

Uncivil Agreement

How Politics Became Our Identity

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The University of Chicago Press
Chicago and London

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Identity-Based Democracy

In the summer of 1954, the social psychologist Muzafer Sherif and his colleagues recruited twenty-two fifth-grade boys from Oklahoma City and sent them to two adjacent campsites in Robbers Cave State Park. The boys were carefully selected to be nearly identical to each other in social, educational, physical, and emotional fitness. They were all white, Protestant, and middle class. None had ever met the others before. They were carefully divided into two equal-sized teams, designed to be similar to each other in every possible way. The two teams came to call themselves the Eagles and the Rattlers, and without knowing it they participated in a three-week-long psychological experiment.

During the first week, the teams were kept separate. The boys on each team grew to know each other and to form, from scratch, a sense of being a group. In the second week, each team learned of the other's existence. Having never laid eyes on the other team, the boys on each side immediately began referring to the others as "outsiders," "intruders," and "those boys at the other end of the camp." They grew impatient for a challenge. The experimenters arranged a tournament between the Eagles and the Rattlers. When they came into contact for the very first time—to play baseball—a member of the Eagles immediately called one of the Rattlers "dirty shirt." By the second day of the tournament, both teams were regularly name-calling and using derogatory terms such as *pigs*, *bums*, and *cheaters*, and they began to show reluctance to spend time with members of the other team. Even boys who were compelled to sit out the competitions hurled insults from the sidelines.

In the next few days, the relations between the teams quickly degraded. The Eagles burned the Rattlers' flag. The Rattlers raided the Eagles' cabin in the middle of the night. The Eagles raided the Rattlers' cabin in the middle

of the day. Boys from both sides began to collect rocks to use in combat, fistfights broke out, and the staff decided to “stop the interaction altogether to avoid possible injury” (Sherif et al. 1988, 115). They were sent back to their separate camps. By the end of the second week, twenty-two highly similar boys who had met only two weeks before had formed two nearly warring tribes, with only the gentle nudge of isolation and competition to encourage them.

By the start of the third week, the conflict had affected the boys’ abilities to judge objective reality. They were given a task to collect as many beans off the ground as possible. Each boy’s collection was viewed by both groups on an overhead projector for five seconds. The campers were asked to quickly estimate the number of beans collected by each child. Every boy estimated more beans for their own teammates than for the children on the opposing team. The experimenters had shown them the same number of beans every time.

The Robbers Cave experiment was one of the first to look at the determinants and effects of group membership and intergroup conflict. It inspired years of increasingly precise and wide-ranging research, looking into exactly how our group memberships shape us, affect our relationships with outsiders, and distort our perceptions of objective reality. The following chapters will discuss many of these results. But the simplicity of the Robbers Cave experiment is itself telling. The boys at Robbers Cave needed nothing but isolation and competition to almost instantaneously consider the other team to be “dirty bums,” to hold negative stereotypes about them, to avoid social contact with them, and to overestimate their own group’s abilities. In very basic ways, group identification and conflict change the way we think and feel about ourselves and our opponents.

We, as modern Americans, probably like to think of ourselves as more sophisticated and tolerant than a group of fifth-grade boys from 1954. In many ways, of course, we are. But the Rattlers and the Eagles have a lot more in common with today’s Democrats and Republicans than we would like to believe. Recently, the presidential campaign and election of Donald Trump laid bare some of the basest motivations in the American electorate, and they provide a compelling demonstration of the theory underlying this book.

The Trump phenomenon is particularly rooted in identity and intergroup competition—something that Trump himself often highlights. In September 2015, then-candidate Trump told a crowd, “We will have so much winning if I get elected that you may get bored with the winning” (Schwartz 2015). Trump’s ultimately successful rhetoric, while often criticized for its crudeness and lack of ideological coherence, is consistent in its most important message: we will win. The “we” that is promised to win is a crucial ele-

ment for understanding the election of Donald Trump and, more broadly, recent politics in the American electorate as a whole.

