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## US Elections

# Political Polarization and Its Divisive Impact on Civil Society

***Amidst a turbulent historical epoch marked by the decline of empires, the upcoming November election in the United States stands as a pivotal moment. The stakes, both domestically and on the global stage, are profound. Yet, the call to vote reverberates against a backdrop of growing apathy and disconnection among voters. The reasons behind this disillusionment with the political “system” are manifold, but one thing remains clear: presidential elections have lost their representational vigor as citizens increasingly view them as lacking opportunities for genuine local and state engagement. And this in turn results in a deficit in effective civic participation. How did we get here? How can we retrace our steps in alignment with the spirit that inspired the founding fathers? These urgent questions cannot be merely confined to a single superpower.***

Pew Charitable Trust, one of the most respected polling institutions in America, has tracked the partisan inclinations of American voters for decades. Recent polling has revealed a deep and growing chasm amongst the electorate. Not too long ago, American political scientists contended that elected officials, and in particular members of Congress, were moving to the extremes of their respective parties, but that the average citizen was still fairly moderate. This notion has since been proven false. The data confirms that the median Democrat and median Republican have moved further to the left and right on the ideological spectrum. An increasing number of partisans identify the opposing party as “dangerous” and “a threat to the nation”. What has caused this trend? Is it a consequence of institutional problems contained in American political life or is it attributable to a lack of engaged and civic-minded individuals working within the system? While the true answer is undoubtedly linked to both causes, the structural deficiencies in the American electoral system have fostered polarization and contributed to an overall sense of both voter apathy and antipathy.

Every four years, Americans go to the polls to elect a president. They participate in an electoral system that is widely criticized as being archaic, inefficient, and overly complicated. The framers of the Constitution designed it to ensure a role for the states in determining the direction of national policies, as states are, at least in theory, closer to the people and more aware of the local interests and needs. Structural elements and the unique federal design were meant both to prevent the national government from becoming too powerful and to avoid the potential “tyranny of the majority” of the uneducated rabble. James Madison, father of the Constitution, intended that the republican model of government, forged in a federal system, would serve as a filter, allowing those elected to aggregate the concerns of citizens and then

act in accordance with whatever policy best encapsulated the common good.

But the system now does not work as Madison intended it. Modern developments have made elections less representative and have encouraged growing polarization.

### **Where does the system fail?**

Presidential elections take place in two stages, the nominating election, or 'primaries', and the general election. The primaries are intra-party elections where both major parties, the Democrats and the Republicans, put forth candidates who will run in the general election. They take place in each state, the District of Columbia, and the American territories. The winner in each state receives delegates, proportional to that states' population. The delegates will then attend the national party convention where the parties officially nominate their candidate through a roll-call vote. This process stretches from January to August of the election year.

After the two parties select their nominees, the candidates will campaign and go head to head in the general election. Citizens go to the polls on election day in early November to cast an indirect vote for their preferred candidate. In fact, they vote for an elector who will endorse the winner of the popular vote in each state to determine the official winner in the Electoral College. So, where does this system fail?

First, federalism ensures that primaries are conducted differently from state to state, including eligibility requirements for voting as well as voting methods. States choose their own method of nominating elections (open primary, closed primary, blanket primary, caucus, party convention) as well as other factors that impact voter turnout, such as same day voter registration, early voting, mail-in ballots, etc. Additionally, independent voters may have a voice in some primaries, but could be totally disenfranchised in others. One of the most important consequences of federalism in American elections is the fact that state legislatures are responsible for establishing their own electoral districts, which are used to determine representatives for both the state and national legislatures. This often results in a practice known as gerrymandering, where the majority party in the state legislature will draw district lines to ensure "safe seats" for their candidates. Historically, gerrymandering has also been used to suppress the minority voter. Of the 435 congressional districts across the United States, only about 60 of them are actually competitive.

