

The Divided Perception: How Media Amplifies America's Political Polarization

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An ever-growing cavern that threatens to swallow us all whole: No it's not the beginning of a new sci-fi movie. It's how most people see American politics today. Ask anyone over the age of fifty, and they'll most likely tell you that the "political divide" has been widening in their lifetime at an exponential rate. With debates from healthcare to taxes to how the COVID-19 pandemic was handled, there seems to be no room left for a "moderate" American. Instead, those with the loudest voices, often with the most divisive opinions, dominate American society.

But what if the political divide isn't as big as we have been led to believe? What if the problem isn't just the growing difference in political opinions but the way those opinions are portrayed to us? In the 21st century, the world is at our fingertips, and media companies want to make sure you're using their site to see it. Sadly, the stories that get clicked on the most are those that showcase division, conflict, and outrage. So, if a company can continue to get you to click on their story, that's another dollar in their pocket. With all that said, there is a problem with partisan polarization, especially in recent years. But it is also true that many Americans overestimate just how different "the other side" actually is. America is not as politically divided as we seem. Though division exists, 21st-century media plays a big role in exaggerating polarization to garner clicks, views, and turn a profit, effectively distorting reality for the average American.

Historical Foundations: Early Americas Skepticism of Partisan Politics

From the earliest days of the United States, our founding fathers feared political division. They knew that factionalism could spell disaster for our new republic because for a democratic republic to function, first there needs to be a shared goal and then compromise. But if a representative refuses to work with a colleague simply because there is an "R" or a "D" next to

their name, then America is stuck. You can see that the founding fathers knew this by their omission of political parties from the Constitution (National Archives and Records, 1788). John Adams actually expressed this belief quite clearly in a letter to Johnathan Jackson in 1780, stating, “There is nothing I dread so much, as a Division of the Republic into two great Parties, each arranged under its Leader, and concerting Measures in opposition to each other. This, in my humble apprehension, is to be dreaded as the greatest political Evil” (para. 6). While sad that these concerns weren’t heeded by current politicians, the fact that these concerns are as old as the country can give us insight into how to handle the political divide in today’s America.

The Evolution of American Political Parties

While the founding fathers may have been worried about political factions, today the two-party system is entrenched in American governance from the Federalists and Whigs to the Democrats and Republicans we know today. However, it wasn’t until the late 1950s to 1960s that these parties began to sort ideologically in a way that heightened division.

Ezra Klein (2021) argued that over time, political parties have become more ideologically consistent and sorted, with Democrats leaning more liberal and Republicans conservative, rather than having a variety of ideological options in each party. As Klein put it, “The more sorted we’ve become, the more weight political identity carries” (p. 38). Political identity has moved past simply policy preferences; it now encompasses your social identity, your regional culture, and even your moral values.

This ideological sorting has deepened division. Liliana Mason (2015) found in her study that “partisan identity had become a powerful social identity, driving both in-group favoritism and out-group animosity” (p. 128). As a result, people now are more likely to feel negative about a member of the opposing party and positive about a member of their own. Jonathan Haidt

(2012) helps support this theory by exploring how people form “moral communities” around political ideologies. These communities, having developed a tribal mindset, in most cases not only see the opposing party as wrong but as morally dangerous, further discouraging compromise while fueling division even if two parties agree on a topic.

To add some historical context, *Facing History and Ourselves* (2024) showed some studies that illustrate the growing apathy among parties. One study they showed says that 45% of current-day Democrats would be unhappy if their child married a Republican, while in 1960, that number was 4%. Republicans have similar percentages. Ultimately, while political parties have always been a main factor in political division, it wasn’t until the transformation into ideologic tribes that the political divide has intensified, which is important to understanding the social and psychological aspects of the current polarization of American politics.

Partisan Sorting and the Social Consequences of Party Loyalty

As political parties have become more ideologically consistent, the ramifications don’t stop at policy disagreements; they are now extremely social and emotional. Americans are not just disagreeing with each other politically; they are distrusting and even despising each other personally. This concept is often referred to as “affective polarization,” and it reflects the shift in how political identity has fused with social identity. Iyengar and Westwood (2015) found that partisanship can now have a stronger effect on individual behavior than race. In one of their studies, participants were more likely to favor someone with a shared party affiliation than someone of the same racial group. This finding highlights the emotional weight carried by political identity today. It isn’t just about left versus right anymore; it’s about us versus them.

Building on this, Mason (2015) argued that as people increasingly align their personal identities with their political party, partisanship has become a core part of self-understanding. This alignment has fueled out-group animosity, where members of opposing parties are not just political adversaries now but are perceived as threats to one's values and community. As Mason explains, "the more these identities converge, the more powerful the emotional reactions to politics become" (p. 129).