The election of Trump is the culmination of a process by which the American electorate has become deeply socially divided along partisan lines. As the parties have grown racially, religiously, and socially distant from one another, a new kind of social discord has been growing. The increasing political divide has allowed political, public, electoral, and national norms to be broken with little to no consequence. The norms of racial, religious, and cultural respect have deteriorated. Partisan battles have helped organize Americans' distrust for "the other" in politically powerful ways. In this political environment, a candidate who picks up the banner of "us versus them" and "winning versus losing" is almost guaranteed to tap into a current of resentment and anger across racial, religious, and cultural lines, which have recently divided neatly by party.

Across the electorate, Americans have been dividing with increasing distinction into two partisan teams. Emerging research has shown that members of both parties negatively stereotype members of the opposing party, and the extent of this partisan stereotyping has increased by 50 percent between 1960 and 2010 (Iyengar, Sood, and Lelkes 2012). They view the other party as more extreme than their own, while they view their own party as not at all extreme (Jacobson 2012). In June 2016, a Pew study found that for the first time in more than twenty years, majorities of Democrats and Republicans hold *very* unfavorable views of their partisan opponents (Pew 2016). American partisans today prefer to live in neighborhoods with members of their own party, expressing less satisfaction with their neighborhood when told that opposing partisans live there (Hui 2013).

Increasing numbers of partisans don't want party leaders to compromise, blaming the other party for all incivility in the government (Wolf, Strachan, and Shea 2012), even though, according to a 2014 Pew poll, 71 percent of Americans believe that a failure of the two parties to work together would harm the nation "a lot" (Pew 2014). Yet, as a 2016 Pew poll reports, "Most partisans say that, when it comes to how Democrats and Republicans should address the most important issues facing the country, their party should get more out of the deal" (Pew 2016).

Democrats and Republicans also view objective economic conditions differently, depending on which party is in power (Enns and McAvoy 2012). In the week before the 2016 election, 16 percent of Republicans and 61 percent of Democrats believed the US economy was getting better. In the week after the election, 49 percent of Republicans and 46 percent of Democrats believed the economy was improving (Gallup 2016).

These attitudes are all strikingly reminiscent of the relations between the Rattlers and the Eagles. Those boys desperately wanted to defeat each other, for no reason other than that they were in different groups. Group victory is a powerful prize, and American partisans have increasingly seen that goal as more important than the practical matters of governing a nation. Democrats and Republicans do not like each other. But unlike the Rattlers and the Eagles, the Democrats and Republicans today make up 85 percent of the American population.¹

This book looks at the effects of our group identities, particularly our partisan identities and other party-linked identities, on our abilities to fairly judge political opponents, to view politics with a reasoned and unbiased eye, and to evaluate objective reality. I explain how natural and easy it can be for Democrats and Republicans to see the world through partisan eyes and why we are increasingly doing so. Just like the Rattlers and the Eagles, American partisans today are prone to stereotyping, prejudice, and emotional volatility, a phenomenon that I refer to as social polarization. Rather than simply disagreeing over policy outcomes, we are increasingly blind to our commonalities, seeing each other only as two teams fighting for a trophy.

Social polarization is defined by prejudice, anger, and activism on behalf of that prejudice and anger. These phenomena are increasing quickly—more quickly, in fact, than the level of our policy disagreements. We act like we disagree more than we really do. Like the Rattlers and the Eagles, our conflicts are largely over who we think we are rather than over reasoned differences of opinion.

The separation of the country into two teams discourages compromise and encourages an escalation of conflict, with no camp staff to break up the fights. The cooperation and compromise required by democracy grow less attainable as partisan isolation and conflict increase. As political scientist Seth Masket wrote in December 2016, “The Republican Party is demonstrating every day that it hates Democrats more than it loves democracy” (Masket 2016). That is, the election of Donald Trump and the policy and party conflicts his campaign engendered has revealed a preference for party victory over real policy outcomes that has only been building over time.

