

"As soon as the constitution became effective, parties appeared."

LOOK WHO'S TALKING

> **RUSSELL MUIRHEAD**, *Government Professor*



Why did you decide to tackle party politics in your new book, *The Promise of Party in a Polarized Age*?

I've been interested in them since I was a teenager. Parties are the institutions that carry ideas into the political world. They are where ideas get real. There's no way to exercise the duties of citizenship without thinking about how you might fit or not fit a party.

What if all politicians ran as independents?

To address any serious problem you need to form a majority in Congress that can agree on a plan, a group that can stand together over time and remember what it has done.

Do you agree with those who say the divide between the major parties is bigger than at any time in the last two decades?

Political scientists know there's a bigger divide in Congress and between activists. We're not so sure that divide also exists in the broader population or if the political elites have been betraying ordinary citizens who are very centrist.

And centrist is good?

Partisanship needs limits. We don't want it to invade friendship, civil society, the entire media, the judiciary or the university. There have to be repositories of the nonpartisan that nourish the pursuit of truth and justice, in order to make it safe to act from our partisan passions in other places, like the legislature.

What's your sense of students' political engagement?

The majority are trying to assess which party stands for things they agree with. Like a lot of citizens, that group is having a difficult time tapping into and sharing the passions that characterize today's parties. For a while Obama seemed to inspire almost all my students, but they have been discouraged.

How are you feeling about the future?

I'm optimistic. For 30 years we've wanted an expansion of government benefits and entitlements and lower taxes—and voted for both. That's unsustainable. It's plausible that a durable majority of the nation will decide to lean decisively toward the promise of Roosevelt or the promise of Reagan. When it does, one party will come to dominate and politics will be easier. Maybe not better, but easier.