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## **Red and Blue Nation? Causes, Consequences, and Correction of America's Polarized Politics**

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### **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

**I**n light of the extreme divisiveness of recent presidential elections, the Brookings Institution in collaboration with the Hoover Institution convened a conference of leading political experts to discuss polarization and the state of American politics. In the first of two such conferences, held on March 13 and 14 of this year, participants considered the extent and root causes of today's polarization. A conference scheduled for January 2007 will take up the consequences of polarization for American politics as well as what might be done to address the problem. A comprehensive two volume study, the first of its kind, will be published on the subject by the Brookings Press.



The project was conceived and organized by Pietro S. Nivola, director of Brookings' Governance Studies, and David W. Brady, deputy director and senior fellow at the Hoover Institution, with the generous support of the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation and the Rockefeller Brothers Fund.

### **Why Study Polarization?**

Not much can be said, much less done, about the red-blue divide in the United States unless we have a basic understanding of the true nature and extent of today's polarization. And, truth be told, for all of our talk about polarization in American life, and for all of our talk about red America versus blue America, the phenomenon is in fact very poorly understood. Political scientists have studied the matter in some detail, to be

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sure, but disagreements are rife over the extent of polarization and what its consequences are.

The March 13-14 conference held at the Brookings Institution was meant to address this gap in our knowledge, and to further our understanding of polarization and, more broadly, of what’s at stake in this debate. The conference’s first three sessions sought to delineate the problem of polarization: what we mean by the term, how much polarization exists in American political life today, and from a historical perspective, how unique our current situation is, if at all. The next three sessions took up what are considered by many to be the major sources of political polarization: first, the media in all of its variety and forms; second, religion and, in particular, the rise of the Religious Right; and finally, certain supposed structural “malfunctions,” as it were, gerrymandering being one of the most often cited of these. If the issues in the great polarization debate can seem at times technical, the consequences for our common life are of the utmost importance.

## Are We Polarized Yet?

The scholarly debate over polarization in contemporary American life was first sparked by Morris Fiorina’s 2005 book *Culture War? The Myth of a Polarized America*. In the book, Morris Fiorina, senior fellow at Hoover and political science professor at Stanford University, and his associates questioned whether the conventional wisdom of a polarized America was true to reality. And similarly in his contribution to this conference, Fiorina and his co-presenter Matthew Levendusky, from Stanford University, argued that the question is not really “how the *public* divides,” but “how *political* *partisans* divide.” For it is the burden of Fiorina and Levendusky’s argument that while political elites are certainly polarized, the public in contrast is most certainly not.

Fiorina and Levendusky draw a sharp distinction between polarization and what they call *sorting*. Sorting describes the process by which a tighter fit is brought about between political ideology and party affiliation. As recently as the 1970s, liberals and conservatives could find a comfortable home in both the Republican and Democratic parties. Indeed, as University at Buffalo, SUNY professor James Campbell was to remark at the conference, it was once commonplace for intellectuals to lament the lack of any clear principles animating the two parties and to complain of their similarity and lack of responsibility. (Tweedledee and Tweedledum, it was said.) But, nowadays, the Republican Party is most certainly the *conservative* party, just as the Democratic Party is the *liberal* party. Yet such “sorting” has not led, in Fiorina and Levendusky’s view, to polarization in the electorate at large. Instead, polarization is, mainly speaking, an elite phenomenon, one that has led to a worrisome “disconnect” between ordinary voters and those who claim to represent them.

The distinction between sorting and polarization can be murky, but others at the conference tended to agree that the public is not as polarized as party elites. As pointed out by several participants, including Gregg Easterbrook, Jonathan Rauch, Alan Wolfe,

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and E.J. Dionne, if there is more *partisan* polarization nowadays, the public by contrast seems to share more common ground than ever before. Opinion surveys demonstrate that on nearly every major issue—from race and gender to sex and class, from prayer-in-the-schools to homosexuality to the environment to abortion—the American people occupy a midpoint between the partisan extremes. We are at once more tolerant of our differences and more likely to share common assumptions. As Boston College professor Alan Wolfe so memorably put it in his 1998 book by that name, “We’re one nation, after all.”