The First Step Is to Admit There Is a Problem

In 1950, the American Political Science Association (APSA) assembled a Committee on Political Parties that produced a report arguing for a “responsible two-party system” (American Political Science Association 1950). As

they argued, “popular government in a nation of more than 150 million people requires political parties which provide the electorate with a proper range of choice between alternatives of action” (APSA Report 1950, 15). Parties, therefore, simplify politics for people who rightly do not have the time or resources to be political experts. In fact, E. E. Schattschneider argued in 1942 that “political parties created democracy and that modern democracy is unthinkable save in terms of parties” (Schattschneider 1942, 1).

Sean Theriault, in his 2008 book on congressional polarization, described the context of the APSA report this way:

When the report was released (the 81st Congress, 1950), the average Democrat in the House was less than 3 standard deviations away from the average Republican. In the Senate, the distance was less than 2.25 standard deviations. Little changed in the ensuing 25 years. . . . As a result of both polarization between the parties and homogenization within the parties, by the 108th Congress (2003–4), the average party members were separated by more than 5 standard deviations in the House and almost 5 standard deviations in the Senate. . . . Now, political scientists, in claiming that party polarization has drastic consequences, are offering reforms to weaken the party leadership inside Congress. . . . Although polarized parties may be ugly for the legislative process, they were the prescription for a responsible electorate. No longer are constituents forced to make the complicated vote choice between a liberal Republican and a conservative Democrat. Additionally, voters need not wonder whom to credit or blame for the way that Congress operates. (Theriault 2008, 226)

Political parties are indeed important elements of democracy. Parties simplify the voting decision. The vast majority of American citizens are not, and cannot be expected to be, political experts. They do not read legislation; many do not even know which party is currently in the majority. But most voters have a sense of party loyalty. They know, either through a lifetime of learning, from parental socialization, from news media, or through some combination thereof, that one party is better suited to them. This acts as a heuristic, a cognitive shortcut that allows voters to make choices that are informed by some helpful truth. According to Schattschneider (1942), this is a crucial element of representative democracy.

Even better, when people feel linked to a party, they tend to more often participate in politics, just like sports fans attend a game and cheer. Partisanship, then, is one important link between individuals and political action. It encourages citizens to participate and feel involved in their own democracy.

So why write a book about the problems generated by partisan identity? It should be clarified at the start that this book is not opposed to all partisanship, all parties, party systems, or even partisan discord. There has been, and can be, a responsible two-party system in American politics. Instead, this book explains how the responsible part of a two-party system can be called into question when the electorate itself begins to lose perspective on the differences between opponents and enemies. If the mass electorate can be driven to insulate themselves from their partisan opponents, closing themselves off from cordial interaction, then parties become a tool of division rather than organization. Parties can help citizens construct and maintain a functioning government. But if citizens use parties as a social dividing line, those same parties can keep citizens from agreeing to the compromise and cooperation that necessarily define democracy.

Partisanship grows irresponsible when it sends partisans into action for the wrong reasons. Activism is almost always a good thing, particularly when we have so often worried about an apathetic electorate. But if the electorate is moved to action by a desire for victory that exceeds their desire for the greater good, the action is no longer, as regards the general electorate, responsible.

In the chapters that follow, I demonstrate how partisan, ideological, religious, and racial identities have, in recent decades, moved into strong alignment, or have become “sorted.” This means that each party has grown increasingly socially homogeneous. It is not a new finding. Matthew Levendusky (2009) wrote a thorough review of how partisan and ideological identities, in particular, have grown increasingly sorted. Alan Abramowitz (2011) wrote a full summary of the polarization of various demographic groups in the American electorate. Both authors note the increasing divide in the electorate but generally come to the conclusion that, on balance, this sorting or demographic polarization could be read as a source for good, as it has simplified our electoral choices and increased political engagement.

