



AMERICA'S POLITICAL CROSSROADS

Chris Stirewalt Examines the State of Play

By Rebecca Patrick

As the country looks ahead to the pivotal 2026 midterm elections, the American political landscape is marked by deepening divides and rising populist sentiment.

In a compelling conversation with *BizVoice*[®], noted political analyst Chris Stirewalt offers a candid and insightful perspective on the forces shaping today's democracy and a potential path forward. He was fresh off his appearance at the Indiana Chamber's annual D.C. INsider event in the nation's capital.

A veteran journalist known for his political commentary, Stirewalt previously served as the political editor for Fox News and is now in that role for NewsNation, where he also anchors *The Hill Sunday*.

***BizVoice*: How would you characterize the political mood of the country heading into 2026?**

Chris Stirewalt: "Deeply dyspeptic and frequently disparate, I think is how I would have to describe it. ... It's very understandable that people would not feel encouraged because we have a beautiful system that is not working – and people are aware of it. The way that populism works is that populist impulses often degrade the ability of the system to function. And when the system is unable to function, then people become more frustrated and therefore more open to populist political ideas. So, it is a cycle. And if you are somebody who is trying to defend sort of the constitutional order of things and checks and balances and how the system is supposed to work, people who hear you say that are liable to say, 'Yeah, but it's not working. We're not addressing the problems that we have.' And this is of course true."

"We have a broad consensus in the United States around say, immigration, where 60% or 70% of the people in America agree that we should enforce the law. We should have secure borders. We should have a tough system for immigration. But (the same people) also think that the people who are here illegally who haven't committed other crimes should have a pathway to citizenship. That is one of the clearest, most solid majorities in American public opinion research for 20 or 25 years. But nobody gets it. We never get there. And because we don't get the things that we want, we become frustrated with the system as we understand it, and therefore more susceptible to the blandishments of people who say, 'Well, we just need to ditch the system and we've got to forget this fussy old Constitution,' but (really) we've got to start doing what the people want."

BV: What trends in voter behaviors stand out to you over the past few election cycles?

CS: "We have to be careful always in political analysis and psephology (study of elections and trends in voting) to remember that the voters who decide every election are the voters who are the least engaged because they're the ones who come in at the end. We know not just for the midterm election but for the 2028 presidential election that we can put 65%-70% of the vote in the bank right now. It doesn't matter what's going on ... those people will never vote for anybody else (other than their party affiliation). The deciders are the people who are not as attached to either party. Those people tend to spend less time thinking about politics than the people who are rabidly engaged. As a consequence, I talk about it as being like flashcards. These voters come in at the end, and they're like, 'Okay, what are we doing? What do we got?' And it's like, do you want option A or do

you want option B? They're like, 'Ah, I guess B.' And it's not more complicated than that.

"And by the way, who are the people who are likely to be those persuadable voters? The middle of the middle class. That's who was getting the most devastated by the consequences of inflation. ... So, 2024 was a fundamentals election. ... Republicans say we now have Hispanic voters, we have young people, we have all this stuff. (But those voters) chose that flashcard in the last election. They'll choose a different flashcard (next time) if they don't like what's going on. Winning a vote is not the same as winning a voter."

BV: What's the most pressing issue you see in the American political dynamic?

CS: "If America doesn't find a way to have a Congress again, we're in deep trouble. The single most pernicious problem is we need primary election reform in the United States to change the incentive structure for the members of Congress about what they're thinking about. Every state should be thinking about this – about what we can do to have a Congress that is both democratic and representative. Because right now we have a Congress that is not representative, it is



"We have two parties that continue to act like minority parties as opposed to majority parties reaching out to the middle (voters)," Stirewalt stresses. "(An example is) Joe Biden overreached so far and did so much with what was not a big mandate. It took (the Democrats) until the spring of 2024 before they started to pivot and reach out for the middle ... it was just far too late."

democratically elected, but it is not representative of the people who they're tasked with representing. That's a problem. That's the first problem. But the second problem is the size of the House hasn't grown since after the 1910 census. The size of the House is based on the 1910 census. We have to get together and agree after the 2030 census that we're going to expand the House. ... The problem is that Congress doesn't want to or is not able to do its job. We're in a government shutdown (at the time of the interview). Who wins every government shutdown? The

executive branch because it's Congress refusing to do its job.

"Once upon a time, there were people like (Indiana's former U.S. Sen.) Richard Lugar. There are a long list of people who were really good at legislating and really (fiercely protective) of the power of Congress to do its thing. And we don't have that (now). As grownups, people in both parties and people of goodwill who care about the Constitution, we have to find a way to reinvigorate the Congress into its appropriate role as the first among equals."

BV: In your book *Broken News* from 2022, you discuss the media's role in polarization. Has the media landscape improved or worsened since then? And do you think the media has a responsibility to shape civic engagement or simply reflect it?

CS: "Journalism is a vocation; it's not a profession. This is supposed to be a calling. It's like being a schoolteacher or a firefighter or something else where you say, 'I want to do this because it's important to me and I care about it.' We enjoy these extraordinary privileges in the United States. We enjoy

these freedoms, and we don't just enjoy the freedom of expression, but we also get to do it in a prosperous and safe country where very seldom is a journalist injured for doing her or his work. We should take seriously our obligations under that.

"I would just say there are a lot of ways to make a buck in the news business. If the way that you're making a buck is bad for the country and divisive and ratchets up fear and anger, you are failing the test. I am not permitted by my conscience to make a living in a way that is bad for the republic that has

given me these extraordinary privileges. Left or right opinion journalists, straight news, whatever, need to take seriously that American journalism requires Americanism."

BV: You've written about civility and discourse. What should respectful disagreement look like in today's climate? Unfortunately, we've not been seeing that, especially with the recent assassination of Charlie Kirk.

CS: "One of the most dangerous and pernicious lies that is told in our politics is that absolute victory is possible. The demonization of the people with whom we disagree creates fear. And if the people with whom you disagree are not just wrong, but they are evil, if that is true, then we have to vanquish them. But you and I know the truth, which is that in a republic, you lose an election by a pretty decent margin or you win an election by a pretty decent margin – and (still) 45% or 47% of the country voted against you.

"The eliminationist rhetoric and the idea of total defeat or total victory – as opposed to what the truth is, which is nobody's going to get everything that they want, and the people with whom they disagree are going to be there the day after the election – that is very dangerous. It creates a climate in which unwell people will be inclined to do wicked things because the stakes are too high. So, I guess I would just say as a rule, it's time to lower the stakes. It's time for people in the press, people in politics to be honest about the fact that the next election is not the most important election (in our lifetime), it's just another election. It's just one more election on the long strip of the uninterrupted transfer of power and self-governance in the United States of America."

BV: It's early, but let's turn our attention to the midterms. If you had to predict one political surprise for 2026, what would it be?

CS: "(First) it's probably 80-20 likelihood that the Democrats will take the House, and it's probably 20-80 likelihood that they'll take the Senate. That's just the midterm and how it is. The Republicans would have to screw up an awful lot to lose the Senate and the Democrats would have to screw up an awful lot to lose the House.

"(But) there will always be one or two Senate races that surprise, right? And that's the fun thing right now, trying to figure out where (they are). Who's got the race and where is that weird thing going to kick up. That's what I will be having a lot of fun doing in the coming weeks (and months)."