You could call the midterm congressional election results a disaster for the Democrats and you would for the most part be correct in your assessment. After all, the GOP took control of the House of Representatives and nearly captured a majority in the Senate. What a dramatic turnaround! Was it not just recently that the American electorate responded strongly to the mantra of change that propelled Barack Obama into the White House? That mantra calling for change is once again being heard throughout the land but this time the litany that is being recited is calling for the undoing of the changes that have been approved in Washington during the first two years of the Obama administration. Democratic victories in the legislative and executive branches of government in the election of 2008 are now but distant memories.

There are those from the right who say that there has been too much change most all of which has been negative and bad for our nation. House and Senate Republicans have been characterized as the party of “no” in light of their consistent and insistent opposition to most every legislative policy advocated by Obama and the Democrats. At the same time many from the political left have been disgruntled that the administration has not brought about more change and has appeared to be ineffective and lacking leadership from the president. It has not been a very pretty business and the political atmosphere has been defined by bitter rancor and divisiveness. How fickle are the fortunes of political fate as we have observed the approval numbers of President Obama and the Democrats plummeting! What a difference two years has made as political winds seem to have shifted overnight!

Tea Party - Wasn’t there a reference to a tea party in Alice in Wonderland? On further consideration it may be that American politics in many ways resembles the fantasy of Alice and her experiences in Wonderland. Many Tea-Partiers believe that traditional Republicans have “gone soft” in their commitment to conservative principles and in recent Republican primaries have been challenging the “slackers” and “backsliders” within their own Republican ranks. Inasmuch as they have achieved several successes particularly with the help of Sarah Palin and South Carolina Senator Jim Demint, maybe their work is moving them from fantasy to reality. It’s all about political and national polarization.

The 2008 election was itself a classic illustration of the degree of polarization developing in our nation. Republicans have become increasingly conservative and ideological in recent years and the perception is that what was once a significant level of consensus in American government has now degenerated from consensus into a dangerous level of contentiousness and outright anger. To once again reference to Alice in Wonderland our political parties were at one time similar that they had been described as indistinguishable as Tweedle Dee and Tweedle Dum. Times have indeed changed. The contemporary perception is that today’s Republicans believe in small government because they simply don’t trust government. The perception of Democrats is that they favor government control of all aspects of life and fear individual freedom and the free enterprise system. Republicans are seen by themselves as champions of traditional values, free enterprise and as God fearing capitalists. They see Democrats (led by Obama) as big government socialists taking hard earned money from good folks in order to create a socialist and perhaps even a Marxist big brother state. Democrats look at it quite differently. They see themselves as champions of social justice keeping faith with the American creed and view Republicans as self absorbed, dominated by corrupt corporate interests and oblivious and unconcerned with
problems facing our nation and its people. Keep in mind that perceptions generate more heat than light and often bear no relationship to either facts or reality.

Whether the issue is one of health care, government involvement in the economy through stimuli, bailouts, taxes, or financial and banking regulation, the debate rages on. Concerns for the unacceptably high level of unemployment and the lack of an economic recovery loom large in the public mind. Somewhere in this political tempest there is even time to consider questions of national security, the war in Afghanistan and America’s place in the new global world order including the global economy. Threats of terrorism and threats of global warming loom large, and who has time to think about oil spills in the Gulf of Mexico? Somewhere in the mix, added to all of the foregoing problems but not at all unimportant to the national political debate are the social issues of same sex marriage, illegal immigration, abortion and other assorted civil liberties questions. Think gay marriage and the repeal of “don’t ask, don’t tell”.

The United States Supreme Court has been a major focus of the national polarization and with President Obama’s selection of two Supreme Court justices the ideological distemper of the nation has intensified. That ideological distemper was much in evidence as Democrats were solid in their support of the nominees and Republicans are almost equally solid in their opposition to the nominees. It never used to be that way.

The health care legislation debate clearly underscored the divisions in our land and that division was there for all to see as America watched the debates and the voting process that finally resulted in the passage of the legislation. Rancorous debate and rampant partisanship were painfully visible and the issue is far from settled as we learn if law suits and midterm elections advance the likelihood of overturning the controversial law. The anger displayed by many Americans on these issues in many instances has made rational discussion of the problems and possible solutions almost impossible as the clamor stifles the civil discourse and accurate information disappears from the debate. Hey, who needs facts when you have a surplus of emotion?

I cannot leave this discussion without saying more about the ominous and omnipresent threat of terrorists. Is Obama weak in defending and protecting us from our enemies? Withdrawal from Iraq, staying in Afghanistan with no apparent success in sight cause many to see Obama as weak but after all if you are birther, what can one expect from a president born in an African Muslim culture? Sean Hannity, Michael Savage, or Rush as well as other highly paid talk show hosts will be happy to tell you all about it.

But we are a democracy and a nation of diverse peoples and interests. We are all part of a pluralist society that has through our national Constitution been able to resolve our differences throughout our history. Discussion, compromise and consensus were all important components of our democratic moderm and our democratic vocabulary. Do the above statements still possess validity?

It is obvious that in the short time frame of a semester we cannot explore fully all the issues that confront us as Americans. Our limited goals in this course include an increased understanding of who we are as Americans living under the Constitution and what that fact may mean as we examine the allocation of power in our political system. What are the powers assigned to the national government and other centers of power? What are the limits of those powers and have those powers been exercised in ways that are consistent American and democratic principles?
In our micro level arena of the classroom the big questions will be studied and discussed. Just as civil discourse on the macro national level is a desired ideal and goal, so too in the classroom, civility will be the expected standard of conduct. We will not likely reach full consensus or find ideal solutions to America’s problems, but we will reason together. Let us begin.