

# “Red and Blue Nation”? Political Polarization in the United States

A Conversation with William Galston

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Q: What exactly do we mean when we say that politics is “polarized”? Are we speaking of a loss of a center as a viable space for political life, or simply that the voices most clearly heard above the din are at the extremes, or neither?

A: The term “polarization” is used somewhat loosely and popularly to refer to those two phenomena and others besides. The strictest academic definition of polarization would be the hollowing out of the center of political opinion and a bunching of opinion at the left and right tail of the famous Bell Curve. Obviously, you can have one curve per dimension of interest, though it’s perfectly possible that you could have polarization about whether, say, economic policy or the role of government in the economy, but a solid center in foreign policy or a number of other areas. So to be precise, you have to look at the distribution of opinion on an issue and you have to specify the issue.

Q: Is polarization a byproduct of partisan politics? If so, is it a necessary byproduct of partisan politics, or is it something that’s severable?

A: It is severable in the sense that you can have intense partisanship, which is more of Team A, Team B—the division of the spoils. We certainly had partisan politics in 1960, for example, but there wasn’t a lot of polarization in the country, by historical standards, nor was there a huge difference between the two presidential candidates. Nonetheless, Democrats intensely identified with their nominee and wanted him to win, and similarly for the Republicans. We saw much the same thing as recently as 1976, when a pretty conservative Democrat was running against a pretty moderate Republican. There were differences, and there was Team A and Team B and a lot of intense feeling, but not a high degree of polarization as I am defining the term.

Q: So are we a red and blue nation now? Or is it a primary system, party activists, and candidates who represent the polarization of the last 20 years or so?

A: The phrase “red and blue nation” that you used refers to the title of a book to which I contributed, and the question you just stated was the principle point of debate among the scholars who contributed to that volume. The issue on the table is that nobody doubts that there is a lot more polarization among elites and in the media, and in a number of other highly visible places than there used to be. The question is, is that a reflection of changes in the country as a whole, in the electorate as a whole? Or, as one of the best-known contributors to the volume, Morris Fiorina, has argued, is there a kind of a decoupling of elite opinion and rhetorical tone on the one hand from the people on the other? To put it slightly differently, is this a top-down phenomenon or a bottom-up phenomenon? I came to the

conclusion that it's some of both. On the one hand, it's clear that polarized elites have sent cues to the public and the public has responded to those cues. On the other hand, it seems pretty clear to me that the public itself reached independent judgments on a number of issues and those judgments drove important changes in the political system. I disagree with those who say that it's simply an elite phenomenon.

Q: Jeffrey Rosen makes a pretty persuasive argument that the Supreme Court generally tends to trail public opinion as opposed to leading it, contrary to the popular understanding. Is that a concept you find persuasive?

A: Let's call that the Mr. Dooley theory of the Supreme Court. Mr. Dooley was famous for saying that the Supreme Court follows the election returns, which is true until it isn't. In two of the most conspicuous court cases of my lifetime, *Brown v. Board of Education* and *Roe v. Wade*, I would make the case that the Supreme Court was closer to the beginning of those cultural changes than the end, and that the controversy that those decisions aroused was in part a function of that fact.

Q: Do you feel the same way about the early '60s—*Abington v. Schempp* and other decisions in schools—that the Court was leading that edge? It strikes me that that's a case where schools had become more secular prior to those decisions.

A: I think that the court was closer to the center of gravity in the country at that point. Those decisions came as an enormous shock to people whom I will call—I think this is not anachronistic—traditional Protestants who assumed something that no Catholic would ever have assumed, namely that there was no problem with the informal Protestant establishment that existed as late as the late '50s or early '60s. When I was in grade school, I was required to recite the Lord's Prayer. As a young Jew, I was aware of the fact that it was a Christian prayer. I was not aware of the fact that it was the Protestant version of the Lord's Prayer. The Protestants up until the 1960s were accustomed to identifying their brand of Christianity with America as a whole. So it came as an enormous shock to many of them that the Court would drive a wedge between this informal establishment on the one hand and the Constitution on the other. But for the rest of the country, I don't think it was that controversial a decision.

Q: Coming back to the broader themes of polarization, is our democracy based on an adversarial system that supports a polarization model of some less extreme mode clustering at the edges of an adversarial politics? Or is polarization corrosive to democracy itself in the long term?

A: Like many other political phenomena, it has its good points and its bad points. If you have a polarized system, you're apt to get more real choices. And back in the late 1940s, right after the Second World War, American political scientists were so dismayed with what they regarded as the Tweedledee, Tweedledum party system that they wrote a famous report, which came out in 1950, entitled *Toward a More Responsible Two-Party System*. They meant that two parties that were ideologically more distinct on the European model gave the electorate real choices. One good thing you get out of such a system is real choices. The second good thing you get is a more intelligible political system. People have more confidence that they understand what they're voting for, and they probably do because the

party positions, which are more starkly different, are easier to pin down. Third, you tend to have more accountability, since parties that are internally homogenous but different from one another are more likely to deliver on the promises that they've made.

But if you take a broader look, there are a lot of disadvantages. In my judgment, the disadvantages have now heaped up so high as to outweigh the advantages. At the end of the essay that I coauthored, I talked about four principle disadvantages. One, it's much harder to address difficult domestic issues, the sort that require long-term thinking and a measure of sacrifice in the short term. If you don't have bipartisanship, you can't do that. Second, it is very difficult to preserve the old maxim that politics stops at the water's edge in a highly polarized system, as we're seeing. That greatly complicates the task of conducting a steady, sustained long-term foreign policy. Three, it tends to erode the distinct status of the judiciary in our system. You tend to get an incorporation of the judiciary into the political struggle which, given the distinct, unique kind of legitimacy that the judiciary must enjoy in our system, is very problematic. Finally, the level of controversy that a highly polarized system generates diminishes trust in the overall governance—public trust in the governance process—and that creates additional problems for government.

Q: Would you say trust is lost because there's concern that the discussions are superficial?

A: There's a lot of political science evidence to the effect that people interpret a lot of what's coming out of Washington as partisan bickering. So a standard Middle American view is, why can't they just roll up their sleeves and get together and help solve the country's problems? And if the system seems gridlocked by this polarization—which is what you get when a country is both highly polarized and closely divided—then it's understandable that you have that public recoil. It's important to note that a system can be deeply polarized but not closely divided, as was the case, for example, in the early days of the New Deal. There was a huge gap between the emerging liberal Democratic Party and the traditionally conservative Alf Landon style Republican Party, but because the Democrats were so dominant, polarization did not lead to gridlock and bickering. It led to a lot of very striking action, and the people were deluged with new policies, the effects of which they could experience and judge for themselves.

Q: Is this analogous at the reverse end of the spectrum to the past five or six years?

A: No. I think what you've had for the past six years is such a close partisan division that it has been relatively difficult for the Congress to agree on much of anything. There's been no agreement on immigration policy, no agreement on Social Security, no agreement on healthcare, no agreement on environmental policy or global warming. It is a very long list and there's a lot of evidence that the people are quite frustrated, because they think they're reaching conclusions, and they don't understand why the political system can't.

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