

BROOKINGS

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My personal journey through polarized America

Darrell M. West Wednesday, March 6, 2019

Editor's Note:

The following piece is comprised of several excerpts from the book "Divided Politics, Divided Nation: Hyperconflict in the Trump Era," a forthcoming Brookings Institution Press memoir by Darrell West.

America's polarization has unfolded over a long period of time. There have been many developments from Reaganomics to Obamacare that have divided people and intensified political conflict. I know because it has been the story of my life. I grew up on a dairy farm in rural Ohio, taught political science at Brown University, and ended up in Washington, D.C., at one of the leading think tanks. My two sisters are Christian fundamentalists who love President Donald Trump, while my brother is a liberal who sees the chief executive as a menace. I recount our country's political history as well as that of my family in my forthcoming memoir, "Divided Politics, Divided Nation: Hyperconflict in the Trump Era."

The Clinton presidency represented a major turning point in how liberals and conservatives viewed one another. For example, one of my sisters, Joanne, was very unhappy when the Monica Lewinsky affair became public. When news leaked out about the relationship, the country was pitted in a red state-blue state divide that I knew all too well from my youth. Conservative Midwesterners and Southerners were outraged at adulterous oral sex in the White House; coastal liberals, while decrying the private behavior, claimed his personal misdeeds had no relevance for his job performance. Right after the news broke, Joanne wrote me: "I don't think this will die down overnight. I think he's in trouble."

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Two months later, she still was upset about the scandal. “It’s horrible all the jokes they say on late night television and everywhere else about him. It’s an embarrassment to our country.” Conservatives thought liberals were being hypocritical in minimizing this ethical transgression, while liberals didn’t understand how upsetting Clinton’s personal behavior was to people in the Bible Belt. When the First Family had the family dog fixed, my hometown friends joked that Hillary had neutered the wrong Clinton.

The Iraq War also tested our family ties and the country in general. My brother, Ken, was no fan of the Bush presidency and sent me liberal memes that read, “Bush. Like a Rock. Only Dumber,” and “When Fascism Comes to America, It Will Be Wrapped in a Flag, Carrying a Cross.” And in a precursor to Trump’s chants about Hillary Clinton in 2016, he passed along a popular Democratic meme about Bush, calling for “jail to the chief.”

Not to be outdone on the humor front, my sister Shirley sent me a birthday card during Bush’s final term showing a smiling picture of “President Hillary Clinton” sitting in the Oval Office. On the next page, the punch line announced, “See? There are some things scarier than turning a year older.” Understanding my political predispositions didn’t match her own, Shirley added a personal note to the card: “Happy Birthday, Darrell! I’m sure you didn’t find this card as funny or scary as we did!!!”

All of the political conflict illustrated the enormous gulf that existed between rural, Midwestern, and urban, East Coast communities. One Christmas, we went to Shirley's house for dinner. During the course of the meal, someone brought up the issue of Iraq and George W. Bush's handling of the war. My two brothers-in-law gave rousing defenses of Bush's policies and said how unfair it was that Bush was being criticized for American troops who tortured foreign prisoners.

I was astounded that anyone would justify the use of torture. Not only would this violate the New Testament dictum to love thy neighbor, but it also raised another issue: If we torture, how can we condemn other nations that do the same thing? As my first wife listened to this conversation, she could not believe what she heard. Knowing my Ohio family was very religious, she posed a sly question. "What would Jesus say about torture?" she plaintively asked.

Much to our surprise, though, both of my brothers-in-law who were devout Christians said that Jesus would torture terrorists and Iraqi prisoners because those people were barbaric. One even made the further point that Jesus would "use nuclear weapons in Iraq and get rid of the whole damn country." This spurred a vigorous dinner debate over whether Jesus would or would not support the use of nuclear weapons in Iraq.

