

POLARIZATION

1 CHAPTER

POLARIZATION IN AMERICAN POLITICS IS NOTHING NEW, BUT CHANGES TO CAMPAIGN FINANCE RULES, PARTISAN GERRYMANDERING, THE RISE OF HYPER-PARTISAN MEDIA AND EVEN AMERICANS' INCREASING TENDENCY TO LIVE IN PLACES WHERE MOST PEOPLE SHARE THEIR VIEWS – DUBBED “THE BIG SORT” – EXACERBATE THE PROBLEM.

Whether virtual, social or geographic, many Americans find themselves in so-called echo chambers, surrounded by people and media who voice similar political beliefs.

“My social circle does not include [conservatives]. I don’t have family members, for the most part, who have those values. And if they do, we just agree to disagree,” says Jill Wildenberg, public policy director for the Interfaith Alliance of Colorado, a coalition of religious progressives in Denver. Her living room is peppered with Hillary Clinton memorabilia, a reminder of the disappointment she still feels about the 2016 election.



▲ Jill Wildenberg, Denver, Colorado

Much of this division is geographic. Left-leaning voters dominate both coasts and urban areas, while conservatives tend to live in between and in the Southeast, often in more rural areas. Clinton won well over 90 percent of

the ballots cast in Washington, D.C., for example, where Donald Trump got just 4 percent of the votes.¹ In contrast, Trump won 87.8 percent of the votes in Cullman County, Alabama, a rural county in the South.² This divide means that many people living in Washington, D.C., rarely come into contact with conservatives who see the world differently than they do. It also means that residents of Cullman County are much more likely to speak to other conservatives than to liberals. As the country becomes more divided in this way, some Americans seek out cities, towns and even neighborhoods that have residents who think the same way they do.

These echo chambers are also a product of the information Americans consume. Speaking for many, Kay Lacona of Santa Teresa, New Mexico, laments that people, “only read things ... that they think [are] right

FACTS AND FIGURES

- » A majority of Republicans and a plurality of Democrats see the opposing party as a threat to national well-being
- » 84 percent of Americans say money has too much influence in U.S. politics
- » The average margin of victory for House of Representatives races in 2016 was 37.1 percent



“I discuss [politics] much more often with people who think like I do. And that’s probably one of the reasons that we have such a divide.”

————— Dorcas Harris

and then they’ll latch on to that and then they’ll become more entrenched in those beliefs.”



 Kay Lacona, Santa Teresa, New Mexico

Although both liberals and conservatives live in their own echo chambers, the topic became a point of particular anxiety for liberals following the 2016 election. Conservatives were happy to gain control of the White House and maintain control of the Congress. Liberals, on the other hand, were made painfully aware of their bubble when they found themselves blindsided by the election results. Stephanie Monahon, who works for the City of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, is a Democrat and former field organizer for President Barack Obama’s campaign. Until recently, she acknowledges, “I don’t think I ever really thought about the liberal bubble that

my kids have been raised in, to be perfectly honest.” In recent months, however, she has been thinking a lot about it. Monahon says she is particularly passionate about gay and minority rights, and she has surrounded herself with others who feel similarly. Now, however, she is concerned that the progress made during the Obama administration may be lost. “All that my kids have known is that to discriminate is wrong,” she says. “They have heard it at home, they have heard it from our friends and family, they have heard it at the local-level politicians, they have heard it at the federal level. That is what they have heard.” Inside the comfortable walls of the echo chamber, many were unprepared for the political shock caused by the election.



 Stephanie Monahon, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

“I’ve been tuning in to Twitter for years, and Facebook, and I frankly was amazed at the partisanship expressed, especially on Facebook.”

————— *Jane Walsh Waitkus*

“Sometimes you can feel pretty lonely,” says Dorcas Harris, a liberal living in Alabama, which a recent Gallup poll designated the country’s second-most conservative state.³ Although conservatives abound in her region, Harris, like many political minorities, speaks about politics predominantly with other liberals. She has spoken candidly with one friend who planned to vote for Trump, but she acknowledges, “I discuss [politics] much more often with people who think like I do. And that’s probably one of the reasons that we have such a divide. ... Everybody that’s relatively close to you, you know where they stand. I do not bring up politics with someone that I know to be a fan of President Trump or even people that I know voted for him.”



 Beverly Peacock, El Paso, Texas

Beverly Peacock, a retired teacher in El Paso, Texas, says, “[At] most dinner parties ... the rule is no political talk, and there are a lot of men that leave with kicked shins and bruises because they want to start it. ... Right now, it’s a bad idea to have a political conversation.”

Bruce Bradley, an outspoken conservative, also of El Paso, agrees. He says his daughter recently called him to remind him not to bring up politics at a party she was throwing, to which he readily assented. “I don’t like to get mad at people,” he says.

