

## Cokie Roberts at NCE: Pediatricians can be effective advocates despite D.C. partisanship

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In the midst of one of the most partisan eras of U.S. history, pediatricians still can accomplish a great deal politically through their advocacy.

With those heartening words, journalist and political commentator Cokie Roberts delivered the keynote address “Insider’s Guide to Washington, D.C.: Advocating for Children in Our Nation’s Capital” at the opening plenary session.

“People ask me *all* the time, is this the most partisan time ever in our history?” said Roberts, political commentator for ABC News and political analyst for NPR. “The answer to that question is no. They aren’t shooting each other. Aaron Burr was the sitting vice president of United States (1804) — Burr-Hamilton is the most famous of the duels, but they used to duel all the time.”



Journalist Cokie Roberts delivered the keynote address “Insider’s Guide to Washington, D.C.: Advocating for Children in Our Nation’s Capital.”

It is, however, one of the most polarized times we have seen in our history in a long time, said Roberts, author of several women’s history books, including *Capital Dames: The Civil War and the Women of Washington, 1848-1868*.

Roberts, the daughter of late U.S. Reps. (Thomas) Hale Boggs and Lindy Boggs, attributed much of the current estrangement between parties to the media, campaign money from outside groups and the drawing of district lines.

She also mentioned the change in generations from when the post-World War II congressmen were all veterans “who had a strong sense of who the enemy was. It wasn’t the guy across the aisle. It was the dictator across the sea.”

Additionally, her family and others in Washington, D.C., grew up with children of members of opposite parties. “It was hard for our fathers to demonize each other when we were playing Clue in each other’s basements,” she said.

A lack of politicians in the middle ground also is a major concern, Roberts said. She referenced a *National Journal* ranking of the liberal and conservative members of Congress. Since 1982, nearly all members had moved toward one extreme or the other, with only one House of Representatives member remaining in the middle and none in the Senate.

“There was not one person (in the Senate) in that middle ground who could get things done and put together compromises that are required to make legislation happen,” Roberts said. “It is a really difficult situation we are in and one that is likely to continue because society is also quite polarized.”

However, she is not without hope of political progress through advocacy — even in the short run. And she has seen firsthand the value of advocating for children.

“People are voting in these primaries on a punish and reward system. So can you, with your issues and the things you care about, particularly since you are so incredibly well-respected. Who doesn’t respect their pediatrician? You are so well-respected, you get phone calls all day and all night!” she said.

Roberts said people erroneously think the only way they can gain access to their congressman to move their issues forward is to make large campaign donations. She highlighted Mothers Against Drunk Driving as a group that worked to pass national legislation without large sums of money.

“I would recommend that in this time we are living in right now, you pick one or two issues and go after them,” she said. “You can make an enormous difference.”

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