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Things were no easier under the Obama presidency. While Obama delighted my liberal friends with his progressive values and being the first African-American president, most of my Midwestern family and friends seethed at his victory. Nearly all of them hated him and thought he had no respect for mainstream values. When Joanne heard I was going to the White House for an event, she told me to “talk some sense into them.” My nephew Doug was even more blunt. He asked me to tell Obama to “stop being an idiot.”

Most of my conservative friends condemned Obama’s economic stimulus package and thought the Affordable Care Act would destroy individual choice in health care. After I advertised a radio appearance dealing with Martin Luther King Day on my Facebook page, one of my hometown friends wrote: “[Y]ou can thank the Obamas for the racial divide. ... In my 58 years of life, the 8 years he was in office is the most divided this country has ever been.”

Doug, the husband of one of my nieces, informed me of the only upside he saw to the Obama presidency. Realizing that talk of gun control under Obama would drive up the prices of guns and ammunition, he invested in them right after the election and then sold later when prices were much higher, making a handsome profit. I was impressed at his clear foresight on how rural America would respond to a liberal Democrat in the White House—and his skill at monetizing that insight.

Despite the seeming intensity of the Clinton, Bush, and Obama years, the emotions were nothing like the crescendo reached during the Trump presidency. Most of my high school friends and relatives voted for Trump. It wasn't that they were super thrilled with him. As religious people, many of them disliked his womanizing and the fact he had been married three times. Shirley did not approve of his supposed affair with pornography star Stormy Daniels. My sister shared the sentiment expressed by Robert Jeffress of First Baptist Church in Dallas that "evangelicals knew they were not electing an altar boy. Forgiveness is part of the evangelical gospel message. We all are sinners."

But the prospect of a Hillary Clinton presidency was completely unacceptable to them. The former senator was dishonest and untrustworthy, they felt, and would take America in the wrong direction. Shirley explained to me one day, "I wish the liberal media would accept Trump and quit trying to find something to impeach him on. Obama and Clinton did worse and nobody said a word."

A year into his presidency, I asked Joanne why she liked Trump, and she told me, "He thinks outside the box." By that, she meant he took unconventional positions and did not necessarily accept the perceived wisdom of past failed approaches. Shirley, meanwhile, felt the news media were not giving him a fair chance. "The media are corrupt," she argued. But good things were happening under Trump, she felt, because "God is using him."

Ken did not share this view of the Trump presidency. He forwarded a Bette Midler tweet that read, "The Washington Post says in his 1st year as Prez, Trump made 2,140 false claims & this year he's more than doubled that in just 6 months. In a way it's a miracle. Nobody's ever seen that much bullshit come out of a horse's ass."

These tensions came to a head during the Senate hearing on Brett Kavanaugh's confirmation to the Supreme Court. Nominated by President Trump to replace retiring Justice Anthony Kennedy, the crucial swing vote on the nine-member

court, legislators of the two political parties initially split over Kavanaugh's legal philosophy, service during the George W. Bush presidency, and judicial temperament.

But late in the hearing process, conflict sharply escalated when Christine Blasey Ford alleged Kavanaugh sexually assaulted her in high school. According to her testimony before the Senate Judiciary Committee, Ford said an intoxicated Kavanaugh groped her, held her down, and attempted to remove her clothing in an upstairs bedroom without her consent. She recalled how he placed his hand over her mouth when she attempted to scream and laughed with his friend Mark Judge at the assault. "Indelible in the hippocampus is the laughter, the uproarious laughter between the two and having fun at my expense," she recalled. "I was underneath one of them, while the two laughed. Two friends having a really good time with one another."

In his testimony, Kavanaugh strongly denied the accusation. "I am innocent of this charge," he claimed, and argued, "This confirmation process has become a national disgrace." He decried the circus atmosphere and angrily interrupted senators seeking to question him. As soon as the hearing ended, President Trump tweeted his support of Kavanaugh, writing, "His testimony was powerful, honest, and riveting. Democrats' search and destroy strategy is disgraceful and this process has been a total sham and effort to delay, obstruct, and resist."