Online, however, the rules are less polite. Karen Gann is

another Democrat in Alabama, “Living around here you kind of stay in the closet a little bit. Outside of my ‘bubble’ I really don’t talk to many other people. Facebook is probably the only place that I encounter other people’s opinions. ... People are ‘keyboard warriors.’ They say a lot of things that I don’t think they would say to my face or somebody else’s face.”



 Bruce Bradley, El Paso, Texas

Jane Walsh Waitkus, a Democrat on the Luzerne County Council in Pennsylvania, believes that online partisanship is at an all-time high. “I’ve been tuning in to Twitter for years, and Facebook, and I frankly was amazed at the partisanship expressed, especially on Facebook,” she says. “In your face. Boldness. Both sides. ... That kind of shocked me. It’s like torpedoes be damned, this is what’s happening, and sorry you don’t like it.”



 Carol Butler, Birmingham, Alabama

The political debate online has reached such a fever pitch that some have retreated.

“I was never a big Facebook fan, but I had to get off completely,” says Carol Butler, of Birmingham, Alabama.



“The gift is that this election has engaged people like no other.”

————— Polly Baca

PROTEST AND ACTIVISM

In December 2015, only 20 people showed up to the annual meeting of the Seattle National Organization for Women (NOW). In 2016, more than 70 attended. Jhana Bach, one of the chapter’s leaders, is excited by this surge in activism. “People are not complacent anymore and people are really willing to step up and put their time in and do the grunt work,” she says.

“Trump won the election so let him be the president.”

————— Reid Leach

In her work for the City of Philadelphia, Monahan organizes volunteer efforts. “The response [to the election is to] volunteer, get involved, be a part of something, work in your community,” she says. “We saw a huge uptick in my office of people saying, ‘I want to do something, I want to be involved, I want to volunteer in my community, how can I help?’ That gives me a lot of hope.”

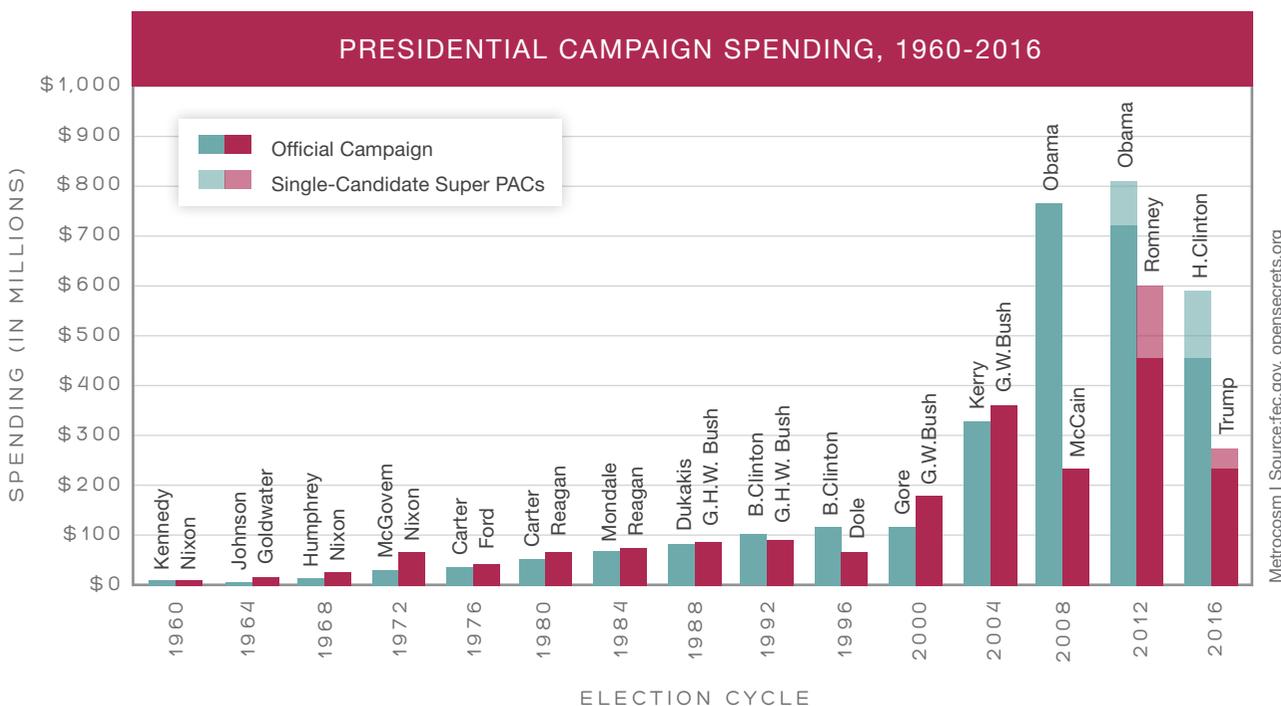
That new embrace of community involvement and political activism among the left had its most visible expressions in the women’s marches, which drew millions across the country, and the March for Science in Washington, D.C., in April 2017.

