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## Cokie Roberts at Calvin College January Series: How computers are polarizing U.S. politics

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GRAND RAPIDS, MI – Cokie Roberts often gets asked whether Congress has become more partisan than ever. Her short answer: No.

“They’re not shooting each other,” said Roberts, the award-winning political commentator for ABC News and National Public Radio. “They really did used to shoot each other.”

Still, the current political environment in Washington, D.C. has become polarized in part because technology has fine-tuned the political art of gerrymandering, Roberts said during a Wednesday, Jan. 16, speech as part of Calvin College’s January Series. Though drawing oddly-shaped congressional districts to suit a particular party’s electoral prospects long has been part of the American political experience, it’s now more precise than ever, she said.

“The members of Congress now have unbelievably safe seats,” Roberts said to a capacity crowd at Calvin’s Covenant Fine Arts Center and viewers at 38 remote sites. “We’ve always had gerrymandering, but the difference now is computers. You can draw a district where you find every one-eyed veteran who votes the way you do and make sure they get into your district.”

Roberts and her husband, Steve Roberts, recently wrote a column on the subject. They noted a data from statistician Nate Silver suggesting that the number of “swing” districts, those considered to be up for grabs, has declined from 103 to 35 since 1992. Meanwhile, the number of “landslide” districts where one party has an overwhelming political base, has doubled from 123 to 242.

“The person who represents that (landslide) district has absolutely no interest in doing anything but protecting his or her partisan base,” Roberts said. “The only trouble you can get into is not being pure enough ideologically” so that you get challenged in a party primary election.

“All you worry about is being challenged from the right as a Republican and from the left as a Democrat. That makes coming together (on legislation) almost impossible.”

Roberts said talk radio, blogs, cable television and other media that feed on polarizing politics “certainly contributes to it.” Voters themselves have become more partisan, she said.

“Ninety percent of Democrats approve of the job (President Obama) is doing. Seventeen percent of Republicans approve,” Roberts said. “That’s a 73-point gap between the way Democrats see him and the way Republicans see him. It is an incredibly polarized society politically.”

The solution? Roberts suggested that “women are, in fact, part of the answer” because “many more of them than the men do come across party lines” in Congress. More broadly, she laid the responsibility on voters.

“In the end, the only way we really fix this is voters,” Roberts said. “We have to fix it. We are all in this together and we have to tell our elected representatives that we will reward those who are civil and come together and make things happen for the country and we will punish those who don’t.

“I do have great faith. I have a tremendous amount of faith in the American people and the voters making it right in the long run. But get to it folks because we really need it.”