

PUTTING IMPEACHMENT IN PERSPECTIVE

(by Bill Woods for StreetVibes)

As I write this article, the House of Representatives has just voted to impeach President Donald Trump. Lined up on rigid party lines, the pro-impeachment Democrats and anti-impeachment Republicans sound like they are living in different worlds. This major Constitutional decision



whether to remove a sitting President from office starkly reveals how polarized U.S. politics is today.

In reviewing our political history over the past sixty years, this country appears to be experiencing a low point in terms of government effectiveness as well as public trust. Although Trump currently looms as a bigger than life problem or the elephant in the room, his

election in 2016 was the result of negative trends that had already weakened our democratic process. Although numerous factors caused this decline, two trends stand out. Over this period "big money" has become more and more dominant in political campaigns at all levels. At the same time, the constituencies of both major parties have changed dramatically.

In the 1960s and 70s, both major parties had liberal, conservative, and moderate wings. While the Democrats elected liberals such as Hubert Humphrey or John Kennedy, they also possessed a full slate of elected Senators and Congressmen from the South. Likewise, one can point to GOP-conservatives such as Robert Taft or Barry Goldwater and liberals like Mark Hatfield or Nelson Rockefeller. Moderates from both parties could also be cited.

A typical criticism of that era was that the two major parties were too similar in makeup and views. In retrospect, however, the strength of this situation meant that even within the parties, compromise was necessary. Furthermore, temporary coalitions could be formed among the factions of the Democrats and Republicans to support legislation. Without such inter-party coalitions, it is doubtful that the major Civil Rights Laws would have passed. With this kind of political flexibility prompting working across the aisles, much positive legislative action occurred, and bills usually did not get lost in ideological stand offs between the two parties.

With today's rigid, uncompromising political atmosphere, little can get through Congress that requires more than one party's support, and then a veto by an erratic President may have to be overcome. The current impeachment process is a case in point. The Affordable Care Act offers another example. Passed with strictly Democrat votes, once the Republicans took over Congress in 2010, they have spent a huge amount of energy weakening this law and trying to repeal it.

It took a number of years to get to today's partisan stalemate. Under President Lyndon Johnson, the Democratic Party was blamed for Civil Rights legislation such as the Voting Rights Act, and the once solid South began to shift to the Republican Party. Barry Goldwater's nomination signaled another conservative shift for the GOP. However, the emergence of Ronald Reagan and his election as President in 1980 and reelection in 1984 brought about the real conservative

take over of this once diverse Party. Meanwhile stripped of the South, the Democratic Party became the political home for liberals and moderates.

The other force that gradually took hold of both major parties from the 1970s onward is the influence of "big money" on elections and the legislative process. Because of an emerging reliance on public relations and TV ads, both parties were beginning to spend much more money on campaigns by the 1970s, and reformers began pushing for limits on all the unregulated big contributions to candidates. From the start, the Supreme Court created legal obstacles with cases such as *Buckley v. Valeo* that equated campaign donations to free speech. Much later in 2010, the Court put even greater limits on reformers by ruling that corporations were people with the same free speech rights to spend money on campaigns.

Although reforms such as contribution limits and the public financing of campaigns have had some success in states and cities that adopted them, "big money" has grown more and more dominant in the political process. Average citizens realize that they have less and less influence on public decision making, and many people have become disillusioned with government. In part, Trump is a result of voters opting for a loud outsider who promised to "make America great again."

This analysis takes us back to the present and the implications of impeachment and the 2020 Presidential campaign. Certainly Trump is a danger to everything positive that this country has ever stood for, and a top priority must be removing him from office. However, this would only be a first step. A lot of thought and energy will be required to put in place the reforms necessary to truly make this country great again.