There was, however, not complete agreement on this point. Brookings senior fellow William Galston noted that there’s some evidence that polarization at the elite level has a “socialization effect” on the average voter, and thus it may only be a matter of time before the divide between elites and ordinary voters is closed. And as pointed out by Nivola, the public is as divided as party activists on such hot-button issues as abortion and the Iraq War. Similarly, political scientists Alan Abramowitz, professor at Emory University, and Gary Jacobson, professor at University of California, San Diego, contended that Fiorina has in his examination of the available data underestimated the extent and depth of political polarization. As Jacobson pointed out, polarization at the political level is rooted in certain deeper socio-cultural realities, most importantly religion.

Indeed, some at the conference maintained that Fiorina and Levendusky’s distinction between sorting, on the one hand, and polarization, on the other, is a distinction without a difference. Considered from a certain vantage point, sorting may well be seen as part and parcel of the polarization process, if not even the very thing itself. The unresolved question is whether sorting and polarization are truly distinct political phenomena or whether sorting is at the very least a prelude to polarization.

Fiorina and Levendusky’s hypothesis is seemingly susceptible to a very real-world test—call it for lack of a better label the “Karl Rove Test.” Fiorina was asked at the conference why someone like Karl Rove would seek to activate the base of the Republican Party, pursuing in effect a campaign strategy premised on the assumption of mass polarization, if such polarization did not really exist. Surely, Karl Rove is nobody’s fool, and understands how best to get his man elected.

Yet, according to Fiorina, Rove’s strategy was not nearly as effective as most people tend to assume, especially in light of the margin of Bush’s victory. Had Rove and Bush pursued a more centrist strategy, Fiorina suggested, Bush could have won with 55 percent of the vote, instead of 51 percent. But, as Thomas Edsall of the *Washington Post* would later counter, one of modern conservatism’s main goals has been to effect a transformation in our politics, and thus, for Rove and Bush, a principled 51 percent majority would be preferable to a more substantial but also more inchoate 55 percent majority. It’s the difference, one might say, between a Republican *revolution* and Ronald Reagan’s large but politically inconsequential victory in 1984 under the slogan of “It’s Morning in America.”

So we might say that this is the \$64,000 question, a question on which much else

hinges: To what extent does elite polarization “trickle down,” as it were, transforming the views and opinions of ordinary Americans? And, on a related point, what difference does it make for our politics if polarization is predominantly driven from the top down, rather than the bottom up? Would this fact make the phenomenon any less permanent or significant?

## Polarized Compared to What?

If these conceptual problems are not complicated enough, there are a host of knotty empirical questions as well, one of the most basic being whether today’s situation is at all unique. Or as Galston put it in his remarks, “Baselines matter, a lot.” That is to say, the extent of today’s polarization looks one way if the point of comparison is 1859, on the brink of America’s Civil War, or the 1950s, a decade frequently characterized as “the end of ideology.” Perhaps we are polarized to some extent today, but the crucial question is compared to what.

Baselines matter: this was the central thesis of project co-director David W. Brady and Wellesley professor Hahrie C. Han. In their presentation, they analyzed three periods of intense political polarization in the United States: the 19<sup>th</sup> century battle between slaveocrats and abolitionists; the 1890s struggle between agrarian populists and an emerging business-manufacturing class; and the divide in the 1930s over FDR’s New Deal, a divide that pitted labor against management. And what they found was that polarization is the historical norm, or if that’s an overstatement, it is unquestionably an enduring characteristic of our political life.

Most of us view the conflicted and tumultuous politics of the present against the backdrop of the post-World War II period, which at least in our idealization of it appeared to be an era of broad liberal consensus. But whatever the truth of this characterization, and there are reasons to question it, this period was an anomaly. Politics in a democracy, almost by definition, will include some measure of polarization, and parties are the institutions by which political differences are organized. Thus we should hardly be surprised by the existence of political division. The only question is how much is too much?