“The gift is that this election has engaged people like no other,” says Polly Baca, a former member of Colorado’s state senate. “I have been so impressed by the young people. [...] Because all of this energy that is now in the United States – it reminds me of the 1960s when I was young. ... I know that we can change things.”

From constituents jamming up the phone lines calling their senators to the well-attended rallies in Denver, Wildenberg, of the Interfaith Alliance, is also impressed. “[I’ve] never seen anything like it, except during the Vietnam War, when I was active in high school,” she says, “People are learning that they have a place in democracy, and that’s a beautiful thing.”

But not all agree. Dominik Salazar, an auto mechanic from El Paso, Texas, does not want his college-age daughter to go north to join major protests in North Dakota against an oil pipeline. He wants her to live, “in a more united [America],” not one divided by protest. Instead, he would rather see his daughter focus on her studies and her work. Perhaps by working hard as an engineer, he reasons, she can do something to benefit all Americans.

Some on the right dismiss the protesters as sore losers trying to obstruct the president.



“Trump won the election so let him be the president,” Reid Leach of Alamosa, Colorado, says.

CAMPAIGN FINANCE

Adding to many Americans’ frustration with their political class is the growing influence of wealthy campaign donors.

In 2010, the Supreme Court’s landmark *Citizens United v. Federal Election Commission* decision drastically changed the campaign finance landscape in the United States. In a 5-to-4 ruling, the court overturned a federal law barring corporations from making independent expenditures – that is, not coordinated with a candidate’s campaign – in support of a candidate.⁴ Although billions of dollars were already being spent on federal, state and local elections, the decision enabled corporations and other organizations to make uncapped donations to political action committees (PACs), which could run advertisements and advocate for their candidate of choice, also flooding the airwaves with negative ads.

In a *New York Times* poll in 2015, 84 percent of respondents said money had too much influence in U.S. politics, and 55 percent said politicians usually “promote policies that directly help the people and groups who donated money to their campaigns.”⁵

Politicians are “supposed to go and look out for the interests of the people that voted them in and I don’t see that. I think there’s too many special interests, too many lobbyists,” laments Martha Thompson of El Paso, Texas, who puts some of the blame on voters. “We’re the people that vote them in,” she admits. “We’re not informed when the elections come. ... I’ve been guilty of it. You go and you see a name you recognize. ... But it’s because of the money. If you’re the incumbent [you have] name recognition.”

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— Martha Thompson

In the 2016 presidential election, money in politics was a central concern for voters. Clinton’s long political career and private fundraising for her family’s foundation worried many voters on both the right and left. “God only knows who ... has [Hillary Clinton] in their pocket,” says Betty Wilkerson of Yakima, Washington. Both candidates

“have baggage” she acknowledges, but she says Clinton was particularly susceptible to special interests because billionaire Trump “didn’t owe anybody anything.”

ELECTORAL COLLEGE

Vanessa S. did not vote in the 2016 election. “They always go by electoral votes ... so I feel like it doesn’t matter if we vote anyways,” she says. Vanessa lives in El Paso, Texas, a predominantly Democratic city in El Paso County, which voted overwhelmingly (69.1 percent) for Hillary Clinton.⁶ The local member of Congress, Democrat Beto O’Rourke, was re-elected with a whopping 85.8 percent of the vote.⁷ However, all of Texas’ 38 Electoral College votes went to Trump because he won most of the state’s votes.

Americans do not elect their president directly. Instead, the Electoral College system assigns a number of votes to each state based on the size of its congressional delegation. Wyoming, for example, has its two senators and one member of the House of Representatives, so gets three electoral votes. In contrast, California has its two senators and 53 representatives, yielding 55 electoral votes. The system is roughly based on population – because that is how states are allotted members of Congress – but is weighted somewhat in favor of less-populous states – because every state gets two senators regardless of population.

“That’s exactly why they have the Electoral College, [because of] us poor people out here in the country. It gives us a better chance to get the person we voted for elected.”

————— Reid Leach

All states except for Maine and Nebraska award all of their electoral votes to the candidate who wins the state’s popular vote, regardless of the margin of victory. Many states have voted for the candidate from one particular party for decades. California has awarded its 55 votes to the Democratic candidate since 1992.

Alabama has awarded its nine Electoral College votes to the Republican candidate since 1980, and Democratic presidential candidates do not campaign there. “We’re not a swing state,” says Josh Carpenter of the University of Alabama at Birmingham. “We’re not going to be competitive at least in the next 20 or 30 years.”