I take a more cautious, even cautionary, view of the effects of the social, demographic, and ideological sorting that has occurred during recent decades. In line with Bill Bishop’s (2009) book *The Big Sort*, I argue that this new alignment has degraded the cross-cutting social ties that once allowed for partisan compromise. This has generated an electorate that is more biased against and angry at opponents, and more willing to act on that bias and anger.

There is a very wide line between a political rally and an angry mob. At some point, however, there must be an assessment of how closely a responsible party can or should approach that line. When parties grow more so-

cially homogeneous, their members are quicker to anger and tend toward intolerance. I argue here that, despite clearer partisan boundaries and a more active public, the polarizing effects of social sorting have done more harm than good to American democracy.

Robert Kagan, a prominent neoconservative, wrote in spring 2016, “Here is the other threat to liberty that Alexis de Tocqueville and the ancient philosophers warned about: that the people in a democracy, excited, angry and unconstrained, might run roughshod over even the institutions created to preserve their freedoms” (Kagan 2016).

As American partisans find themselves in increasingly socially isolated parties, it is worth examining what kind of effects this social isolation may have on their political behavior and sense of civic responsibility.

Cross-Pressures

For decades, political scientists have understood that the effects of partisanship are mitigated by what are called “cross-cutting cleavages.” These are attitudes or identities that are not commonly found in the partisan’s party. If a person is a member of one party and also a member of a social group that is generally associated with the opposing party, the effect of partisanship on bias and action can be dampened. However, if a person is a member of one party and also a member of another social group that is mostly made up of fellow partisans, the biasing and polarizing effect of partisanship can grow stronger.

Since the earliest studies of political behavior, scholars have found that those with “cross-pressures” on their partisanship would be less likely to participate in politics. In 1944, Paul Lazarsfeld and his colleagues and, in 1960, Angus Campbell and his colleagues suggested that partisans who identify with groups associated with the opposing party would be less likely to vote (Lazarsfeld, Berelson, and Gaudet 1944; Campbell et al. 1960). Lipset ([1960] 1963) went so far as to call these cross-pressured voters “politically impotent,” suggesting that “the more pressures brought to bear on individuals or groups which operate in opposing directions, the more likely are prospective voters to withdraw from the situation by ‘losing interest’ and not making a choice” (211). Further research found that these voters would be less strongly partisan (Powell 1976), and that these “cross-cutting cleavages” would mitigate social conflict (Nordlinger 1972).

Berelson, Lazarsfeld, and McPhee (1954), in their seminal book *Voting*, wrote, “For those who change political preferences most readily are those who are least interested, who are subject to conflicting social pressures, who

have inconsistent beliefs and erratic voting histories. Without them—if the decision were left only to the deeply concerned, well-integrated, consistently principled ideal citizens—the political system might easily prove too rigid to adapt to changing domestic and international conditions” (316).

While the traditional view of cross-pressured voters is that they are generally uninvolved and uninterested, some of the foundational literature of political behavior suggests that those with cross-cutting social identities are an important segment of the American electorate. Democracy needs these voters. Berelson and colleagues found them to be an important source of flexibility in American policy responses to changing conditions. Not only are cross-pressured voters a source of popular responsiveness, they are also a buffer against social polarization.

Cross-cutting religious, racial, and partisan identities tend to allow partisans to engage socially with their fellow citizens and partisan opponents. On the other end of the social-sorting spectrum, those with highly aligned religious, racial, and partisan identities are less prepared to engage with their partisan opponents.

But we don't have to go back to 1954 to find positive references to cross-pressured partisans. More recently, Lavine, Johnston, and Steenbergen (2012) described another group of responsive voters, looking directly at what happens when a partisan holds some negative opinions about their own party. They call this “partisan ambivalence.” In line with prior research, they find that these ambivalent partisans are in fact more likely to defect from the party in voting and, further, that they tend to think more carefully about their political decisions, rather than taking partisan identity as a simple cue. These voters are far more like what is normatively desirable in a voter—they are open to new information. Unfortunately, they are also less likely to participate.

