



## MEMORANDUM

**To:** Madison Initiative Program Team

**From:** Center for Evaluation Innovation

**Re:** Pressure Test Preliminary Findings

**Date:** August 6, 2014

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### **INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND**

**This memo offers summary results from “pressure testing” the Madison Initiative’s spread-bet strategy.** The pressure test examined the extent to which the Foundation’s strategy corresponds with:

- The conditions and dynamics driving polarization and its impacts on Congress
- Change levers experts believe have the greatest potential for impact and “ripple effects”.

The test’s purpose was to compare the Foundation’s choices to experts’ insights in order to uncover where the strategy may need refinement, as well as where the evaluation needs to pay particular attention.

The test’s first phase focused on identifying the conditions and dynamics driving polarization, as well as plausible change levers. The second phase will examine these findings more deeply alongside the Foundation’s initial grantmaking.

**We confidentially interviewed 17 experts recommended by the Foundation.** They included experts in the Madison Initiative’s three systems or main areas of investment (Congress, campaigns and elections, civic engagement); grantees and non-grantees; and those who may be critical of some of the Foundation’s decisions so far.

#### **Pressure Test Experts**

- Michael Dimock, Pew Research Center
- Amy Dominguez-Arms, Irvine Foundation
- John Fortier and Don Wolfensberger, Bipartisan Policy Center
- Joe Goldman, Democracy Fund
- Elaine Kamarck and Bill Galston, The Brookings Institution
- Frances Lee, University of Maryland
- Peter Levine, Tufts University
- Michael Malbin, Campaign Finance Institute
- Nolan McCarty, Princeton University
- Norm Ornstein, American Enterprise Institute
- Nate Persily, Presidents Commission on Election Admin
- Rob Richie, FairVote
- Dan Schmidt and Michael Hartmann, Bradley Foundation
- Talia Stroud, University of Texas

## **FINDINGS**

**The matrix and figure that follow offer simplified pressure-test findings.** We identified the factors experts suggested both influence polarization and represent areas where the Foundation might invest (change levers) in order to achieve its ultimate goal of improving the ability of Congress to function in spite of polarization.

Judgments about the strengths of each factor as a polarization influence or potential change lever are based on an examination of what experts said regarding each factor *on its own*. Recognizing that no one change lever will be effective in achieving the Initiative's ultimate goal, the Foundation is using a spread-bet approach, identifying the set of change levers that it believes may result in traction *if used in combination*.

**Interviewees did not always agree on each factor's level of influence or potential as a change lever.** We aggregated what we heard across experts.

We chose this format to represent a complex set of findings as briefly and clearly as possible. We recognize the matrix and figure oversimplify the relationships of entangled variables in complex systems.

### **What is Driving Polarization?**

The matrix on pages 3-4 identifies what we heard across experts regarding:

*The key factors influencing polarization and their level of influence—to what extent do factors drive polarization, defined as hyper-partisanship and an increased ideological coherence within and divergence between parties in Congress?*

It also contains brief notes summarizing interviewees' perspectives about the factor's influence on polarization, its power as a change lever, and the level of risk associated with focusing change efforts on that factor.

