

OFF TO THE RACES

The Divided States of America

Partisanship and social sorting are deciding elections, clogging government, and turning friends into foes.



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The bitter partisanship that has enveloped Capitol Hill, the White House, Washington, and the country is deeply troubling, and it's getting worse. Today, collegiality and cooperation between the parties is more the exception than the rule. An example of the exception was the unveiling last week of the portrait of former House Energy and Commerce Committee Chairman Fred Upton of Michigan, who stepped down from that position at the end of the last Congress when the GOP rule on term limits for chairmanships kicked in. Upton was honored not only by party colleagues like Speaker Paul Ryan and Majority Leader Kevin McCarthy, but also by Minority Leader Nancy Pelosi and Minority Whip Steny Hoyer from the Democratic side.

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This event was held in the John Dingell Room of the Rayburn House Office Building, named for the Democratic lion of the House (a member for over 59 years), John Dingell, a fellow Michigander. Upton chaired hundreds of hours in that hearing room, Dingell thousands. Among Upton's many contributions to public policy was his relentless push with Democratic Rep. Diana DeGette and Republican Sen. Lamar Alexander to pass in the last Congress the 21st Century Cures Act, to provide nearly \$5 billion in new funding for the National Institutes of Health.

But partisanship has become the rule, and it is not only a problem in Washington. As a country, we are becoming more partisan, with our last election the most parliamentary in our history. Every single Senate race was won by the same party as the presidential race in that state, and 400 out of 435 House districts voted the same way for House and president. We are not only becoming more partisan, we are self-sorting, both in terms of geography and social groupings. The pioneering Democratic campaign consultant Matt Reese constantly cited the old adage, "Birds of a feather flock together." In a groundbreaking book published in 2008, *The Big Sort: Why the Clustering of Like-Minded America Is Tearing Us Apart*, an Austin, Texas journalist named Bill Bishop wrote about how Americans are increasingly gravitating toward like-minded people and how that's affecting us.

A survey last year by the Pew Research Center found that 77 percent of both Republicans and Democrats have spouses of the same party. Ninety-one percent of Republicans had an unfavorable opinion of the Democratic Party, up 17 points from 1994; and 86 percent of Democrats had an unfavorable view of the Republican Party, up 22 points from 1994. Among self-described Republicans, 52 percent said Democrats were more "close-minded" than other Americans, 47 percent said Democrats were more "immoral," 46 percent said they were more "lazy," 45 percent said they more "dishonest," and 32 percent said they were more "unintelligent." Among Democrats, a whopping 70 percent said Republicans were more close-minded, 42 percent said they were more dishonest, 35 percent said they were more unintelligent, and 18 percent said they were more lazy.

Most Democrats and most Republicans see issues and politics in very different ways. In the new April 17-20 NBC News/*Wall Street Journal* poll, when presented with the choice of two points of view, 80 percent of self-described Democrats thought "government should do more to solve problems and help meet the needs of people," while just 16 percent of Democrats thought that "government is doing too many things better left to businesses and individuals." Among self-described Republicans, 69

percent thought government was doing too much, and just 28 percent thought it should do more. Among all adults, 57 percent thought government should do more, up 7 points from the July 2015 NBC/*WSJ* poll; and 39 percent agreed the government is doing too much, down 7 points from July 2015. The survey was conducted by Fred Yang of the Democratic polling firm of Hart Research and Bill McInturff of GOP firm Public Opinion Strategies.

One of the smartest state legislators around, Virginia state Sen. Dave Marsden, has a theory centered on the Pledge of Allegiance: “I pledge allegiance to the flag of the United States of America, and to the Republic, for which it stands, one Nation, under God, indivisible, with liberty and justice, for all.” Marsden, who represents part of Fairfax County in Northern Virginia, argues that while most Americans agree with both liberty and justice, Republicans tend to put the emphasis on liberty, Democrats on justice. Pushing Marsden’s point a little further than he might want, one could argue that Democrats don’t trust Republicans not to infringe on justice, while Republicans don’t trust Democrats not to constrain liberty.

Basically, Democrats and Republicans tend not only to have a very different view of the role of government, but also a different value structure: Democrats are obsessed with justice, and Republicans are equally obsessed with liberty.




Politicians and citizens would do well to try to understand the views and values of people who don’t share their party affiliation. Each side would find the other less threatening, and the hyper-partisanship gripping the country would ease, helping the government function more effectively and letting people from opposite sides of town be friends again.

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