From Brady and Han’s deep historical analysis one learns two things. The first is that, by historical standards, today’s polarization is minimal. We’re not nearly as politically polarized as we were in these three earlier periods. Indeed, if there’s any anomaly in our present situation, it’s the coexistence of ideological polarization and party parity, and the fact that Congressional elections have yet to become nationalized or fully polarized. These unique factors may cause considerable friction in the system, but they also act as a brake on any further polarization. The second thing history can teach us is that America’s political system is highly resilient. Whatever one thinks of polarization, whether one thinks polarization is a bad or good thing, and whether one believes its reach is deep or superficial, one can be confident, in the view of Brady and Han, that the sky is not falling.

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## The Medium Is the Message?

The upsurge in polarization over the last few decades—certainly at the elite level and perhaps in some measure at the level of ordinary voters as well—has led many to search for “root causes,” the media in particular being frequently blamed or implicated in some way. It's thus important to consider the role of the media in political polarization, a matter taken up at the conference by a working journalist, Gregg Easterbrook, and two students of the medium, Diana Mutz and Tom Rosenstiel.

Brookings visiting fellow Easterbrook led off the discussion by explaining, as Brady and Han did earlier, that baselines matter. A generation ago, as he pointed out, newspapers were little more than party organs or party mouthpieces, and in that sense were far more polarizing than they are today. But with the emergence of a more professional journalist class, devoted to the ideals of objectivity and neutrality, this is no longer the case. Few media outlets nowadays self-identify as Republican or Democrat; rather, whatever their ideological slant, they stand apart from the political parties, and are even bitterly critical of them.

But if we don't have a politically polarizing media, we do have, according to Easterbrook, an increasingly *opinionated* media. The reason for this, according to Easterbrook, is to be found in the information technology revolution. We are living in the midst of an explosion of new media outlets and new media forms, such as the advent of cable television, the emergence of “Talk Radio,” and most importantly the creation of the Internet and the “Blogosphere.” Now, the media, almost by definition, is the way by which opinion is amplified and communicated to a broader audience, and thus today we have more opportunities than ever to broadcast and telecast our opinions, sharing them with a mass audience. This is what is new in our situation, according to Easterbrook. It is not so much that the media is more polarizing today than in previous periods but that, because of our new communications technologies, we are more efficient at telecasting and broadcasting our opinions.

It's not even all that clear that the media is itself a causal agent in our party divisions. Reporting on the latest social-psychology research, Diana Mutz, professor of political science and communication at the University of Pennsylvania, pointed out that the media is only delivering what we're genetically hard-wired to desire: conflict and partisanship. For as evolutionary-psychology research indicates, human beings have a preference for conflict over agreement. That is, people prefer to watch uncivil, rather than civil, discourse; and in this sense, the media market is only responding to consumer demand. One might say that polarization stands at the crossroads of the Free Market and the Free Press.

However that may be, Tom Rosenstiel, director of the Project for Excellence in Journalism, offered a somewhat different view of contemporary media and its role in political polarization. And like Easterbrook, Rosenstiel emphasized the role of the new communications technologies. As the media have become more diverse and the sources of information have mushroomed, power has gradually shifted from editors and



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journalists, who once told you what they thought you needed to know (“all the news that’s fit to print”), to the consumer, who now must act as his own editor. The news consumer must make sense of the world on his own. But, as Rosenstiel explained, if we have more “information” today, we suffer for this very reason from a dearth of “knowledge.” And thus we have entered what Rosenstiel calls the era of “sense-making journalism.”