The ambivalent, however, are not the voters I focus on in the current study. Here, rather than looking at a clash between partisans and their evaluations of their own party, I look at the relationship between partisan identities and other social identities that are to greater or lesser degrees associated with the party.

The reason I focus on the clash of identities, rather than the clash between party and attitudes, is that social identities have a special power to affect behavior. First, scholars Betsy Sinclair (2012) and Samara Klar (2014) have found that social environments can dramatically affect partisanship and political behavior. Partisans are responsive to the identities and ideas of the people around them.

Second, and more central to the theme of the book, the identities them-

selves have psychological effects of their own. Green, Palmquist, and Schickler (2002) make a strong argument for the social elements of partisan identity but explicitly reject the psychological theory of social identity. I believe that this rejection misses out on a wealth of information provided by the social identity literature. I therefore follow in the footsteps of Steven Greene (1999, 2002, 2004), who has repeatedly made the case for using the psychological definition of a social identity to better understand partisanship and political behavior. This is, in fact, the key to truly taking advantage of the cross-cutting-cleavage literature from decades ago. The power of cross-pressures (or the lack thereof) is far easier to see when social-psychological theory is employed to explain it.

This explanation must begin with a look, first, at the psychological effects of holding a single social identity.

The Origins of Group Conflict

That was the first time we got together and decided we were a group, and not just a bunch of pissed-off guys.

—Mick Mulvaney, Director of the Office of Management and Budget, founding member of the Freedom Caucus (quoted in Lizza 2015)

Humans are hardwired to cling to social groups. There are a few good reasons for us to do so. First, without a sense of social cohesion, we would have had a hard time creating societies and civilizations. Second, and even more basic, humans have a need to categorize (Tajfel et al. 1971). It is how we understand the world. This includes categorizing people. Third, our social categories don't simply help us understand our social environment, they also help us understand ourselves and our place in the world. Once we are part of a group, we know how to identify ourselves in relation to the other people in our society, and we derive an emotional connection and a sense of well-being from being group members.² These are powerful psychological motivations to form groups.

However, simple social cohesion creates boundaries between those in our group and those outside it. Marilynn Brewer has argued that as human beings we have two competing social needs: one for inclusion and one for differentiation. That is, we want to fit in, but we don't want to disappear within the group. If we create clear boundaries between our group and outsiders, we can satisfy our needs for both inclusion and exclusion (Brewer 1991). This means that humans are motivated not only to form groups but

to form exclusive groups. The exclusivity of group identities isn't necessarily based in animosity. As the psychologist Gordon Allport described in 1954, people automatically tend to spend time with people like themselves. Much of the reasoning for this is simple convenience. He explains, "it requires less effort to deal with people who have similar presuppositions" (Allport [1954] 1979, 17). However, once this separation occurs, we are psychologically inclined to evaluate our various groups with an unrealistic view of their relative merits. This is true of nearly any social group that can exist. One famous experiment makes this abundantly clear.

Minimal Group Paradigm

In the late 1960s, a social psychologist named Henri Tajfel wanted to know more about the origins of conflict between groups. He grew interested in the work of Muzafer Sherif, who, based on his research at Robbers Cave and other experiments, had formed a theory that discrimination between groups naturally arises out of a simple conflict of interest between them. Tajfel and his colleagues wanted to know whether the conflict of interest was necessary for creating discrimination between groups, or whether intergroup discrimination grew out of something even simpler. They ran a number of experiments in order to find a baseline intergroup relationship in which there were two distinct groups with so little conflict between them that they did not engage in discrimination or bias. The design and outcome of these experiments became known as the minimal group paradigm.

