

GRAND STRATEGY AND POLICY

CONFLICT AND COLLABORATION AS PERENNIAL STRATEGIES IN AMERICAN DEMOCRATIC GOVERNANCE: A POLARITY MANAGEMENT APPROACH

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Abstract

The recent political debacle in the US Congress that led to the removal of House Speaker Kevin McCarthy was seen as emblematic of the rather dysfunctional current interplay of the conflictual and collaborative strategies at the center of the American system of democratic governance. Applying Johnson's (1992/1996) polarity management approach and Benet's (2006) polarities of democracy theory, the paper presents conflict and collaboration as a strategic polarity to be leveraged rather than a problem to be solved and offers a preliminary assessment of their current state of (mis)management.

Keywords: *Strategies, conflict, collaboration, polarities, management, democratic governance*

INTRODUCTION

On October 3, 2023, the US House of Representatives voted to remove California Republican Kevin McCarthy from his position as House speaker. The ouster came after Republican representative from Florida Matt Gaetz forced a vote on a motion to vacate the office of the speaker, which was seen as an attempt by Gaetz to punish McCarthy for working with the Democrats to pass a government funding stopgap bill (Continuing Resolution or CR) and prevent a partial shutdown of the federal government. In other words, McCarthy had to pay a

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price for reaching across the proverbial aisle and employing a collaborative legislative strategy.

This was a significant historical event as McCarthy was the first speaker in the history of the United States to be ousted through a full House vote in the middle of a congressional term. The ensuing chaos in the house in the wake of the unprecedented removal of its speaker lasted, to the utter dismay of the American public, for more than three weeks, paralyzing the ability of Congress to pass any legislation. With the new November 17 fiscal deadline looming on the horizon, the leadership vacuum threatened to derail the enactment of the appropriation bills to keep the entire government open, including the National Defense Authorization Act for 2024, as well as President Biden Administration's proposed \$106bn national security package.

As David Smith wrote emphatically in *The Guardian* on October 21, 2023, “Speaker fiasco lays bare ungovernable dysfunction of House Republicans...One branch of the US government has ground to a halt amid death threats and screaming matches as Republicans fail to unite around a candidate for speaker.”

By the time Representative Mike Johnson of Louisiana finally emerged as a compromise candidate and was elected speaker on October 25, 2023, the lasting damage to the reputation of both the Republican Party and the House as a critical institution of democratic governance had already been done. By all accounts, the House speaker saga underscored the futility of the conflictual strategy employed in the case. Thus, with the detrimental, disastrous effect of intra- and inter-party conflicts on the institutional capacity to govern in full display, the strategy seems destined to be repudiated and abandoned.

Does it really, however? Is conflict amenable to problem-solving, normatively speaking? Or, accepting its inevitability in politics and policymaking, an alternative strategy to its management may afford higher feasibility in practice. The following section presents a brief overview of the structural drivers of both conflict and collaboration in the American system of democratic governance. Then, it introduces the notion of polarity management and the polarities of democracy theory as an alternative framework for addressing conflict in governance.

LITERATURE REVIEW AND FRAMEWORK

Drivers of Conflict

Arguably, the House speaker fiasco was symptomatic of the toxic political culture in Washington. Speaker McCarthy was essentially removed from his post for ensuring that the American government was funded. The resulting political drama, however, should not have come as a complete surprise when set against the classic assumptions in the political science literature. In Schattschneider's (1960) account, for example, “At the root of all politics is the universal language of conflict. The central political fact in a free society is the tremendous contagiousness of conflict” (pp. 1-2).

Indeed, there is a widespread consensus in the academic literature today that conflict is deeply ingrained in the constitutional framework of the American political system (Farmer, 2003).

This paper will deal primarily with the concepts of conflict that arise from the structural dilemmas caused by these constitutional barriers to effective governance.

However, it would be naïve to believe that addressing only these structural barriers will be sufficient to fully address current conflicts by using polarity management (Johnson, 1992/1996) and the polarities of democracy (Benet, 2006, 2012, 2013, 2022). While it is beyond the scope of this paper to fully integrate the current conflicts that arise from ideological differences in America today, we note them here and will address them in future publications.