In the eighties and nineties, television was dominated by the “Crossfire” format, in which a liberal and conservative would engage in pitched battle. Think Michael Kinsley slugging it out with Patrick Buchanan. Such shows were not liberal or conservative per se, but rather offered the kind of uncivil, polarizing discourse that we’ve all become only too familiar with, and that Diana Mutz described as all but inevitable. But in Rosenstiel’s view, enormous changes are underway. Today’s most popular news programming does not feature the clash of ideologies but instead seeks, according to Rosenstiel, “to help the viewer make sense of the world.” Lost in a flux of facts, viewers have gone searching for someone to put it all in order, such as is to be found for example on “The O’Reilly Factor.” So what the media offers today is not so much partisan conflict as a certain *weltanschauung*, whether liberal or conservative.

What seems pretty clear from these diverse analyses is that our media culture is less a cause of political polarization than a symptom of new technological developments in their interaction with the free market, the free press, and our own desires and needs. What’s less clear is what to make of these new developments. In Easterbrook’s judgment the new media choices are to be welcomed, while Galston objected that our politics are not necessarily improved by the mere increase of consumer choice. Do we need a new Fairness Doctrine? Do we need to reconsider our commitment to an absolutist interpretation of the First Amendment? Do we need to cultivate a new sense of journalistic responsibility and professionalism? All these questions, and many others, will need our attention in the future.

## In God We Trust?

Another culprit frequently blamed for political polarization is the role of religion in modern American life and, in particular, the rise of the Religious Right. To examine this question the conference heard from *Washington Post* columnist and Brookings senior fellow E.J. Dionne. It was his somewhat counterintuitive suggestion that while religion does play a role in political polarization, it is hardly the only or even the most important factor. In Dionne’s view, such factors as region, race, and class also matter a great deal.

At the 1988 Republican Convention Patrick Buchanan declared to great fanfare that America was being torn asunder by a cultural or religious war. It is a view held by many on the Right as well as the Left, but as Dionne sought to show the story is much more complicated than that. Religion, he agreed, matters, but history does not support the contention that it is a First Mover. White Southern Democrats began to move into the

Republican Party as early as the 1960s, long before the rise of the Religious Right. What motivated them was not religion or abortion or cultural issues but the issue of race. “Even were conservatives not religious,” Dionne declared, “they would still be voting Republican.”

Dionne also took a somewhat contrarian view of recent electoral data, holding that the “religion effect” is limited. What enabled Bush to defeat Kerry in 2004 was not religious voters but his ability to win just enough of the nonreligious (or nontraditionalist) majority to vote for him. It is Dionne’s view that political polarization is partly a religious phenomenon, to be sure, but also a regional, class, and racial phenomenon as well.

In their responses, Andrew Kohut and Alan Wolfe tended to agree with Dionne, and this brought the conference back to issues first raised by Fiorina. Kohut, Director of the Pew Research Center for The People & The Press, joined Fiorina and others in arguing that the culture wars are only an elite phenomenon, rather than something that animates the general public. And Wolfe cautioned the conference participants that just as political scientists underestimated the importance of religion thirty years ago, they are today on the verge of overestimating its importance.

Wolfe also questioned the appropriateness of the traditionalist-modernist paradigm, so popular among news commentators. While it is true that the old theological divide, which separated Catholics from Protestants, and both from Jews, has been replaced by divisions over moral and cultural matters, the true significance of this is too often overlooked. To begin with, if we are indeed divided along a moral rather than a theological axis, this signifies the *declining* influence of theology, not an increase in its importance. And, in the next place, the term “traditionalist” hardly fits today’s Religious Right anyway. Religious conservatives are for the most part “born again” evangelicals, and such Christians are anything but “traditionalist.” To be an evangelical is rather to turn one’s back on one’s tradition (to be born again). In Wolfe’s view, traditionalists and modernists are not “archetypes”; rather, we are all in our lifestyles and opinions a mix of both.