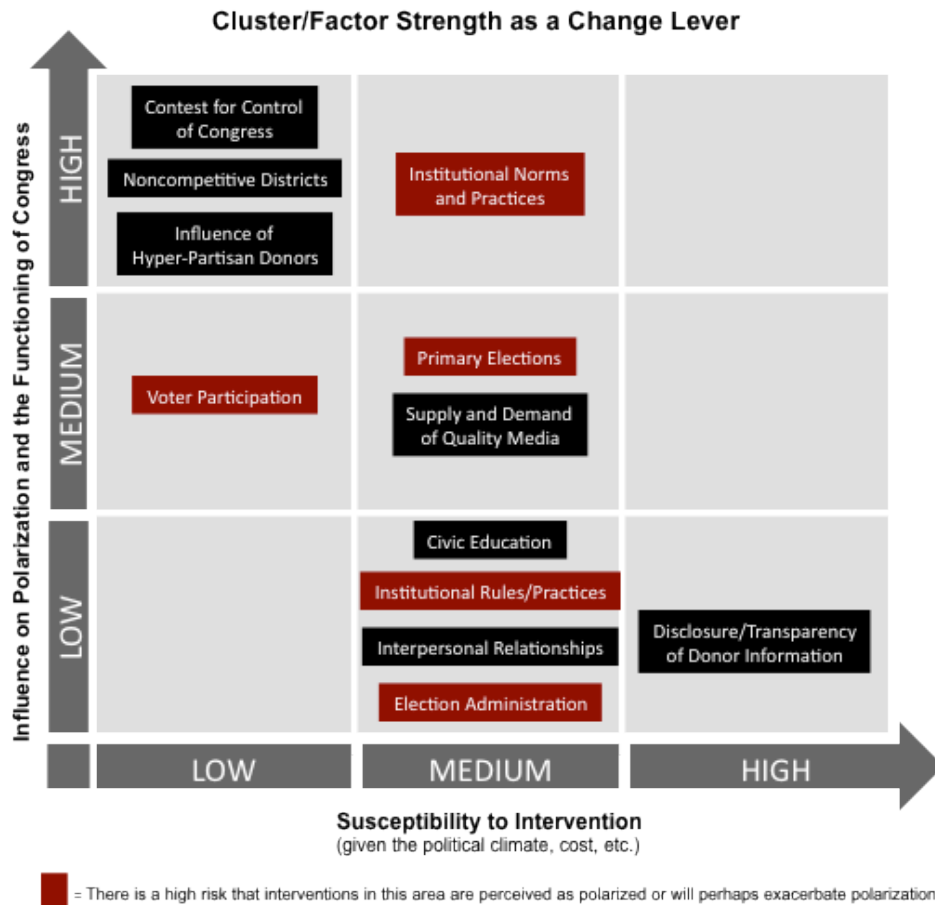
### Summary of Pressure Test Findings

	Key Factors	Influence of Factor on Polarization	Notes from Interviews
CONGRESS	1. Contest for Control of Congress	High	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>This was cited as a highly important influence on polarization, but one that is beyond the purview of philanthropic influence.</li> <li>Closely contested control is likely to be the state of affairs for the foreseeable future, producing a set of strong incentives that need to be counterbalanced rather than eliminated.</li> </ul>
	2. Institutional Rules and Processes	Low	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Rule changes rarely were identified as a potential change lever. Interviewees more often believed that the misuse of rules is a bigger problem than the rules themselves, as MOCs find loopholes or ways around them.</li> <li>The idea of bringing back earmarks as a negotiation tool emerged as a potentially useful change.</li> <li>There is risk in moving this lever because the discussion itself about rule changes is polarized, and because some tools like earmarks could increase public cynicism about government.</li> </ul>
	3. Institutional Norms and Practices	High	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The contest for control of Congress—and perhaps the media environment and big sort— fundamentally have changed the normative behavior of MOCs.</li> <li>Many believe the culture of Congress is a critically important change lever, while others see it as a product of more fundamental drivers that must be changed first.</li> </ul>
	4. Interpersonal Relationships and Trust	Medium-Low	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Overall this was seen as a necessary intervention, but not sufficient unless combined with other interventions because of stronger variables that overrule the influence of relationships and trust.</li> <li>Some observed that relationship and trust building must be done under cover so that MOCs do not feel obligated to perform a certain way for the broader public or intense policy demanders.</li> </ul>
CAMPAIGNS & ELECTIONS	5. Non-Competitive Districts	High	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>There was general (but not unanimous) agreement that redistricting will <u>not</u> be an effective lever for reducing polarization or improving Congressional performance.</li> <li>At the same time there was broad agreement that redistricting is crucial to re-establishing public trust in government, which is an important precursor to improved civic engagement.</li> </ul>
	6. Influence of Hyper-partisan/ Ideological Donors	High	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>This almost universally came up as significant, but there were few ideas on how to solve it.</li> <li>As a lever it could have a high impact, but it is seen as difficult to change.</li> <li>Attempts to move this face risks of unanticipated negative consequences (a la McCain-Feingold).</li> <li>Public financing and increasing the proportion of small donors were most commonly cited as potential solutions.</li> </ul>

	Key Factors	Influence of Factor on Polarization	Notes from Interviews
CAMPAIGNS & ELECTIONS	7. Disclosure/ Transparency of Donor Information	Low	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Although it is important as a good government practice, it is not clear how it would change either MOC or voter behavior.</li> </ul>
	8. Primary Elections (structure)	Medium-High	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Most think primaries are related to polarization, but there was less agreement about solutions.</li> <li>More agreement existed about the promise of national primary day and eliminating caucuses and conventions.</li> <li>Less agreement existed on ranked choice, top-two, and open primaries, in part because they do not change the fundamental problem of a two-party winner-take-all system.</li> </ul>
	9. Election Administration	Low	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Reforms are seen as a good thing to do for democracy, but not particularly related to polarization.</li> <li>Voter access debate related to this is seen as firmly partisan, so this area may be considered high risk.</li> </ul>
CIVIC ENGAGEMENT	10. Supply and Demand of Quality Media	Medium	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>There is interest in media as a way to create pressure on MOCs to behave differently. The deterrent effect on policymaker behavior might be more important than direct effect of media on citizen behavior or opinions.</li> <li>It is important to examine the capacities of political reporters as a potential area for solutions.</li> <li>We need to develop a better understanding of what quality media means—what type of coverage will make a difference.</li> <li>Concerns were raised about viability/business model challenges in shifting the supply of quality media.</li> </ul>
	11. Civic Education (informing and exposing to different views)	Low	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>People find value in civic education for the good of democracy in general, but question whether civic engagement solutions can affect polarization.</li> <li>Effects are on a long time delay and interventions of a meaningful size would be very expensive.</li> <li>There is less interest in citizenship and candidate/issue education, and more interest in education about how the system functions and the importance of cross-party deliberation and compromise.</li> <li>There is uncertainty about how to proceed given changing demographics and technology.</li> </ul>
	12. Voter Participation (turnout in primaries and general)	Medium-Low	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Strong agreement exists that this is good for democracy, but most questioned whether the SIZE of voter participation would do anything to reduce or mitigate polarization.</li> <li>Many believe that to have any kind of moderating effect, the increase in participation would have to be so high that it is not plausible.</li> <li>There is risk—a strong case can be made that broadening the electorate can only be done by further polarizing the population and heightening antipathy.</li> </ul>