The ideological conflicts not addressed in this paper are one element of a greater struggle. Declining democratic performance among governments around the world has been reported by evaluators such as The Economist (2022), Freedom House (2024), International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (2023), Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (2024), Peace Worldwide (2023), and Universität Würzburg (2020). How do we advance the concept of democracy in the face of this increasing pressure from authoritarian sources? This threat to democracy in the US from authoritarian forces has been identified by authors such as Applebaum (2020), Hannah-Jones et al. (2021), Maddow (2023), Richardson (2023), Schaller and Waldman (2024), and Wilkerson (2020). These authors have chronicled the role that racism, white supremacy, and anti-democratic forces have played in transforming the ideology of the Republican Party in the US to the point where political conflicts increasingly arise from this ideological competition between pro-democracy and pro-authoritarian forces. In a future article, we will examine the efforts of the Polarities of Democracy Institute to address the role of ideological conflict within the conflict and collaboration polarity.

But for now, we return to the idea that conflict is deeply ingrained in the constitutional framework of the American political system through structural forces. This is primarily due to the establishment of two fundamental principles: *federalism*, which divides power between the national and state governments, and the *separation of powers* among the different branches of government at both levels. These principles have created significant divides within the American political system, thus posing an ongoing governance challenge. According to Kettl (2005), “The Constitution’s long shadow over American democracy is one of boundaries: of what each branch of government is empowered to do, of powers reserved to state governments, and, most importantly, on the limits of governmental power enshrined in the Bill of Rights” (p. 6).

While the intent behind these constitutional divisions was to prevent the concentration of power, absolutism, and authoritarianism, the constitutional design itself reflects the founding fathers' understanding of human nature, as articulated by Madison (1788/1961), who, in a famous and frequently quoted excerpt from the Federalist Papers wrote:

Ambition must be made to counteract ambition... It may be a reflection on human nature that such devices should be necessary to control the abuses of government. But what is government itself but the greatest of all reflections on human nature? If men were angels, no government would be necessary. (p. 322)

The framers of the Constitution acknowledged the inevitability of conflict among self-interested groups, or "factions," as they called them (Madison, 1788/1961). This insight is considered central to the American political tradition (Siegel, 2008). Thus, according to Kettl (2005), the separation of powers in the American system is about structuring the unavoidable political conflict between various governmental institutions.

Moreover, the principle of *checks and balances*, which grants shared authority and overlapping responsibilities to the otherwise "separated" powers (branches of government), along with the *two-party system* and the principle of *divided government*—when one party controls the presidency while the other controls Congress—further intensifies the inherently conflictual and competitive nature of the political system (Fiorina et al., 2005).

Additionally, Vogel (1996) traces the historical roots of this conflictual, competitive governing strategy to what he labeled a *judicial model of state authority*:

The common-law system, like the market system to which it is historically related, emphasizes the virtue of competition. Both systems assume that the interests of all are best served when relatively equal forces are engaged in an adversary relationship. More critically, both emphasize the role of the state in providing the arena of conflict, not in determining how it should be resolved. (p. 150)

In the same vein, Kagan (1991) argued that "Compared to other economically advanced democracies, the United States is uniquely prone to adversarial, legalistic modes of policy formulation and implementation, shaped by the prospects of judicial review" (p. 369). This conflictual approach to governance, termed *adversarial legalism* by Kagan, appears further exacerbated by the bias in news coverage and the general media obsession with conflict (Thomas, 2008), which has become an impactful factor in public governance.

In summary, the American political tradition has been characterized by conflictual contestation of competing interests and adversarial legalism. Democracy in America appears conflict-prone by constitutional design – it contains an inherent, built-in bias towards conflict and competition, both structurally and culturally. Consequently, it is entirely reasonable to expect that individuals and institutions steeped in this context would display similar propensities for employing a conflictual strategy to democratic governance (Bidjerano, 2009).

Drivers of Collaboration

Contrary to this predominant view of the American political system, the same structural drivers of conflict have been seen, rather paradoxically, as prompting an alternative, essentially opposite, collaborative strategy to governance. According to Farmer (2003), for example, "In terms of public policymaking, *separation of powers* and *checks and balances* makes (sic) it almost impossible to make public policy unless a great deal of interaction and cooperation between (sic) the three branches of government takes place" (p. 11, emphasis added).