This led to a heated debate among the participants over the role of religion in today’s politics, with many contending that Dionne, Wolfe, and Kohut were underestimating its significance. And Thomas Edsall raised a perhaps even broader point—namely, that we should not overlook the contribution of Secularism to political polarization. As he pointed out, in our focus on the Religious Right, we tend to overlook the fact that Secularists control the base of the Democratic Party, both in terms of numbers and its agenda, and moreover that they tend to dominate their party far more than the Religious Right dominates the Republican Party. So the real question, in Edsall’s view, is why moderate Democrats have been so much less successful at limiting the influence of their “true believers” than Republicans have been at limiting theirs. Edsall thus reminded the conference that whatever the role of the culture wars and religion in political polarization, there are in fact two sides in this struggle, each equally distant from the moderate middle.

## System Malfunction?

In the final session of the conference Brookings senior fellow Thomas Mann considered what role gerrymandering plays in our political divisions. A variety of institutional structures and practices are in fact widely assumed to be at the root of today's political polarization—from the role of campaign finance, to the Electoral College, to primaries, to the internal rules of the U.S. Congress—but, as Mann pointed out, of all these it is gerrymandering that tends to receive the greatest blame.

But this “conventional” view is not supported by the evidence. Consider first some basic facts: Partisan polarization is nowadays as much a problem in Senate races, where there can be no gerrymandering since the boundaries of states are fixed, as in House races; high levels of polarization have prevailed in previous eras without any systemic gerrymandering; and, finally, there is scant empirical evidence that less electoral competitiveness produces partisan polarization. The numbers just don't bear this out. Most conference members found Mann's case against blaming gerrymandering convincing, and most agreed that as a practical matter it would be next to impossible to put a stop to gerrymandering.

Yet the gerrymandering question is important for broader reasons. It is a case study in whether our polarized politics are in some way attributable to institutional practices, and thus amenable to institutional reforms. As hard as it may be to reform district line-drawing, or how the U.S. President gets elected, or the role of money in politics, it would be even harder to get at such nonstructural, noninstitutional variables as religious belief, the new media technologies, and the increasing role of intellectuals and political elites. So the fact that gerrymandering is not the main culprit only opens the door to deeper and more troubling problems, problems perhaps less susceptible to reform.

## So What?

Polarization presents political scientists with a hard-to-piece-together intellectual puzzle. It's one of political science's leading “who done it” mysteries. However, in the final analysis, we're concerned about political polarization not merely as political scientists but as *citizens*. Indeed, the animating purpose behind the Brookings-Hoover polarization project is a broader concern for the health of our politics.

Pietro Nivola, co-director of the project, began and concluded the conference by making this important point. The truth is that we care about the micro questions of polarization in order to get at some of the big, macro questions in our political life. For example, conventional wisdom holds that polarization has led to gridlock and political dysfunction. This would be alarming, if true. But, as Nivola pointed out, this assumption flies in the face of recent legislative accomplishments. Our “age of polarization,” if one can call it that, has produced such major legislative accomplishments as the passage of



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NAFTA; welfare reform; tax and campaign finance reform; the Sarbanes-Oxley bill; the No Child Left Behind education initiative; the largest entitlement expansion in a generation with the prescription drug benefit; not to mention the Patriot Act, the reorganization of U.S. intelligence agencies, and the creation of the Department of Homeland Security. Several of these accomplishments were, moreover, bipartisan efforts.

But this is not to encourage complacency or to say that polarization is without serious political consequences for the nation. Polarization has, as Nivola pointed out, stymied any honest grappling with our teetering entitlement programs—perhaps the most serious domestic issue facing America today. In addition, it has also poisoned the judicial nomination selection and confirmation process, and even more worrisome, it has seriously impeded the conduct of U.S. foreign policy. Not even the political divide over the Vietnam War matches the political vitriol and policy differences over the Iraq War.

If we are polarized over issues that truly matter, and if polarization leads to genuine reflection as well as an honest reckoning and real policy solutions, then it could truly be said that polarization has virtues. But, as Nivola observed, the great danger in today's polarization is that it often concerns not the substantial but the trivial, that it is not always over the central concerns of the nation but distracting sectarian issues, and that it is making national unity difficult in a time of great international peril: All of which is to fiddle while Rome burns.