The differences in how states conduct their primaries also contributes to the selection of more ideologically partisan candidates. Political parties at the national level seek moderate candidates who will appeal to independent voters in the general election, but it is party members at the state levels who actually choose the candidates. States with open primaries allow non-party members to participate, giving less weight to the national parties. Party orthodoxy is no longer a litmus test for candidate success. For example, Trump was much more successful in open primaries in the 2016 election compared to closed primaries. It is unclear why this was the case. Did Trump galvanize new Republican leaning voters, who previously feeling disenfranchised tended not to vote? Did he appeal to non-Republicans who then participated in open Republican primaries? Regardless, the Republican National Convention had little latitude to impact Trump's nomination. Even in the most typical elections, more partisan and ardent party supporters play a greater role in choosing the party's nominee, making it less likely that the party ticket includes a moderate candidate.

The primary system also favors frontloading, or states jockeying to hold their primary elections early on in the election year. Iowa, the first caucus, and New Hampshire, the first primary, represent a fraction of the total electorate, but are disproportionately influential in choosing the party nominees. Early winners not only gain an advantage in the delegate count, but also

gain new fundraising donors, outsized media attention, and important campaign momentum. For states that host their primary or caucus later in the election year, the nomination is often already determined. Both Biden and Trump had secured a sufficient number of delegates to win the nomination on Tuesday, March 12. For the dozens of states and territories that had not yet held their elections, they now play no role in choosing the party's nominee. Furthermore, primary elections only draw about 20% of eligible voters. An increasing use of closed primaries means that only the most committed and partisan party members are most responsible for choosing the party's candidate for the general election. A higher voter turnout would likely temper the overall candidate choices, but voters are not inclined to show up at the polls when they feel their vote doesn't matter.

### **The third "spoiler" party**

Second, the United States House of Representatives, as well as state legislatures, are based on single-member districts and winner-takes-all elections, which have entrenched the two-party system, resulting in less competitive elections and fewer candidate choices. A two-party system discourages the kind of compromise and coalition building that is possible in European democratic models. Over time, a two party system generates more polarized candidates. Voters will begrudgingly support their party's candidate, even if the candidate is more extreme in their policy preferences. Furthermore, the system makes it nearly impossible for a third party candidate to make any kind of meaningful impact in elections. The only true role for a third party to play is that of "spoiler" by siphoning off voters from the major party they are closest to, often resulting in the opposing party winning. The impact of the Green Party in the 2000 election is a good example of this particular phenomenon. Al Gore, the Democratic candidate, would have certainly won the state of Florida and therefore the Electoral College vote had Ralph Nader, the Green Party candidate, not run. Third parties could play a role in moderating the parties by fostering partnerships across the aisle.

Finally, the Electoral College also generates a sense of disenfranchisement. Most states are solidly red or blue, and therefore not competitive, as electoral votes are also distributed in a winner-takes-all manner (with the exception of Maine and Nebraska). There are only a few "battleground" or "swing" states. Presidential candidates unsurprisingly focus their attention and their campaign resources on those states, ignoring even the most populous states in order to secure their electoral vote. Additionally, as with the 2016 election, a candidate can win the national popular vote, but lose the electoral vote, again lowering a sense of voter efficacy. While many people support abolishing the electoral college and using the direct popular vote, critics of the idea suggest this would focus candidates too rigidly on urban population centers and limit the potential voice that rural and suburban voters have in the Electoral College.

In addition to the aforementioned structural problems with the American electoral system, there are also recent trends that present additional challenges. The sheer amount of time and resources needed to campaign limits voter choices and opens the door to outside spending by corporations and groups funded by wealthy individuals, many of whom are not disclosed to voters. Between the nominating election and the general election, the two major party nominees will spend over \$1 billion each. Attempts to limit campaign spending by outside groups have been halted by the Supreme Court.