The original baseline condition required that subjects in the experiments remain isolated in a laboratory, unaware of who was in their ingroup or in their outgroup, unable to even see or hear any of the other subjects. The groups were designed to be meaningless and value-free—no group was objectively superior to the other. In one experiment, subjects were shown a number of dots on a screen, and asked to estimate the number of dots. Some were then told they were overestimators, some that they were underestimators. In a second experiment, the subjects were shown a number of abstract paintings and asked to choose their favorites. Some were told that they preferred the paintings of Klee, others that they preferred the paintings of Kandinsky. These group labels were, in fact, randomly assigned.

After being informed of their group label, the subjects were then asked to allocate money to other subjects (not to themselves), each identified only by a subject identification number and a group label. They allocated money by writing numbers on a sheet of paper. In one experiment, they were explicitly invited to choose between two scenarios: (1) everyone receives the

maximum amount of money; or (2) the subject's own group receives less than the maximum, but the outgroup receives even less than that. They still had never seen another subject's face. They did not stand to gain any benefit themselves.

Tajfel did not expect to find intergroup discrimination in these experiments. He was looking for a design that generated no discrimination and hoping to slowly add conditions until discrimination was achieved (Turner 1996). He expected that with no conflict, no value differences, no contact, and no personal utility gained from group cohesiveness, the group names would not matter in determining the amount of money allocated at the end of the experiment. He expected the common good of the whole to be more attractive than turning the teams against each other. He was incorrect in this expectation.

Even in the most basic definition of a group, Tajfel and his colleagues found evidence of ingroup bias: a preference for or privileging of the ingroup over the outgroup. In every conceivable iteration of this experiment, people privileged the group to which they had been randomly assigned.³ Ingroup bias emerged even when Billig and Tajfel in 1973 explicitly told respondents that they had been randomly assigned to two groups, because it was "easier this way." The ingroup bias still appeared, simply because the experimenters distinguished two groups. These respondents were not fighting for tangible self-interest, the money they allocated went to other people, not themselves. They simply felt psychologically motivated to privilege members of their own imaginary and ephemeral group—a group of people they had never met and would never meet, and whose existence they had only learned of minutes earlier. People react powerfully when they worry about a group losing status, even when the group is "minimal."

The ingroup bias that results from even minimal group membership is very deeply rooted in human psychological function and is perhaps impossible to escape. Adults, children, and even monkeys have automatic negative associations with outgroup individuals (Greene 2013). Simply being part of a group causes ingroup favoritism, with or without objective competition between the groups over real resources. Even when there is nothing to fight over, group members want to win.

Tajfel points out that one of the most important lessons of the minimal group experiments is that when the subjects are given a choice between providing the maximum benefit to all of the subjects, including those in their own group, or gaining less benefits for their group but seeing their team win, "*it is the winning that seems more important to them*" (Tajfel et al. 1971, 172). This is a crucial discovery for understanding American partisan politics

today. The privileging of victory over the greater good is a natural outcome of even the most meaningless group label.

These natural, even primal human tendencies toward group isolation and group comparison open the door to group conflict. The human inclination is to prefer and privilege members of the ingroup. The primary result of group membership is simply to hold positive feelings for the ingroup, and no positive feelings toward outsiders. Even this difference can cause discrimination, but it is not distinctly hostile. Under circumstances of perceived threat or competition, however, the preference for the ingroup can lead to outright hostility toward the outgroup, particularly when the competition is a zero-sum game (Brewer 2001a). The Rattlers and Eagles were involved in a zero-sum competition, as are Democrats and Republicans every election. Only one team can win, and the other team loses. This threat of loss will prove to be an essential ingredient in modern polarization.

Physical Evidence of Group Attachment

It is important to be clear that group identities are not simply factual memberships. Emerging research is finding repeated instances of physical effects of group membership on human bodies and brains. Avenanti, Sirigu, and Aglioti (2010) showed respondents video of hands being pricked by pins. People tended to unconsciously twitch their own hand when watching these videos, except when the hand belonged to a member of a racial outgroup.

Scheepers and Derks (2016) explained that it is possible to observe changes in brain activity within 200 milliseconds after a face is shown to a person, and that these changes depend on the social category of the face. Furthermore, they found that people who identify with a group use the same parts of their brain to process group-related and self-related information, but a different part of the brain to process outgroup-related information.

