Leadership in a Polarized Policy Landscape—Bridging parties, communities, and interests

The Dan Evans Leadership Seminar has provided an important window into an approach to public policy and governing that is strangely alien in the polarized political landscape of 2005. Throughout the quarter, students have been introduced to a political style that reaches beyond partisan self-interest and speaks to deeper, collective interests. This approach has important lessons for politics today.

Contemporary, balkanized electoral politics (primarily at the state and federal level) consists of partisans speaking-shouting-whining past each other. Rooted in the dominant discourses of blue-red, urban-rural and liberal-conservative, these dichotomies obscure more than they illuminate. The seeming world of difference between Seattle Liberals and Bellevue Republicans isn’t so vast when considered with a slightly different reference point. Would a Ballard liberal really not be able to tell the difference between Dave Reichert and Sam Brownback? Our political differences are relative. The metaphors we use to describe them grow increasingly brittle as issues become more tangible. National talking points dissipate into hopeless generalities.

It’s tempting to blame our anemic political discourse and shrill partisan bickering on any number of the usual suspects: biased news media, failing public education, television, the fact that people different than me are idiots, etc. Whatever the cause, public apathy and
non-participation leaves the conversation only to zealots. And the zealots are poor listeners.

One of the critical factors that makes partisan politics as currently practiced an uphill battle is the system of campaign finance. The escalating costs of a competitive campaign increase candidate incentive to speak to the true believers in their party. Core supporters are more likely to write checks than apathetic bystanders and the dwindling numbers of open-minded fence sitters that still listen. The parties and entrenched interests have incentive to centralize resources.

The dominant Washington players certainly are doing little to ameliorate the problem. The Gregoire-Rossi stalemate and subsequent court case was leveraged to mobilize the party base and influence public opinion. And in the wake of the King County ballot counting problems did Chris Vance push for a blue ribbon commission to deal with registration irregularities? No, he waited to enter the fray three days before the election; targeting voters in districts that he perceived would vote the other way. The strategy was short-term division over long-term coalition building. It’s a strategy built on non-participation. It ignores collaborative governing processes that serve the interests of everyone. It attempts to exclude those with whom the party disagrees.

It seems particularly easy to target the Republicans with these criticisms. As the dominant national party, localities are adopting pieces of the playbook nationwide. The Vance electoral strategy probably would have been (and has been) utilized in districts
across the country. The infamous Republican Southern Strategy, McCain’s hatchet-job in the 2000 South Carolina primary, the politics of division in order to win a slightly larger piece of the electorate—ala Gay Marriage initiatives, all speak of a politics that ignores the collective good and appeals to narrowly defined self-interest. It is uninspiring and reinforces the downward spiral of non-participation.

This is not to say that the Democrats would be any better. The utter lack of a coherent response to Republican tactics, even copying them in some cases, demonstrates that the Dems do not possess a more viable approach. Perhaps the real difference is simply that the Democrats have been so marginalized in national politics that it doesn’t even matter that they are no better. Do we care if the Socialist or Green parties practice inclusiveness?

While there may be a number of variables that play subterranean roles in the real and cosmetic issues that divide citizens of Washington and the US, the solution to this fragmentation is leadership. The political framework Dan Evans introduced to the seminar of University of Washington graduate students combines leadership and collective interests to unite citizens and shrink the perceived chasm so vehemently enforced by the punditry and ideologues. The truth is that collective interests represent real, powerful opportunities to redraw political affiliations. Climbing into the details of local needs and interests provides an opportunity to pull back the curtain and see the jokers running the show are pulling levers that win elections for now, but poorly address our collective challenges.
While the seminar has been filled with insights regarding innovative contrasts to our existing patterns of governing, critical opportunities for bridging our so-called “blue-red, urban-rural, liberal-conservative” divisions emerged: building inclusive support and seeking shared interests.

President Bush’s sagging approval ratings and growing public unease with the occupation of Iraq may push local Republicans away from the national platform. Regardless, for Democrats and Republicans alike, the realities on the ground in Washington State diverge in important ways from national positions. The talking points don’t fit so well. Washington Republicans look a lot more like Dan Evans than Trent Lott. Environmental conservation, separation of church and state, civil rights and fiscal discipline need to be framed concretely and locally. The values that unify citizens of Washington State are stronger and more convincing than the ideological frames that apply nationwide. Building new frames that sidestep traditional party buzzwords and speak to more direct connections is possible.

Conscious attention to shared interests is irreplaceable. The structures of money, communication and campaign assets exert substantial pull—it’s easy to plug into the dominant storylines. “Blue” rules the state; “red” is more powerful nationally.

The Alternatives for Washington project was an incredible example of an Evans experiment that ignored the dominant frames and attempted to build consensus or at least
political agreement around issues that Washingtonians face, not ideologies. The project initiated a dialogical process among diverse representatives of the citizenry. The project represented a governmental initiative to build bottom-up priorities and participation. This type of process bridges state differences through listening and dialog.

Open communication is another means of promoting trust on socially divisive issues. As politically polarized as things seem today, the stories from Vietnam and the Civil Rights Era presented an extremely challenging framework that Evans managed through open communication. Whether it was holding meetings in the Central District of Seattle under the cloud of race riots or an unscripted address to the citizens of Washington on King TV following a war protest, Evans demonstrated that speaking directly to real concerns effectively mitigated the conflicts.

Perhaps the most challenging aspect of this leadership seminar is trying to figure out how Dan Evans is a Republican. So much about the tone of the seminar (and really the Evans School in general) downplays party differences. It treats it almost as a personal choice, like religion or choosing a mate—there isn’t a “wrong” choice. However, the ruling party in Washington DC acts exactly the opposite, almost forcing people to take sides. “You’re with us or against us,” is prophetic here.

The interesting thing about Dan Evans, which is also the answer to the political polarization that I’ve considered in this essay, is that his “Republicanism” is almost indistinguishable from many of the issues and values that cause people to adamantly
align with the Democratic Party. Environmental protection. Civil Rights. Education. Appropriate, effective government. Even the historically Republican terrain of fiscal discipline is more owned by Clinton than the crew currently running the show. The fact that Evans’ policies are not obviously distinguishable from Democratic priorities is a testament to the fact that a political framework dedicated to collective interests is possible. In fact, it’s persuasive enough to sway a room full of “Seattle Democrats” to feel greater affinity for the former Republican governor than past and present Democratic governors. Perhaps the pendulum is swinging.

It has been inspiring and a pleasure. Thank you for the seminar.