## What Might Be Effective Change Levers?

The figure below examines each factor's *strength as a change lever*—is it worth trying to push? Factors are positioned based on an assessment of how difficult it would be to move the factor given length of time, cost, scale of the problem (x-axis), and its potential impact on the Initiative's goal if changes are successful (y-axis). (Positioning on the y-axis as low, medium, or high corresponds to content in the middle column of the previous matrix.)



Ideally, we would want to see change levers clustered in the upper-right corner of this matrix—levers that can be moved more easily and that will have a higher impact. Because polarization is an exceedingly complex issue with no clear or easy solutions, it is not surprising that no levers appear in that area. As we map the Foundation's grantmaking, we will want to pay attention to how grantmaking is distributed across the matrix and the extent to which the Foundation is making, for example:

- High-risk bets—investments in levers that are hard to move but would have high impact (upper-left corner)
- Low-return bets—investments in levers that are easier to move but would have lower impact (lower-right corner).

## **OTHER FINDINGS**

### **Is the Initiative's goal appropriate?**

- *Yes*—Experts agreed that the Foundation's latest iteration of its overall goal as *improving the ability of Congress to function in spite of polarization* was a better and more feasible choice than aiming to address polarization itself. However, some noted that these are not necessarily mutually exclusive goals. Some change levers will affect both.

### **What might the Foundation be missing?**

- *The candidate pipeline*—Experts raised the importance of thinking about *who* runs for public office, saying that too many who are more moderately inclined (as well as women and people of color) are either opting out or being excluded.
- *Relationship between Congress and the other branches*—Currently the Foundation's focus is on Congress and primarily its legislative function. While experts agreed with this as a main focus, they also noted a need to pay attention to how polarization affects the executive and judicial branches, how a polarized Congress interacts with these branches, and how the dynamics between the three branches contribute to polarization.
- *Role of the media in all three areas*—Experts raised concerns that current thinking may be too focused on the role of media regarding civic engagement, and said it was important to consider the role that media play during campaigns and elections and with respect to the way Members of Congress think and behave.
- *The nature of relationship building*—Experts emphasized the importance of paying attention to what relationship building among Members of Congress entails. "It has to be more substantive and purposeful than cocktails and dinner," and relationship building has to happen outside the public eye so they are not lambasted for consorting with the enemy.

### **Where is more research needed?**

- *Looking at states as laboratories*—Several experts raised opportunities for research in states that could shed light on polarization at the federal level. Ideas included looking at:
  - States that are less polarized to see what we can learn from them.
  - States implementing unique reforms, such as public funding for campaigns, different primary structures, election administration improvements, etc.
  - Drivers of public attitudes about state legislatures, which tend to be more positive than attitudes about the federal government even in states where legislators have made "painful" or unpopular policy decisions.
- *Comparative learning from other countries*—What can we learn from other democracies about what it takes to manage polarization?

- *Research on the impacts of polarization*—Research is exploring what drives polarization, but what about research on what results from polarization, such as its impacts on policies and on the public? This research could be used to show why Members of Congress and citizens should be concerned.
- *Solutions and idea development*—Similar to the above, experts cautioned against focusing too much research on what is driving polarization and not enough on evaluating potential solutions. Make sure the grants focused on solutions, particularly innovative ideas, are properly evaluated.

### **What other interesting observations emerged?**

- There was strong support for the way the foundation is conducting the Initiative thus far, including:
  - *Using the spread bet approach*—recognizing uncertainty and the need to place bets in multiple places in order to have a chance of achieving the goal.
  - *Continuing to look for innovative approaches*—we cannot return to the good old days of less polarization. We can only move forward in a new environment and with new solutions.
  - *Working collaboratively*—there was high praise for the way program staff are working with grantees and experts in the field. High value was placed on the deep expertise program staff bring and the non-dictatorial (but engaged) nature of their work.
- Experts also raised several cautions:
  - Do not assume that 40 years of less polarized government represents the norm, or assume that we want to (or could) return to that era. Do not look to the past as the ideal.
  - Make sure the strategy is not too much of a reaction to what has been happening during the last couple of years in Congress. Make sure it is focused on real trends.
  - Do not narrow too early on the spread bet approach.
- Polarization may end when one party firmly sweeps both houses of Congress and the presidency, or when there is long-term majority control by one party. If those “solutions” to the problem are not satisfactory, it means we have not been clear enough about the goal.