



# HC professor: Maintaining open communication will help keep partisan gap from widening

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When Robert Amyot looks at the growing partisan polarization in America, he becomes worried.

“It leaves me with worries and a redoubled feeling like we need to get out there and keep building those bridges or maintaining the bridges like we already have and keep reminding our neighbors and friends who are opposite us in politics that actually we’re all in the same boat,” he said. “We’re all in the same country. Let’s celebrate together.”

Amyot, professor of political science at Hastings College, spoke about partisan polarization during a Hastings League of Women Voters Zoom meeting on

Friday.

He said the United States used to have four regional parties including conservative Democrats, which were primarily in the South, plus liberal Democrats, conservative Republicans and liberal Republicans.

Those four regional groups had different positions on various issues like labor rights, civil rights and race relations, economic and environmental regulation, and government services.

Amyot said the parties began to polarize in 1964.

The Republican party started to fight for and attract Southern and working-class white voters. At the same time

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# Prof: ‘Are our hearts hardening as well as our voting records?’

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the Democratic Party started to attract black voters and liberal white voters through measures such as the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965.

That polarization accelerated in the 1990s, when Newt Gingrich served as Speaker of the U.S. House of Representatives and Republicans took control of the House, ending four decades of

Democratic control.

“Then as the House, and later the Senate, becomes accessible to both parties rather than being dominated by just one, we see control switching back and forth between the parties and that means that there is no reason to build up relationships with the other side and compromise,” Amyot said. “When there’s a good chance your party is going to be in control

soon and then you’ll be able to push through the kinds of things you want to do before the other side gets control, we see this dynamic taking place and nationalizing all parties.”

Issue cleavages begin to coalesce, so the same people who are “pro-life” or “pro-choice” also become pro-low tax or pro-big government, pro-gun rights or pro-gun control.

“All these issues start

getting drug into these two different bins,” he said. “People start finding all different sorts of ways, reasons why they should be disagreeing.”

Amyot presented the results of a poll from the Pew Research Center from September 2019, stating 78% of respondents from both political parties think divisions between Republicans and Democrats are increasing. Likewise 6% of respon-

dents thought the division was decreasing and 16% thought it was staying the same.

“Are our hearts hardening as well as our voting records?” he said. “The fact that we have had close elections and the houses of Congress and the White House are switching in control of the various parties back and forth means that voters are increasingly getting frustrated.”

To keep this divide from widening, Amyot said, it’s important to keep lines of communication open with neighbors, look for ways to work together on problems in the community, seek common ground, avoid condemnation and hyperbole in remarks about the “other” side, and call out bad behavior on both sides in terms that highlight the importance of civility and democracy.