportion has grown steadily as the nation’s political polarization accelerated. By 2004, it had risen to 48.3 percent; by 2012, a majority of Americans (50.6 percent) lived in a landslide county. And last year, the proportion of Americans living in deeply blue or deeply red counties surged to 60.4 percent.

“That’s a big number,” Bishop notes. “Even bigger, however, is the percentage of rural voters who lived in a landslide county. In this election, more than three out of every four rural voters lived in one of these politically lopsided communities.”

The result, Bishop adds: “Any common ground between



the two sides has nearly disappeared.”

That pattern has increasingly played out in Wisconsin. During last November’s presidential election, Donald Trump won Wisconsin by a single percentage point, but he won 35 of the state’s 72 counties by more than 20 points. Hillary Clinton won three counties, including the state’s two most populous ones (71.4 percent in Dane County, 66.4 percent in Milwaukee County), by more than 20 points.

The urban-rural divide was especially sharp: Trump won the state’s rural vote by a staggering 27 points. (See related story on Page 27.)

Cheesehead clout

The year began with Wisconsinites playing central roles in the extraordinary Game of Thrones unfolding in Washington, D.C. At the White House, Reince Priebus became chief of staff; on Capitol Hill, Paul Ryan remained House speaker. Both of them got off to rocky starts, but the year is still young.

Big win on energy

One unalloyed victory for the Badger State came when the Trump administration began rolling back Obama-era energy regulations, including the Clean Power Plan. A 2015 analysis by the state’s Public Service Commission found that “this single federal regulation will cost Wisconsin rate-payers between \$3.3 billion and \$13.4 billion.”

Last year, the U.S. Supreme Court put the regulation on hold after two dozen states, including Wisconsin, sued the Environmental Protection Agency.

“Since Wisconsin is more reliant on coal than most states, this bureaucratic boondoggle would have cost our state dearly in job losses, rate hikes and lost economic potential,” Brett



Healy, president of the MacIver Institute, said in a statement. In 2015, a MacIver Institute and Beacon Hill study found that the Clean Power Plan could cost Wisconsin 21,000 jobs and \$1.82 billion in disposable income by 2030.

Update on campus free speech

John McAdams, a professor of political science at Marquette University, won the annual Jeane Jordan Kirkpatrick Award for Academic Freedom in February. But McAdams, who was suspended for writing a controversial blog post in 2014, is still barred from teaching at Marquette.



We continue to be intrigued by Marquette’s intellectual standards. Earlier this year, the Jesuit school announced: “Marquette is honored to host the brilliant political activist Angela Davis.”

McAdams commented on Marquette’s double standards:

“At the event and tweeting about it notes that President Lovell called Davis an ‘awesome example.’ This about a woman who is a self-proclaimed Communist and who bought guns for her fellow black militants in a plot that led to the killing of several innocent people.”

He also noted the disparity between the school’s handling of Davis and conservative speaker Ben Shapiro.

“When Ben Shapiro was at Marquette, the university required the reading of a disclaimer that noted that Shapiro’s views were not necessarily the views of Marquette University.

“No such disclaimer was read at the Davis event . . .

“Note the double standard: When Ben Shapiro, a rather mainstream conservative, spoke on campus, Marquette officials threatened to charge the Young Americans for Freedom (who sponsored the event) for security.

“They backed off that, but then staffer Chrissy Nelson tried to undermine the event by advising leftists to sign up for a ticket and not show up, depriving an interested student of a seat. She did so at the suggestion of an unnamed ‘director of diversity.’

“Not only did no Marquette official laud Shapiro, Provost Dan Myers took to Marquette Wire to argue against Shapiro.

“While minor contributions to Shapiro’s speaker’s fee were made by Student Government and the Residence Hall Council, apparently all of Davis’ fee was paid by Marquette. Out of tuition money.”

A Milwaukee County circuit judge on May 4 backed Marquette’s suspension of McAdams, who vowed to appeal the ruling.

Hard times for Democrats

Not that long ago, Democrats controlled pretty much everything in Wisconsin: the governorship, both houses of the Legislature, a majority of the congressional delegation and both U.S. Senate seats. Since 2010, they’ve suffered one defeat after another, including Trump’s victory here, the first time a Republican won the state since 1984.

Today, the GOP holds not only the governorship, commanding legislative majorities and a majority of congressional seats, but last year retained a U.S. Senate seat when Ron Johnson defied the polls and upset liberal heartthrob Russ Feingold. If that were not bad enough, conservatives now also hold a solid 5-2 majority on the state Supreme Court.

Writing in the *Wall Street Journal* in March, Emily Jashinsky, a former WPRI intern, chronicled the Democrats’ sorry state:

“The latest evidence of Democrats’ sorry slide is (the election) for a seat on Wisconsin’s Supreme Court. Only six years after their historic demonstrations against Act 10, Democrats couldn’t find a single candidate willing to run against conservative Justice Annette Ziegler in her bid for another 10-year term.”


Since 2000, campaigns for the high court have become increasingly high-profile, high-stakes contests. This year, the left simply folded. On April 4, Ziegler won a second term unopposed.



Jashinsky continued:

“A spokesman for the state’s Democratic Party told the Milwaukee Journal Sentinel in January that ‘a number of people’ considered opposing Justice Ziegler before ultimately deciding not to take the plunge. Considering Wisconsin’s political history as an incubator of 20th-century progressivism, this development is rather stunning. ‘The Democratic Party has done a terrible job,’ Glendale Mayor Bryan Kennedy told the Journal Sentinel. ‘We haven’t built the kind of infrastructure that says to a Supreme Court candidate, ‘We can help you.’”

In politics, things change fast, but Democrats are also having a hard time recruiting a strong candidate to run against Gov. Scott Walker in 2018. Former state Sen. Tim Cullen toyed with idea but bowed out after admitting that he wasn’t keen on trying to raise money.

This is what happens when your bench is decimated, demoralized and defeated. 

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