Kleinfeld (2023) adds that emotional polarization has led to real-world consequences, such as rising tolerance for political violence. In the current environment, individuals feel less accountable to shared national goals and more focused on defeating their "enemy." Jonathan Haidt (2012) provides a psychological perspective, suggesting that humans are "groupish" by nature, and once aligned with a political tribe, they often use moral reasoning to protect that tribe rather than to seek truth or understanding. The combination of ideological sorting and emotional loyalty to political parties has intensified social divisions, often making it difficult for Americans to engage across differences. Understanding this emotional and psychological landscape is essential to recognizing the true cost of modern polarization.

Media Influence and the Erosion of Journalistic Integrity

Today, with all the world's knowledge a tap away, media companies compete not just to inform you but to capture your attention, and most times, outrage wins. The structure of modern media rewards emotional engagement over nuanced reporting. Ezra Klein (2021) argues that media organizations have learned that conflict and division drive the most clicks, shares, and views. This business model rewards polarization: the more emotionally invested an audience

becomes, the more likely they are to come back looking for more, further reinforcing the same ideological perspectives. Sadly, this shift has eroded journalistic integrity. Pew Research Center (Forman-Katz & Jurkowitz, 2022) found a notable divide between journalists and the general public regarding “bothsidesism,” the idea that journalism must give equal weight to both sides of a story regardless of factual balance. While 55% of U.S. journalists said every side does not always deserve equal coverage, only 24% of the public agreed. This highlights a major disconnect between media professionals and the audiences they serve, further breeding mistrust and alienation of political parties. Kleinfeld (2023) further explains that polarized media ecosystems fuel the perception of “the other side” as extreme or dangerous. In her analysis of democratic backsliding and political violence, she notes that the current media environment not only distorts reality but also contributes to a rise in anti-democratic behaviors, as partisans increasingly believe the ends justify the means.

Jonathan Haidt (2012) adds a psychological lens, arguing that media plays into moral intuitions by triggering outrage and moral disgust. This tactic, while effective at keeping people engaged, also stunts public discourse by activating tribal instincts instead of critical thinking. Ultimately, the media's role in American polarization cannot be ignored. With a business model dependent on emotional clicks, journalistic norms are under pressure, and the public is left with an information ecosystem that profits from division more than understanding.

Understanding the gap between perception and reality

One of the most overlooked contributors to modern polarization is not just the ideological differences between parties, but the public's misperception of how divided Americans really are. According to Pew Research Center (2019), members of different political parties consistently

overestimate how extreme their opponents are. For instance, 44% of Republicans believe that most Democrats are “unpatriotic,” while only 19% of Democrats say the same about Republicans. On the other hand, 41% of Democrats view most Republicans as “racist,” whereas only 15% of Republicans view most Democrats in this way. These exaggerated perceptions breed unnecessary tension and mistrust between parties, making it seem as though the divide is far wider than it actually is. As Ezra Klein (2021) observes, the more political identities become entrenched, the more emotionally charged and divisive these identities become, amplifying the perceived threat from the opposing side. These false perceptions are further fueled by media, which, as stated previously, thrives on conflict and sensationalism, in turn greatly shaping how people view those who have differing political views. As Rachel Kleinfeld (2023) argues, this distorted perception of the “other side” can lead to harmful consequences, such as the erosion of democratic norms. Jonathan Haidt (2012) suggests that people often view these ideological differences not just as political disagreements but as moral threats, further cementing the division between parties. In reality, many Americans agree on a range of issues, but the exaggerated perception of a deep divide undermines efforts to find common ground. Addressing this gap in perception is essential, as it can help reduce polarization and encourage more constructive dialogue.

Conclusion

The political divide in America is not as deep as it may seem. While there are certainly ideological conflicts, it is the way these divisions are framed and amplified by media that exaggerates the polarization. As media companies profit from heightened emotions and outrage, they have created a feedback loop where the public is fed increasingly polarized narratives. These narratives, in turn, shape perceptions, leading Americans to believe that the divide is more

extreme than it truly is. At the root of this issue is the intersection of media incentives, psychological biases, and the growing social importance of political identity. When people see politics not as a matter of policy but as a moral and social battle, they are less likely to engage in constructive dialogue or consider alternative viewpoints. The result is a society that views compromise not as a solution but as a betrayal, further deepening the divide. But there is hope. By recognizing the role that media and psychological investment play in shaping perceptions, Americans can begin to challenge the narratives they've been given. A better understanding of the true state of political division could help foster a more empathetic and productive political environment. While the road to healing the divide is long, acknowledging that the divide may not be as vast as we've been led to believe is a crucial first step toward narrowing the gap and finding common ground.

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