

# The American Situation

BY PAUL STARR

America, it seems, is stuck—unable to make significant progress on critical issues such as climate change, rising economic inequality, and immigration. To explain that inaction, people often point to political polarization. Democrats and Republicans, liberals and conservatives, are now so sharply opposed to each other that they are unable to find common ground.

But while the country is stuck, it is not stationary. Some things are changing; it's just not at the federal level that the changes are emerging.

Polarization leads to stalemate only under certain circumstances—when the two sides in a conflict are closely balanced, and political institutions and procedures (such as the Senate filibuster) enable each side to check the other. That has been the story in the federal government.

Under other circumstances, however, polarization can be a stimulus to change. When politics become polarized between two alternatives, voters have clearer choices. They have more reason to pay attention and turn out. Each side may then mobilize, take power, and get its way in different jurisdictions or private institutions. That is what is happening now in state and local governments and civil society. Two ideologically based societies have developed within the United States, and the differences between them are growing. The question will ultimately be which America, red or blue, dominates the nation's future.

**THE UNITED STATES** began as two societies—one based on racial slavery, the other on free labor—and despite all that has since happened in the nation's history, today's political divisions are descended from that original split. The current political map, to be sure, does not divide exactly along North-South lines. Some rural areas in the North are socially and politically more like the South, while some urban areas in the South are more like the North. The West has its own divisions. But the regional and racial continuities are unmistakable. The South continues to be the principal base of support for a party favoring harsher policies toward labor and the poor and drawing its support almost entirely from whites. The South's culture and religion pervade the version of conservatism that dominates the Republican Party.

For most of the 20th century, it wasn't at all clear that these old divisions would continue to define the lines of conflict in the United States. Until the 1980s, the prevailing currents of change favored the creation of a single national society. The Progressive era, the New Deal, and the civil rights movement and Great Society of the 1960s all brought nationalizing reforms; the Supreme Court extended constitutional requirements for equal rights and civil liberties to the states. As national markets, national corporations, and national media grew, they contributed to a narrowing of regional economic and cultural

differences. Especially during World War II and the Cold War, it was easy to believe—as many leading historians and social scientists did—that all Americans shared a consensus on values. While Europeans fought ideological battles, Americans supposedly worked out their differences within a common framework.

The belief in an American consensus was never entirely

an American consensus, the idea of a "culture war" was not entirely wrong, but it captured only part of the emerging conflict, primarily the backlash against the sexual revolution and change in gender relations that began in the 1960s. That conception downplayed the conflict's racial dimension and missed entirely its implications for economic inequality. It also underestimated the scope of the conser-

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right and, for that matter, never entirely wrong. Even when disagreeing, Americans have generally appealed to the same values of freedom and equality; we just interpret them in opposite ways. Since the 1980s, however, after a long period when the prevailing currents favored convergence, the trends have reversed, and the country has split apart along its old seams—albeit with some new twists. Ethnic whites and white working-class men have left the Democratic Party as it has become more firmly identified with racial minorities and with causes such as feminism, gay rights, and environmentalism.

In the 1980s and '90s, many observers saw the great divide in America as arising over culture and values. Like the earlier idea of

conservative backlash, which now aims to roll back the changes of the 1930s as well as those of the 1960s. In the name of federalism, a conservative majority on the Supreme Court has brought back states' rights and limits on federal powers.

It's in state policy that ideological polarization has been most fully expressed, especially since the 2010 election, when Republicans gained unified control of many state governments and began to pursue in earnest what is now widely seen as the "red-state model." That model typically includes sharply reduced taxes for those with higher incomes, reductions in spending on education and social programs, curbs on unions, and rollbacks of environmental laws, as well as some culture-war priorities such as

expanded rights for gun owners and restrictions on abortion and gay marriage. Meanwhile, political leaders in some blue states such as Massachusetts and California and in cities such as New York and Seattle have pushed ahead with progressive policies that move in exactly the opposite direction: tax increases on the rich, more resources for education, expanded health care, increased minimum wages, and so on.

The polarization in social policy between red and blue states is apparent in their response to the Affordable Care Act. Here the Supreme Court under John Roberts played exactly the opposite role from the one that the Court played half a century earlier under Earl Warren. Although Roberts prevented his conservative colleagues from overturning the entire health-care law, he extended states' rights in two respects, limiting the scope of federal authority under the Commerce Clause and restricting the use of federal appropriations as a means of securing state compliance with congressional aims. The immediate effect of the Court's ruling was to make the Medicaid expansion optional to the states; the longer-term effect is to limit the ability of Congress to make equal rights a reality nationwide. One of the ACA's principal objectives was to improve insurance protection and access to health care for all Americans, but instead the law has—at least so far—become another example of the growing divergence in state policy.