In the same vein, Agranoff and McGuire (2003) argued that "*American federalism* is perhaps the most enduring model of collaborative problem resolution" (p. 34, emphasis added). Such a conclusion confirms the analysis of other political scientists from the past, such as Morton

Grodzins (1966), for example, who famously employed the *marble-cake federalism* metaphor to represent symbolically the joint activities and shared responsibilities of federal, state, and local officials, thus illustrating the intrinsically collaborative nature of the American system of democratic governance (Bidjerano, 2009). In Grodzins' (1960) words, "federal-state-local collaboration is a characteristic mode of action" since "any governmental activity is almost certain to involve the influence, if not the formal administration, of all three planes of the federal system" (pp. 266-67).

Similarly, Imperial (2005) points to the institutional elements of *shared power*, *fragmentation*, and *dispersed capacity for solving policy problems* as factors giving an impetus for collaboration. The distinctive focus on boundaries in the structure of the American government, identified earlier by Kettl (2005), makes the use of collaboration in managing those exact boundaries imperative (Kettl, 2006).

THEORETICAL FOUNDATION

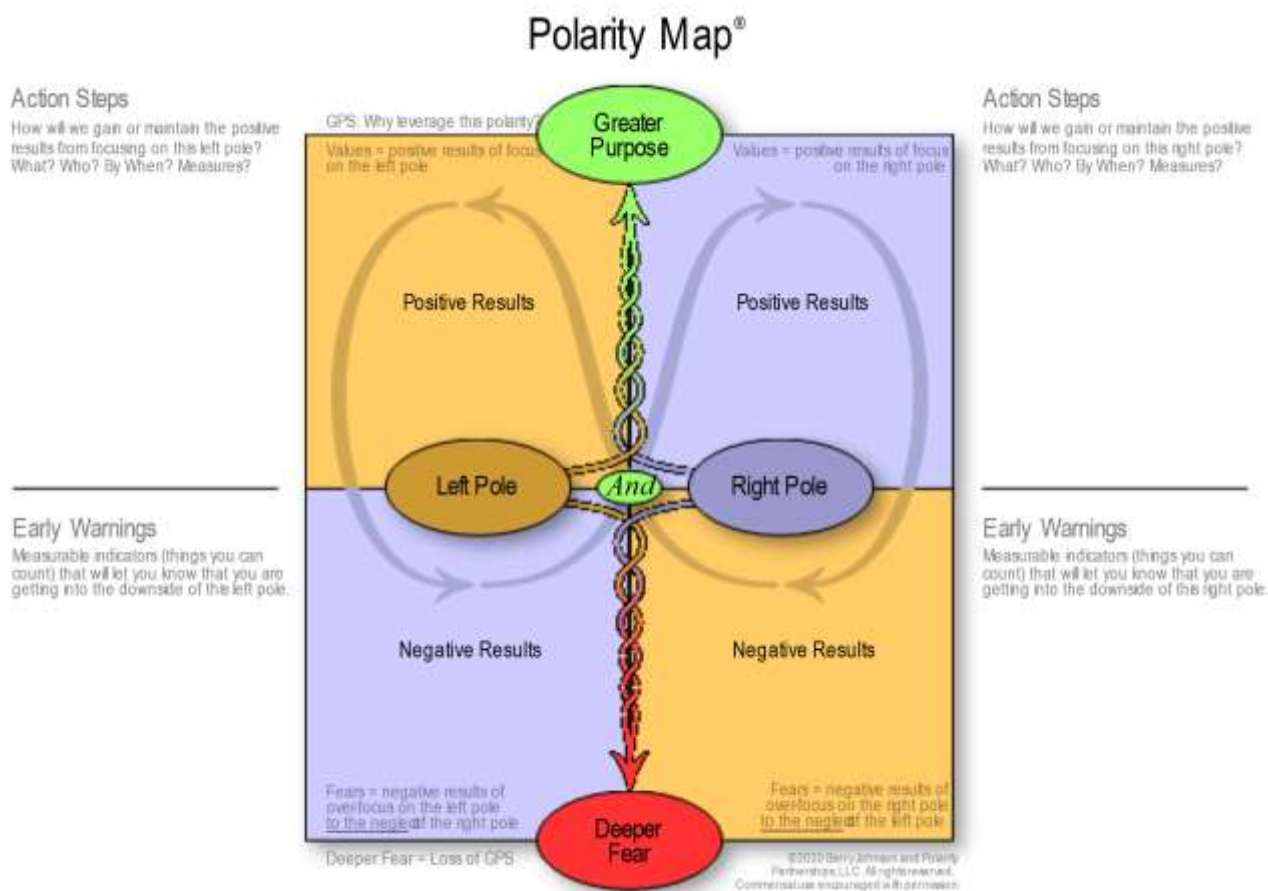
The polarities of democracy theory was developed by Benet through his doctoral and post-doctoral research at the University of Toronto from 2001-2014. The goal of Benet's research was to develop a unifying theoretical framework that can be used to assess public policies, structural forces, and individual behaviors that support making the promise of democracy a reality for all people. Polarity management served as the conceptual framework for the polarities of democracy theory.

