



OUR DIVIDED SOCIETY

Part I: Reasons for Our Current Crisis

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In September 1950, the American Political Science Association (APSA) released a special report describing a major danger that they saw in the American political climate of the day: the political parties were not different enough. The authors of the report lamented that voters did not have clear choices between the two parties, that there was not enough party loyalty and national party leadership, and that the country might become too disengaged from American democracy if this was not fixed. The writers feared that this disengagement would lead to extremist views among American citizens.¹

It is hard to imagine anyone fretting over a lack of difference between the major parties today. As Ezra Klein remarked in his recent book on American polarization, *Why We're Polarized*, the APSA report in today's context sounds like a parody. But at the time, APSA's description of the two major U.S. parties was a valid one. The Democratic Party at the time was not thought to be liberal, nor was the Republican Party considered conservative. Politicians such as Thomas Dewey, Richard Nixon, and John F.

Kennedy expressed how terrible it would be if the parties had clear "liberal" or "conservative" platforms; and major candidates often had a mix of liberal and conservative views. Consider, for example, that President Nixon started the Environmental Protection Agency and was one of the most pro-Native American presidents of the 20th century, that President Ronald Reagan supported amnesty for undocumented immigrants, and that it was President Bill Clinton who declared "the era of big government is over."²

What happened?

Historical Reasons for the Divide

There is a story that, on the night President Lyndon B. Johnson signed the Civil Rights Act in 1964, he told an aide, "I think we just delivered the South to the Republican Party for a long time to come." For decades, the South had largely aligned itself with the Democratic Party. But when Johnson chose to align himself with northern Democrats who were calling for action on civil rights, white southern Democrats saw his action

as betrayal. A greater proportion of Republicans in the Senate voted for the bill than Democrats did; but, crucially, Sen. Barry Goldwater—the Republican nominee for President in 1964—did not. This effectively drew a significant ideological line between the Democratic and Republican nominees. Slowly but surely, Johnson’s prediction proved to be correct: white southerners migrated to the Republican Party as the Democratic Party began to be known as the pro-civil rights party.³

Another major political alignment that helped solidify our current polarized state was the emergence of the Christian Coalition. From the late ‘80s onward, conservative Evangelicals increasingly began to align themselves with the Republican Party—helping the Republican Party to become the party opposed to abortion rights and in favor of what some members of this movement were calling “family values.” This also gave the impression of the Republican Party as being aligned with religious people, leading secular voters to align themselves more with the Democratic Party.

The critical result of these movements was not only that the parties developed distinct platforms. The parties also began to be sorted into groups of identities.

Identity Sorting

We know from polling that Democrats today are more likely to be non-white, secular, and urban, while Republicans are more likely to be white, Evangelical, and rural or suburban. These identities deal with more than just political positions—they deal with socialization and personal comfort. The parties can now claim to be “the place” for certain identities. To put it another way, as political scientist Lilliana Mason has written,

Due to the clearer distinction between the parties, Americans had far more simple cues to follow. These cues helped citizens to understand that a highly religious Christian who is also wealthy and white will feel most at home among Republicans. Similarly, a secular, less-wealthy, Black person will feel more comfortable surrounding herself with Democrats. The parties, by providing increasingly clear cues, have helped Americans to know which party is their own.⁴

This trend of the two parties becoming teams of sorted identities—what Mason calls “mega-identities”—is one of the main catalysts for our deep divisions and polarization. When a person feels their party is being attacked, they may very well sense their identity is being attacked—a sense that produces fear, panic, and anger. Think, for example, the intense hatred and even violence

that can occur from sports rivalries. When my team loses or is insulted, I may feel like I’ve lost or been insulted somehow as well.

Now imagine the same scenario applied to politics—a realm with much higher stakes than sports. If my political party gets attacked, I may feel like my very way of life is being attacked. And that will only lead me to seek more security identifying ever more closely with my political “team,” even if that entails defending my team at the expense of rational thought. Researchers such as Dan Kahn have called this phenomenon “identity-protective cognition.”⁵ We end up reasoning and rationalizing with our “teams” because it helps us feel safe, even if that means we have to believe something that is demonstrably false. It hurts too much to open myself to believing something different, so I dig my feet into the ground even more.

Rational arguments produced from the other side, then, do not help me to change—especially when those arguments feel combative.

Conclusion

Our country is certainly in a different place than 1950 when political scientists declared that the parties were too similar and did not have enough party loyalty. Today, many Americans feel the opposing party is not simply an opponent, but an enemy who threatens their way of life and who they are. A 2017 survey done by Mason showed that 40% of Americans believe the opposing party is *evil*.⁶

In the next issue of *JustSouth Quarterly*, I will present some possible solutions to our current crisis.

ENDNOTES

- 1 American Political Science Association. (September 1950). “*Toward a more responsible two-party system: A report of the Committee on Political Parties.*” *American Political Science Review*, Vol 44, No. 3, Part 2, Supplement.
- 2 Klein, E. (2020). *Why we’re polarized*. Avid Reader Press; Landry, A. (2016, September 13); “Richard M. Nixon: ‘Self-determination without termination.’” *Indian Country Today*. Available online: <https://indiancountrytoday.com/archive/richard-m-nixon-self-determination-without-termination-K-BgPAYGZ0GAKiY3OyS8-A>.
- 3 Klein, *Ibid*.
- 4 Mason, L. (2018). *Uncivil agreement: How politics became our identity*. University of Chicago Press.
- 5 Kahn, D. (2018, December 3). “*Why smart people are vulnerable to putting tribe before truth.*” *Scientific American*. Available online: <https://blogs.scientificamerican.com/observations/why-smart-people-are-vulnerable-to-putting-tribe-before-truth/>.
- 6 Kalmoe, N. and Mason, P. (2019). “*Lethal mass partisanship: Prevalence, correlates, & electoral contingencies.*” Prepared for presentation at the January 2019 NCAPSA American Politics Meeting. Available online: https://www.dannyhayes.org/uploads/6/9/8/5/69858539/kalmoe___mason_ncapsa_2019_-_lethal_partisanship_-_final_lmedit.pdf.