Division Street

Mining the data, a sociologist contends that the American electorate is moving to extremes

By Glenn C. Altschuler | June 15, 2008

The Big Sort: Why the Clustering of Like-Minded America is Tearing Us Apart
By Bill Bishop with Robert G. Cushing
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More than three decades ago, political theorist Robert Dahl reminded Americans that a "pattern of cleavages" - by race, faith, geography, and class - had been a source of stability for the United States. As long as different interest groups did not coalesce into a permanent (and tyrannous) majority, he wrote, echoing James Madison, they would enrich the body politic. He also cautioned that if the cleavages came to occur along the same lines, posing "two alternative ways of life, two kinds of society, two visions of man's fate and man's hope," with those across the divide viewed as enemies, not well-intentioned opponents, "then the severity of conflicts is likely to increase."

Ideological and political polarization, according to journalist and blogger Bill Bishop, is now the norm. In "a kind of self-perpetuating, self-reinforcing social division," he argues in "The Big Sort," Americans have formed homogeneous groups, cocooned in neighborhoods, cities, and counties. These quiet revolutionaries have changed the economy, built up and emptied out cities, transformed institutions of faith and fellowship, and established two tribes, with remarkably coherent beliefs on issues ranging from abortion to gay marriage to taxes to national defense. Following their lead, politicians have stopped trying to bring people with vastly different values and backgrounds together in national community.

In collaboration with sociologist and statistician Robert G. Cushing, Bishop makes a compelling quantitative case that Americans are segmented and segregated. Well-educated young people, for example, who were evenly distributed in cities in 1990, have flocked to a dozen high-tech metropolises, including Raleigh-Durham, Portland, Seattle, San Francisco, and Austin, which facilitate social interaction. In 2000, the adult inhabitants of 62 metropolitan areas (many of them in the Rustbelt or Sunbelt) included fewer than 17 percent who had completed college, while in 32 cities more than 34 percent of adults had a bachelor's degree or better.

Political divisions, Bishop indicates, reflect "how - and where - people have come to reside." Between 1976 and 2004, the gap between Republicans and Democrats grew in 2,085 counties across the United States. The parties were more competitive in only 1,026 counties. In 1976, fewer than 25 percent of Americans lived in places where the votes for Gerald Ford and Jimmy Carter differed by 20 percent or more. In 2004, nearly half of the electorate lived in such landslide counties. Republicans, of course, "were the winners in the Big Sort." While relatively affluent Americans moved from one Democratic landslide county to another, less well-off whites migrated from Democratic to Republican counties. From 1980 to 2005, Republican counties gained 48.4 million people, while Democratic counties picked up 23.1 million.

Bishop uses the findings of social psychologists to bolster his claim that the proliferation of homogeneous communities is exacerbating political polarization. Over time, their studies indicate, mixed company tends to moderate beliefs, while like-minded groups tend to adopt more extreme attitudes. The latter reward conformity, ostracize contrarians, and respect those who articulate views somewhat more extreme than the group average. No wonder, Bishop adds, people seek the comfort of agreement (on politics as well as lifestyles) in their houses of worship, with only 7 percent of megachurches describing themselves as moderate.

Jam-packed with fascinating data, "The Big Sort" presents a provocative portrait of the splintering of America. But Bishop does not always connect the dots. He does not distinguish between "The Big Sort" as a cause - or reflection - of political polarization. He conflates balkanization and polarization. And his evidence doesn't seem to justify his conclusion that "the clustering of the like-minded is tearing us apart."

Bishop is too quick to dismiss a simpler - and more conventional - explanation of the more sharply partisan electorate. Since 1980, political parties have engaged in their own "Big Sort." The ideological differences between the parties have grown more substantive and stark. Eastern establishment moderate Republicans and "yellow dog" conservative Democrats were purged. In Congress, bipartisanship gave way to party-line voting. Several hot-button issues, including abortion, prayer in schools, and evolution, enflamed political passions. Consequently, voters grew more likely to pledge allegiance to the donkey or the elephant - and reaffirm their choice in elections. After all, as Bishop acknowledges, seeing the gray is often "the ticket to withdrawal."

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It is not all that clear, moreover, that Americans are as deeply divided - or as committed to every plank in their party - as Bishop thinks they are. In 2004, for example, 38 percent of voters who favored gay marriage and 52 percent of those who supported civil unions voted for George W. Bush. So did one third of those who thought the federal government should play a more substantial role in solving problems - and 16 percent of those who thought the president deferred too much to large corporations.

Bishop acknowledges that the electorate has been polarized before - and then new, "cross-cutting issues" changed the political landscape. He even nominates reform of the healthcare system (which has been endorsed by a diverse coalition including Wal-Mart, Intel, Kelly Services, and the Service Employees International Union) as a possible candidate. He insists, however, that it's wishful thinking to anticipate forging a national consensus "out of our disparate communities." But what about less political polarization, among politicians and in the electorate? Moderates and independents, including Latino Catholics and Rustbelt Reagan Democrats, seem up for grabs in 2008. Evangelicals are more interested in global warming and the alleviation of poverty. And presidential aspirants are gravitating, albeit slowly, toward the middle of the road. America may not yet be out of sorts.

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