People learn differently depending on whether an ingroup member or an outgroup member is observing them. Hobson and Inzlicht (2016) found that when learning a new task, a person will learn more slowly if he or she is being observed by an outgroup member.

You can find evidence of group membership in saliva. Sampasivam et al. (2016) found that when people's group identity is threatened, they secrete higher levels of cortisol in their saliva, indicating stress.

Even our emotions are neurally connected to our groups. People's brains respond similarly when people are sad and when they are observing a sad ingroup member, but when they are observing a sad outgroup member, their brains respond by activating areas of positive emotion. As Scheepers

and Derks (2016) explain, “favoring the ingroup is not a conscious choice. Instead, people automatically and preferentially process information related to their ingroup over the outgroup” (8).

This is an important point for all of the analyses that follow. Group-based reactions to events and information are not entirely voluntary. A person cannot simply turn off his or her preference for the ingroup. It should not be considered an insult to point out the inherent ingroup bias shared by all humans. Ingroup bias is deeply rooted in the physical body as well as the thoughtful mind, and no person is immune.

Invented Conflicts

Social identities can alter the way people see the world. Zero-sum conflict between groups is easily exacerbated and can be based in both real and invented conflicts. During the Robbers Cave experiment, the boys from both teams began accusing each other of sabotage that had never occurred. The Rattlers accused the Eagles of throwing trash on their beach (they had forgotten that they themselves had left the trash behind the day before). The Eagles erroneously accused the Rattlers of throwing ice and stones into their swimming hole after one of them considered the water to be colder than the day before, and another stubbed his toe.

Allport ([1954] 1979) explains that group members “easily exaggerate the degree of difference between groups, and readily misunderstand the grounds for it. And, perhaps most important of all, the separateness may lead to genuine conflicts of interest as well as to many imaginary conflicts” (19). Allport’s words were meant to describe the conflicts between racial, religious, or class-based groups. The previous passage, however, is almost eerily prescient in its descriptions of the current conflict between Democrats and Republicans in American politics. Partisan conflict today is characterized by an exaggerated and poorly understood difference between the parties, based in both genuine and imaginary conflicts of interest.

Political psychologists Milton Lodge and Charles Taber in 2013 wrote a comprehensive review of the effects of motivated reasoning on voters. Motivated reasoning is the process by which individuals rationalize their choices in a way that is consistent with what they prefer to believe, rather than with what is actually true. Lodge and Taber (2013) write that “political behavior and attitudes are very much a function of the unconscious mechanisms that govern memory accessibility” (1). Motivated reasoning is not exactly “inventing” conflicts, but it is the brain’s way of making preexisting attitudes easier to believe. This occurs not by choice, but at a subconscious level in the

brain, where the things a person wants to believe are easier to locate than the things that contradict a person's worldview. In this way, imaginary and exaggerated conflicts are very difficult to remedy. The human brain prefers not to revise erroneous beliefs about opponents. Eric Groenendyk (2013) suggests that these often-elaborate justifications in defense of the party can occasionally be broken down by reminding partisans of civic values and a desire for accuracy. The tendency toward motivated reasoning, however, remains prominent.

American politics has always been characterized by real differences between the two parties and by true conflicts of interest. As the APSA committee on responsible two-party government explained, the parties should be distinguishable and unique. They should represent real differences in governing philosophy, so that citizens can choose between them. A partisan's natural inclination, once he or she has chosen sides, is to engage strongly in claiming victory for his or her own side. In fact, politics, along with religion, has long been one of the most famous dinner-party topics to avoid if you want the discussion to remain polite. None of this is the major problem with American political identities today.