Polarity Management

Johnson's (1992/1996) research showed that while some problems can be solved using *either/or* thinking, other problems are unsolvable because they consist of polarity dilemmas with two interrelated poles. When these polarity dilemmas exist, each pole has both positive and negative aspects that create polarity tensions that go on forever. Thus, you must use *both/and* thinking to leverage the polarities to maximize the positive aspects of each pole while minimizing the negative aspects of each pole.

Barry Johnson and Polarity Partnerships, LLC developed the Polarity Map™ (as shown in Figure 1 below) to show (a) the two specific poles of a polarity pair, (b) the upper and lower quadrants associated with each of the poles (the positive and negative aspects of each pole that make up the pair), (c) a *Greater Purpose* and *Deeper Fear* related to the polarity pair, (d) *Early Warning* signs of when a polarity pair is not being leveraged effectively, (e) *Action Steps* to better leverage the polarity, and (f) a grey *Infinity Loop* that represents a polarity that is being leveraged effectively. It should be noted that when a polarity is not being managed effectively, the grey Infinity Loop will dip deeper and deeper into the negative quadrants, and you will find that you are getting less and less of the positive aspects of either pole of the polarity pair.

Figure 1. A Framework to Visualize Johnson’s (1992/1996) Polarity Management and the Infinity Loop



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Polarities of Democracy Theory

The results of Benet’s research (2013) support the finding that democracy should be an *either/or* solution to the problem of oppression in both the workplace and society. It should provide a system of governance that (a) overcomes oppression (our deepest fear), (b) achieves human emancipation (our highest aspiration), and (c) advances healthy, sustainable, and just organizations and communities.

Benet’s (2013) findings suggest that the challenge in achieving and sustaining democracy as an *either/or* solution to oppression is that democracy requires ten values, each of which is essential, but none of which are sufficient by themselves, *AND* these ten essential values exist as five polarity pairs. Thus, to realize the promise of democracy, *both/and* thinking is needed to effectively leverage these five pairs to maximize the positive aspects of each pole and minimize the negative aspects of each pole.

Further, each of the polarities of democracy pairs is interrelated with the other pairs, creating a system of interdependent pairs. Because the pairs are also interdependent, failure to successfully leverage any one pair of values negatively impacts the other pairs. To achieve

greater democratization, we must effectively leverage each of the five pairs to maximize the positive aspects and minimize the negative aspects of each pole. The ten essential values in Benet's polarities of democracy approach are presented as the five polarity pairs shown below in Figure 2.

Figure 2. The Ten Values of the Polarities of Democracy[®] Theory Arranged in Their Polarity Relationships



Note: Image reproduced with permission of the Polarities of Democracy Institute.