Different policies foster different economies and social structures. Historically, most of the red states have been poorer than the blue states and have used low wages as a lure for business. With their renewed emphasis on regressive taxes, low social spending, low minimum wages, and anti-union policies, the red states are upholding an old social order that many expected to fade away. The efforts to exclude blacks and Latinos

from power through voter-suppression strategies are part of the same return to the past. What is new in the recent right-wing takeovers is the imposition of this model on a state like North Carolina, which has had more liberal policies especially in education, and the effort to import the model into the upper Midwest in such states as Wisconsin and Michigan. These are “battleground states” not just electorally, but in the larger ideological conflict over America's future.

**HOW DEEP DOES** the red-blue conflict in America go? The political scientists who study public opinion have been divided over the question. Some analysts such as Morris P. Fiorina argue that only political elites have become polarized and that the public at large continues to be predominantly moderate. Others such as Alan Abramowitz counter that polarization has become more widespread and now extends to the politically engaged public. As Abramowitz shows, the more attention Americans pay to politics and the news, the more polarized they are ideologically. The evidence, I think, favors Abramowitz's position. Polarization has been spreading—but not just to wider segments of the public. It also affects patterns of community life and institutions such as religion and the media. While red-blue differences among the states are writ large in electoral maps, the same cleavage also shapes the lives and relationships of Americans at a more local and immediate level.

American communities have become more ideologically homogeneous. The increased residential clustering of people with like-minded views was the subject of Bill Bishop's 2008 book, *The Big Sort*. Americans appear to be choosing where to live on the basis of economic and social criteria that are highly correlated with their political views. As a result, at the local and county level,

elections are increasingly lopsided, with one party or the other able to dominate and get its way.

A similar pattern of increased ideological separation has developed in the sphere of religion. In the mid-20th century, Democrats and Republicans were equally likely to attend a church or synagogue regularly. The main lines of division were denominational—Protestant, Catholic, Jewish. By the 1980s, the divisions became increasingly ideological, with the conservative wings of each religion allying with one another against more liberal and secular tendencies. Now religiosity itself has become strongly related to partisanship. Republicans go to church and say grace before meals, while Democrats are more secular, and the gap between them has grown. “Americans have become polarized along religious lines,” Robert Putnam and David Campbell write in *American Grace*, their 2010 empirical study of religion and public life. “Americans are increasingly concentrated at opposite ends of the religious spectrum—the highly religious at one pole, and the avowedly secular at the other. The moderate religious middle is shrinking.”

In other domains as well, conservatives and liberals have now gone their separate ways. The media are a familiar example. Most Americans used to watch the same evening news programs of the three television networks, but the network audience has declined, and instead the most politically attentive watch ideologically distinct cable news or get their news online from sources that fit their political perspective. Increasingly, Americans with opposed views live not only physically apart but also in their own factual universes.

Ideology and partisanship have become more salient in American life in part because they carry more significance than they used to. When partisan differences were smaller—and when there were liberal Republicans and

conservative Democrats—knowing someone's political party didn't tell you all that much. Now it says a lot. In 2012, *The Wall Street Journal* reported that dating services found that their clients put far more emphasis on sharing political views than in the past. The head of one high-priced service told the *Journal*, “People now say ‘I don't even want to meet anybody who's from the other party,’ even if it's someone who's perfect in every other way.”

Of course, many Americans don't care about politics and don't make it a factor in personal relationships, though their social circles may still be relatively homogeneous because political views are so strongly related to social identities and status. The danger, especially for the most politically engaged, lies in only hearing your own side. As a long traditional of psychological research on “group polarization” shows, when people with the same beliefs talk only with one another, they drift toward more extreme positions. If what you know about the news comes chiefly from partisan media and like-minded friends, you may misread what is happening in the wider society.

That is a genuine risk for all of us, liberal and conservative. Yet even as I acknowledge that risk, I am no less convinced that my side, the liberal side, has an edge and is more likely to prevail. On some issues, like climate change, I am optimistic for pessimistic reasons: the realities will ultimately be inescapable. On other issues, like gay rights, I am optimistic because the young have more liberal views than the old, and the effects of time are also inescapable. But at bottom, for me and I suspect for many others (like Randall Kennedy in this issue), there is something else: a confidence in the long arc of history, the power of reason, and the promise of democratic government to bring out the best possibilities within us. It may take a while, but we have no other options. ■