The trouble arises when party competitions grow increasingly impassioned due to the inclusion of additional, nonpartisan social identities in every partisan conflict. The American political parties are growing socially polarized. Religion and race, as well as class, geography, and culture, are dividing the parties in such a way that the effect of party identity is magnified. The competition is no longer between only Democrats and Republicans. A single vote can now indicate a person's partisan preference *as well as* his or her religion, race, ethnicity, gender, neighborhood, and favorite grocery store. This is no longer a single social identity. Partisanship can now be thought of as a mega-identity, with all the psychological and behavioral magnifications that implies.

American citizens currently believe that they are in a partisan competition against a socially homogeneous group of outsiders, sometimes to an exaggerated degree (Ahler and Sood 2016). At a dinner party today, talking about politics is increasingly also talking about religion and race. They are wrapped together in a new way. Social sorting is not simply a score on a scale, it is a general trend of partisan homogenization. Ironically, politics and religion may be increasingly acceptable topics at a dinner party today, because most of our dinner parties include mainly socially and politically similar people. When we limit our exposure to outgroup individuals, the differences we perceive between parties grow increasingly exaggerated, and imaginary conflicts of interest rival genuine ones.

Why Does This Matter?

In this binary tribal world, where everything is at stake, everything is in play, there is no room for quibbles about character, or truth, or principles. If everything—the Supreme Court, the fate of Western civilization, the survival of the planet—depends on tribal victory, then neither individuals nor ideas can be determinative.

—Charles Sykes, “Charlie Sykes on Where the Right Went Wrong”

Unlike the Rattlers and the Eagles, the Democrats and Republicans aren’t fighting over a simple trophy. Their job, as the only two governing parties, is to enact real policies that benefit or harm real people. When winning becomes as important as or more important than the content of those policies, real people feel the consequences.

As American social identities grow increasingly party linked, parties become more influential in American political decision-making, behavior, and emotion. Two separate factors drive these changes. The first is the effect of partisanship on policy opinion itself. Policy opinion is defined here as the collection of attitudes that an individual holds about how the government should (or should not) address particular public problems. It could be argued that partisanship encourages more consistency in political attitudes and that this helps democracy.⁴ However, in the extreme this consistency can also be a signal that American voters are no longer thinking independently, that they are less open to alternative ideas.⁵ In the latter case, the policy opinions of Americans become a reflexive response to party cues, and deliberation or reasoned disagreement grows increasingly difficult.

The second effect is the main concern of this book, and that is the power of social identities to affect party evaluations, levels of anger, and political activism, *independently of a person’s policy opinions*. When megaparties form, social polarization increases in the American electorate. Both social and issue-based polarization have recently been shown to decrease public desire for compromise (Wolf, Strachan, and Shea 2012), decrease the impact of substantive information on policy opinions (Druckman, Peterson, and Slothuus 2013), increase income inequality (Bonica et al. 2013), discourage economic investment and output, increase unemployment, and inhibit public understanding of objective economic information (Enns and McAvoy 2012), among other things. Polarization is generally not considered to be a helpful political development.

The increase in social and issue-based polarization has been blamed on elected officials, the primary system, gerrymandering, the partisan media, and a host of other influences. This book takes account of these generally

structural and outward-looking explanations for social polarization but adds to the discussion the possibility that one source of our polarized politics is a psychological motivation that most Americans share. Social polarization is an increasingly intense conflict between our two partisan groups. It is based in the same impulses that drive racial and religious prejudice. And just as in the case of racial or religious prejudice, there are institutional, outward-looking explanations, as well as individual psychological explanations. These inner sources of social polarization are less visible, but they are Americans' responsibility to observe and understand.

As citizens, we may not be able to change the primary rules or tone down the partisan media, but we can begin to understand how much of our political behavior is driven by forces that are not rational or fair-minded. This book lays out the evidence for the current state of social polarization, in which our political identities are running circles around our policy preferences in driving our political thoughts, emotions, and actions. I explain how this came to be, illustrate the extent of the problem, and offer some suggestions on how to bring American politics back to a state of civil competition, rather than a state of victory-centric conflict.