Republican presidential candidates may vie for voters’ support in Alabama’s primary election, but they, too, focus their efforts in more contested states during the general election. “It’s a frustrating experience and it’s deadened the activism here,” Carpenter says. “I don’t mean activism as in protest, I mean activism as in accountability. I think that people feel that it is futile to hold politicians accountable right now.”

On the other hand, candidates spend lots of time in Florida, Pennsylvania and Ohio, vote-rich “swing states” that have shown no fixed political allegiance in contemporary national races.



▲ Josh Carpenter, Birmingham, Alabama

Baca, the former Colorado state senator, has served as an elector in the Electoral College in the last three presidential elections, meaning that she cast one of her state’s nine votes when the Electoral College met to officially choose the president. She says she has opposed the institution for 20 years “because it’s wrong. But if they’re going to have it, I’m going to run for it.” Baca was involved in an effort to stop the Electoral College from selecting Trump.



▲ Reid Leach, Alamosa, Colorado

GERRYMANDERING IN NORTH CAROLINA

Current Congressional Districts



Source: Washington Post⁹

But some Americans in less-populous areas say the Electoral College ensures their voices are heard on the national level. “That’s exactly why they have the Electoral College, [because of] us poor people out here in the country,” Reid Leach of rural Alamosa, Colorado, says. “It gives us a better chance to get the person we voted for elected, [instead of] having people in California and New York and some of those big cities ... where they have all the popular vote.”

GERRYMANDERING

States redraw lines for congressional districts after each census every 10 years. The process differs from state to state, with some using independent, nonpartisan commissions to draw the maps, but most allowing politicians to run the show. Unsurprisingly, whichever party controls the process tends to draw districts that favor its electoral chances, either by packing hostile voters into a few districts or, if possible, dividing them up to dilute their votes.

With the contest between the two major parties in congressional races lopsided by design, the real fight for these seats is in a party’s primary, which determines a party’s candidate in the general election. And because it is committed partisans who turn out for primary elections, the candidates must increasingly pander to the liberal or conservative bases. They may also vote less moderately once in office to fend off primary challeng-

ers at home. With safe seats, “you get the extremes,” Baca says.



 Polly Baca, Denver, Colorado

Partly because of this gerrymandering and partly because of the dominance of one party in some states, few congressional races are competitive. “In the 2016 elections for the House of Representatives, the average electoral margin of victory was 37.1 percent,” The Washington Post reports. “Last year, only 17 seats out of 435 races were decided by a margin of 5 percent or less.”⁸

Not only are the candidates farther right or left than they would be in a marginal district, but they are also lauded at home for obstructing the opposing party’s legislation. Baca herself used to support gerrymandering when she served in the state Senate, but she now sees the

damage it can do. “We have to be strong enough and brave enough as patriots and people who care about their country to allow for competition,” she says.

THE ‘FORGOTTEN’ MIDDLE

Polarization in American politics is nothing new, but changes to campaign finance rules, partisan gerrymandering, the rise of hyper-partisan media and even Americans’ increasing tendency to live in places where most people share their views – dubbed “the Big Sort” – exacerbate the problem. Going far beyond disagreement on policy, a majority of Republicans and a plurality of Democrats viewed the other party as a threat to the country’s well-being in a 2014 nationwide survey.¹⁰

“By and large, I think we see the extremes,” says cattle farmer Ben Haynes, of Cullman, Alabama. “I still believe that there’s a really big group there in the middle who recognize the importance of getting things done.” According to that same 2014 study, Haynes is right, but centrists are less politically active, and therefore easier for politicians to ignore, than fierce partisans.

Some moderate Americans feel forgotten and bewildered. “I do think there are a whole lot of people who are like me, standing in middle going, ‘What is going on? Have you all lost your minds?’” says Carol Butler of the Mike and Gillian Goodrich Foundation, in Birmingham, Alabama, which provides community development grants. “You don’t get good legislation when you get only the rabid sides on both sides making that

happen. You have to have people in the middle who are looking out for the broader good.”

But you also have to have people in the middle who vote in equal numbers to those on the ends of the ideological spectrum. In the meantime, increasing polarization is dismayingly self-perpetuating: The same echo chambers that vilify the other party and encourage politicians to court extreme partisans become ideological traps, punishing legislators at the first sign of reaching out to the enemy. This, in turn, can lead to bad policy, when politicians withhold support for sensible solutions if they deem that their opponents will be blamed for some or another problem.

“I do think there are a whole lot of people who are like me, standing in middle going, ‘What is going on? Have you all lost your minds?’”

————— Carol Butler

Some obvious ways out of this bind are to reform the redistricting process and to pass campaign finance reform as a constitutional amendment, but those are long shots. The most fruitful efforts might lie in getting more Americans to vote, which is likely to bring more moderates to the ballot box and, in turn, to the political stage.



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