### **The role and influence of the media**

The role of the media has also shifted over time. New forms of investigative and more adversarial journalism emerged in the 1960s, sparked by the events of Watergate and the Vietnam War. As coverage of government officials, policies, and decisions became more negative, it contributed to an overall decline in the trust that Americans have in policymakers. This attitude

has continued to dominate media coverage and has also impacted campaigning practices. Lacking a strong sense of political efficacy, Americans react more to sensationalized, negative political advertising that again tends towards polarization and away from consensus and coalition building. Media reporting on elections is often described as “horse race” journalism, where polling results are more widely covered than substantive issues, leaving many Americans ignorant of nuance in policy choices and generating more candidate-centered campaigns where celebrity matters more than ideas.

These issues dovetail with patterns in how Americans consume the news, which have further changed our political climate. Social media, which is more conducive to shrinking sound bites and less able to convey substantial analysis, is increasingly the greatest source of political socialization, particularly for young Americans. This also opens the door for campaigns to be more personality, rather than issue driven. Algorithms create echo chambers of ideas so that many potential voters are never exposed to opposing opinions in a way that is not villainized, pushing people to further extremes.

All of these factors culminate in a system where citizens experience the tension of an increasingly polarized world and suffer the lack of choices and competitive elections. More moderate or independent voters feel a sense of political homelessness and question to what extent their vote matters. As a corollary, American attitudes towards the government have become more cynical and pessimistic. Approval ratings for each branch of government and regardless of party has declined precipitously over the course of the past several elections cycles. Attitudes of fear and acrimony between the two parties have become more pronounced, resulting in gridlock and stalemate in Congress and an utter lack of confidence in policy makers among the electorate.

### **Rebuilding civil society**

Against the backdrop of these concerns is a broader issue. If the founders put such effort into creating a federal system that preserved a robust involvement of the states and municipalities, why do Americans place so much stock in the outcome of the national elections, particularly when there is such a strong feeling of disenfranchisement? Coverage of national issues fuels partisan resentment, even when those issues don't touch on the day to day events of those consuming the news.

One possible path forward is for Americans to reinvest themselves in local communities. Recent scholarship about polarization also identifies the fact that career politicians tend not to move to Washington DC, but rather commute from their home state or district, as a root cause. Politicians across the aisle used to spend time together because their kids played on the same soccer team, or they belonged to the same church. In other words, sharing simple moments of life together helps to create more congenial working relationships and less demonization of the other side. The same is true at the local level. As Americans are less engaged in community groups, clubs, and civic organizations, they lose the possibility of forging relationships with people who are demographically and politically different from themselves, leaving people more isolated in their political silos. Groups such as the AND Campaign under the direction of Justin Giboney exist to promote civic engagement, particularly amongst urban Christians, as a way to advocate for better representation and more fruitful policymaking. They can serve as a catalyst for the grassroots efforts to rebuild civil society.

Other possibilities for change are more structural. For example, much could be done within the system to try to rebuild the political center. There are several examples of politicians who are attempting to occupy this space, such as Joe Manchin of West Virginia and Susan Collins of Maine. This would require candidates with clear voter-centric, moderate goals that focused



on strengthening the middle class while downplaying identity politics and extremist social positions on both sides of the political spectrum. Groups such as No Labels have been trying to cultivate a candidate base that fits this profile. A comparatively successful third party in the long-term can help share party platforms that favor more moderate and less partisan policies, while advocating for clear ideals oriented toward the common good.

Citizens can also advocate for changes in voting or election laws. Requiring states to use non-partisan methods for redistricting, setting term-limits, imposing spending caps on candidates per election cycle, and shortening the primary/caucus system could all be ways to help reinvigorate a sense of political efficacy and cultivate a stronger commitment to voting and civic engagement. These changes, unlike a proposal like eliminating the Electoral College, would not require amending the Constitution and could be accomplished either at the state level or via congressional statute.

The Preamble to the Constitution of the United States promises that “we the people” will strive to become a “more perfect union”. The founders envisioned that elections would play a fundamental role in that becoming by serving as a conduit between the people and those in office. In order for American elections to fulfill this role, serious reforms are needed to tackle the intense polarization and lack of meaningful political participation that define the current system.

More competitive and representative elections offer the best starting point for citizens to re-engage in civic life and renew a shared commitment to the common good.



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