

Can America ever be united again?

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It's not your imagination. The nation really is politically polarized.

A June 19 report by the Pew Research Center, "Public Highly Critical of State of Political Discourse in the U.S.," found that about half of the people surveyed said that "talking about politics with people they disagree with politically is 'stressful and frustrating,'" to the point where many people prefer to avoid those discussions. A significant majority of those surveyed said political debate has become more negative, less respectful and less based on facts over the past few years.

We spoke to political science experts and to a few politically engaged citizens about this growing divide, how we got here, and how we address the issues that separate us.

The upshot: The schism is real, it's widening, and the road to repairing the social rifts is likely narrow.

Why so polarized?

"Polarization is, in a way, a manifestation of social change," said Dr. Gerald Benjamin, director of the Benjamin Center at SUNY New Paltz, which provides research, policy development and analysis.

In the 1950s and 1960s, ideology wasn't so closely tied to party, Benjamin said. What we have now, Benjamin said, is "a convergence between ideology and party," and national leadership that doesn't encourage coalitions or partnerships across party lines.

By 2050, Benjamin said, no racial or ethnic group will make up a majority of the U.S. population, and there will be no single dominant religion. That's disturbing to many, consciously or not, he said.

Richard Born, a professor of political science at Vassar College in Poughkeepsie, said academic literature identifies 15 to 20 causes of political polarization, but the keys over the past 40 or so years are the regional realignment of parties and ideology; a shift in the motive to seek higher office from status and money to activism; and outside spending by ideologically driven groups, much of it via "dark money" and political action committees.

"If you're running for Congress, you know if you take middle-of-the-road positions, you know you're likely not going to be well-funded," Born said. That pressure from monied interests continues in office, pushing incumbents farther from the middle.

In the past, Benjamin said, "we always thought that polarization was an anomaly," and that the phenomenon would hurt a presidential candidate's chances. The conventional wisdom was that appealing to "the broad middle" was necessary to win the presidency.

President Donald Trump is a product of the long-term polarization trend, not the root cause, Born said.

"He couldn't have been elected had polarization not been proceeding apace," Born said, but he has spent his time in office mobilizing his base so they'll go out and vote. "It's really 100 percent that he's been the most polarizing president in American history."

Day-to-day discord

The dismal state of discourse spills into people's day-to-day lives.

"I do notice that conversations on these topics nowadays become heated very quickly," said Mark Bischof of Goshen, who considers himself a conservative. "In a way that's good, it shows we give a damn about what's going on. It would help to recognize that and what it tells us about each other."

Bischof said he learned fairly recently that three co-workers he has always assumed were moderate or conservative are in fact liberal, and he says that shows how the current climate has raised tensions.

“Previously, our political difference never came up,” he said.

“There’s a thousand people can’t stand Donald Trump, and a thousand people can’t stand these other characters,” said Jim Carney of Mamakating, a former Teamster who also worked as a state trooper in the 1960s, who’s fairly conservative.

“I think a lot of people are uptight about a lot of things,” he said. “It’s gotten to the point these days, you’ve got to watch what you say, because people get very offended.”

For Willa Freiband, a media consultant, past president of the Orange County Democratic Women and a member of the state Democratic Committee, this is a marked change from the past, when people had faith in society’s institutions and government, and felt that everyone was a part of the nation.

“There has been an erosion of trust and respect for each other, which shows up in both large and small ways,” she said. “It seeps through the way we view our society.”

Some people refuse to address the issues, said Kathleen Brophy of Middletown, a liberal-leaning former Democrat who relishes a good debate.

“It seems that a lot of folks prefer to spend their lives in a hive mentality, unable (or) unwilling to stray from the perceived mandated rhetoric of group beliefs,” she said.

According to the Pew report, 85 percent of the people surveyed said political debate has become less respectful over the past few years, and 76 percent say it’s less fact-based. Of those polled, 55 percent said Trump changed the tone and nature of political debate for the worse; 24 percent say for the better.

“While I suppose our president would be the most popular choice as the culprit, I really think he only revealed the schism, and perhaps aggravated it a bit,” Bischof said.

Us vs. them: Twitterdome

Social media's instant communication, with no requirement for facts, is driving divisiveness and destroying the institution of news, Benjamin said.

People largely follow information sources that reinforce their own biases, and many of those sources don't hew to journalistic standards and practices.

"There's nobody checking it, no editor, nobody saying 'did you call the other side,'" Benjamin said. "There's nobody vetting the communication that's defining the conversation."

"Affective polarization," the kind driven by emotions and feelings, turns people toward a dangerous us-versus-them view, Born said.

"More and more, it's just 'the other side is the enemy,'" he said. "It's us versus them, and we're good and they're bad."

Bischof said our tolerance for "human uniqueness" hasn't kept up with communication speeds.

"Our differences have been growing and festering for decades as societal change accelerates," he said, "especially since it appears that more and more of that change seems to involve compelling one group to accept another group's personal demands."

Brophy says disinformation is the driver.

"I believe it's a government/corporate-manufactured schism designed to divert the populace from the fact that the US is the highest income inequality First World country on the planet and a plutocracy, due to the fact if we keep the peasants infighting out there, they won't look over here," she said. While people deal with mass incarceration, corporate destruction of the environment and unions, crumbling infrastructure and skyrocketing health-care and college costs, conservative and liberal corporate media point fingers at the other side, painting opponents as the villain.

"Never have so many been held incommunicado by so few," Brophy said.

The digital age “is drowning us in an ocean of information and misinformation,” Freiband said. “We don’t have time to sift through what’s relevant and what’s not ... With all the noise, people are blocking out each other’s real stories.”

Our neighbors are not the enemy

So how do we breach the divide? By reaching across and listening. We need leadership that wants to find common ground, and we need to try to avoid destroying what we have in common, Benjamin said. If someone meets hostility at every attempt to reach across the aisle, he said, they’ll withdraw deeper into the conviction that their views are justified.

As America becomes more diverse, he said, we must all be more mindful, and try harder to find commonalities.

Born said multiple solutions have been proposed, but he’s not hopeful. He expects Trump to ratchet up the rhetoric through the 2020 election, for GOP candidates to follow suit lest they lose to a challenges from the right, and for Democratic candidates to cater to their party’s left wing.

“I think the signs are that polarization is going to get worse,” Born said. “A wipeout of the Republican party in 2020 is about the only thing I could suggest for how things could become less polarized. The whole idea of American government, and this goes back to the framers, is compromise. People have different views, but you’ve got to have some middle ground.”

Bischof said we need to build on the things we share, the things that bond us.

“We as individuals want to be as free and as safe as safety and freedom can possibly coexist; we want our individual sovereignty to be respected; and we desire to be left in peace. Great societies are built on these tenets and we need to get back to them,” he said. “Change has to start with the individual, partly because a society’s natural tendency is to coalesce into mobs ... Panic and paranoia ensues, communication stalls, and the schism grows.”

“Those who tell us scary stories don’t motivate us to find solutions. They keep us apart,” Freiband said. “We have to push through. My hope is that each person finds their own path toward those lofty goals.”

Brophy said people need to pay attention and get involved; too many people revert to “love it or leave it” instead of acknowledging the country’s problems.

“But the adage of ‘the journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step’ applies here,” she said. “One individual willing to stand and educate can reach another individual, who reaches another individual. Apathy is a solution to nothing.”

No one thinks change will happen quickly.

“It’s gonna take a while. You’ve gotta see what happens in this next election, for one,” Carney said. “You’re just going to have to wait it out.”

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