Thus, the polarities of democracy, viewed as a whole, are not a polarity and should not be presented as such. Rather, democracy should serve a greater purpose of human emancipation. Since these ten values exist as five polarity pairs, however, if we use both/and thinking to effectively leverage the five polarity pairs that are required to achieve democracy fully, then democracy can fulfill its role as an either/or solution to the problem of oppression. It can be used to overcome, for example, problems of racism, patriarchy, authoritarianism, economic disparities, violence, and climate change, among others. It can allow us to achieve healthy, sustainable, and just communities that respect all people's rights, conforming to standards such as the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) and the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (2015).

METHODOLOGY - POLARITY ASSESSMENT

Barry Johnson and Polarity Partnerships', LLC methodology, adopted by the Polarities of Democracy Institute, involves a 5-step polarity assessment process:

Figure 3. The 5-Step Polarity Assessment Process

Note: Image reproduced with permission of Polarity Partnerships LLC and the Polarities of Democracy Institute

For this article, we completed the first two steps of the *Seeing, Mapping, Assessing, Learning, and Leveraging* (SMALL) process and used the generic polarity map (Figure 1 above) to map the emerging conflict and collaboration polarity in the context of the House speaker's saga from the Fall of 2023.

The polarities of democracy approach to organizational and community change was also applied as a referential framework to offer a preliminary assessment of how managing the conflict and collaboration polarity can contribute to effectively leveraging the polarities of democracy, thus repairing and strengthening the institutions of democratic governance in the US.

Seeing

Based on our review of the scholarly literature and the vignette of the House speaker removal, the manifestation of conflict does not appear amenable to problem-solving. Instead, selecting a conflictual and collaborative strategy for democratic governance in the United States presents a polarity dilemma with two opposing yet interrelated poles.

MAPPING

In the presence of the identified conflict and collaboration polarity and per Johnson's (1996) polarity management model and Benet's (2006) polarities of democracy theory, each pole exhibits both positive and negative aspects that create polarity tensions. Addressing the polarity dilemma would require not *either/or* but *both/and* thinking to potentially leverage the

polarity to maximize the positive aspects while minimizing the negative aspects of each pole. Achieving *functional democratic governance* can be presented as the *Greater Purpose* of managing the polarity pair while descending into *dysfunctional anti-democratic (or oppressive) governance* can be characterized as our *Deeper Fear*.

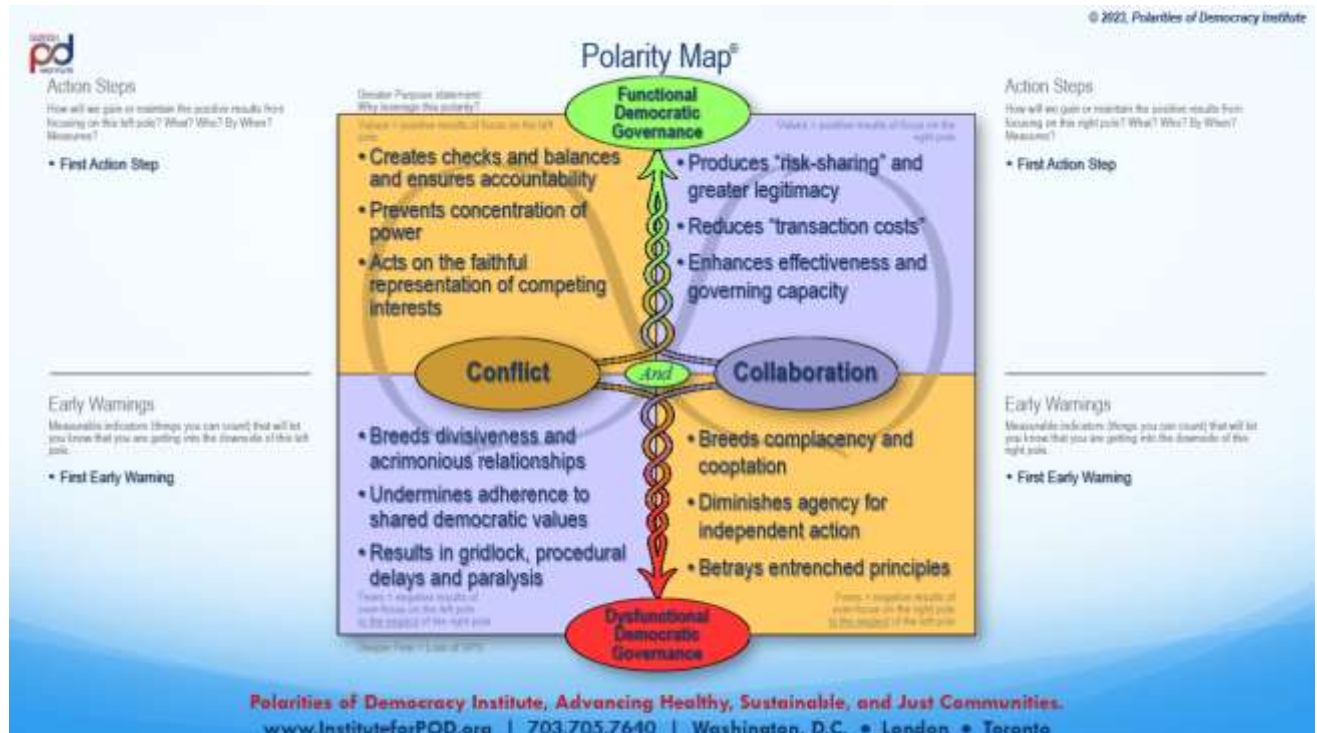
With conflict as the left pole and collaboration as the right one, some of the most salient positive aspects of focusing on the left side of the polarity are listed in the upper left quadrant of the polarity map. In line with the deliberate constitutional design described in the literature review above, those generally positive values include, for example, *creating checks and balances and ensuring accountability, preventing the concentration of power*, and *faithfully executing the representation of competing interests*.

However, several clear Early Warning signs, such as the inability of Congress to pass any meaningful legislation, have signaled (mis)management of the polarity, with the *Infinity Loop* dipping deep into the lower left quadrant of the conflict's negative aspects. Those adverse outcomes include *divisiveness and acrimonious relationships; undermined adherence to shared democratic values; and gridlock, procedural delays and paralysis*.

Leveraging the polarity effectively would, in turn, require specific *Action Steps*, which would take the *Infinity Loop* diagonally, in the upper right quadrant of the collaboration's positive aspects, such as *risk-sharing and greater legitimacy, reduced transaction costs*, and ultimately, *enhanced effectiveness and governing capacity*. Moreover, both the "duration" and the "intensity" of the negative experiences associated with the utilization of the conflictual strategy would make the upsides of the opposing collaborative strategy pole even more attractive and the strategic reorientation – more plausible (Johnson, 1992/1996, p. 256).

Of course, overemphasis on collaboration while ignoring conflict could potentially entail manifestations of its downsides over time: *complacency and cooptation, diminished agency for independent action, and betrayal of entrenched principles*. Such inevitable development would be expected to prompt reverse oscillation back to the positive aspects of conflict in the upper left quadrant of the polarity map, thus completing the loop. The conflict and collaboration polarity is graphically presented in Figure 4 below.

Figure 4. Mapping the Conflict and Collaboration Polarity



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CONCLUSION

In conclusion, our focused review of public administration, public policy, and political science scholarly literature identified both conflict and collaboration as perennial strategies in American democratic governance. Viewed through the lenses of polarity management and the polarities of democracy theory, the two strategies appear not mutually exclusive but complementary. In this sense, conflict is not to be seen as a problem to be solved but as a pole in a polarity to be managed.

This article's analysis was limited to the first two steps (seeing and mapping) of the Polarity Partnerships', LLC polarity assessment process. It was also employed in the specific context of a recent political event in the US – the unprecedented removal of the House Speaker in the middle of a congressional term – that may have somewhat limited transferability to other empirical contexts.

These methodological limitations notwithstanding, from our preliminary analysis, it appears that polarity management and the polarities of democracy may provide a valuable approach to effectively achieving the positive aspects of both conflict and collaboration while avoiding the negative aspects. However, as noted above, addressing only the structural drivers of conflict and collaboration will not be sufficient. To fully achieve the promise of democracy through the application of polarity management and the polarities of democracy may also require addressing the ideological bases of our current conflict. How the Polarities of Democracy Institute is pursuing effectively leveraging these aspects of the conflict and collaboration polarity will be the subject of a future study.

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