Public opinion divided sharply along partisan lines. A CNN national survey found nearly complete polarization among the general population. Ninety-one percent of Democrats opposed the Kavanaugh confirmation, while 89 percent of Republicans supported it. There also was a strong gender gap, with women holding negative views about the nominee and men being more supportive.

The national political divide reflected the rifts within my own immediate family. I talked to my sisters a few days after the Senate confirmed Kavanaugh on a 50 to 48 vote. Joanne told me she supported the court nominee. "You want to talk

about polarization? I feel he is a good man who is qualified. He has been torn to shreds because of bias. It is a crying shame. ... People are outraged in going back to high school to bring up those things. You better never had made a mistake at any point in your life.”

Shirley also was upset at the Kavanaugh hearings. “The whole thing was a smear. ... [Ford] couldn’t remember anything and no one corroborated anything. It was a sham. [Democrats] have never accepted Trump. ... Those people in D.C. are horrible. What is wrong with the people up there? They are supposed to be leading the country.”

My brother and I did not share these views of the Senate decision. Ken wrote that Kavanaugh’s confirmation was “deplorable. Raw power used. Disregard for women. Totally inadequate and incomplete FBI investigation.” Both of us felt Ford’s testimony was credible and persuasive. She clearly had suffered a lot from the high school trauma and had told people at various points before Kavanaugh was nominated for the Supreme Court about the attack. High school and college classmates submitted statements under oath about his high school drinking excesses, and how he became angry and abusive when intoxicated. They painted a youthful portrait of the nominee substantially at odds with how Kavanaugh testified under oath.

My family isn’t the only one divided by politics. In the 2018 midterm elections, familial discord spilled over into several races. For example, Paul Gosar, a conservative Republican member of Congress from Arizona, faced the unusual situation of siblings who appeared in an ad urging voters not to support their brother’s re-election. Siblings Tim, Jennifer, Gaston, Joan, Grace, and David appeared in a Democratic commercial criticizing their brother’s right-wing views. “We gotta stand up for our good name,” said David. “This is not who we are.” Grace noted, “I couldn’t be quiet any longer, nor should any of us be. ... It would be difficult to see my brother as anything but a racist.” Gosar, who would go on to

win re-election, responded with a sharp retort. “My siblings who chose to film ads against me are all liberal Democrats who hate President Trump. Stalin would be proud,” he angrily complained. And in Nevada, GOP gubernatorial candidate Adam Laxalt saw several cousins speak out against him. At a fundraising event, Monique Laxalt explained, “We feel an obligation to speak out in opposition to Adam Laxalt’s candidacy” due to his positions on gun control and taxes, among other issues. “We do not believe Adam Laxalt represents Nevadans or has the interests of our people at heart,” she said.

Why is this happening now? One answer lies in technology. Digital technologies enable people to sort themselves into like-minded groups. Social media platforms make it easy for those with strong viewpoints to find one another. In day-to-day life, it might be hard for partisans to find people with similar perspectives, but on the internet, politicized communities are one click away.

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In addition, the media landscape has changed dramatically. As argued by professors Yochai Benkler, Robert Faris, and Hal Roberts, conservative outlets, such as Fox News, the Daily Caller, Breitbart, Infowars, and the like have pushed public narratives sharply to the right. At the same time, the liberal mainstream media does little to help bring people together due to its tendency to sensationalize events and elevate political punditry over substantive reporting.

A world based on political enemies is a black-and-white situation with few shades of grey. There is no room for people who see both sides of the disagreement. Facts are distinctive to each side, and differences in impressions affect the way issues are addressed. It leads to what University of Maryland political scientist Lilliana Mason calls “partisan prejudice,” or negative feelings about people from the opposite party.

Harvard professors Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt worry a lot about this kind of polarization. They write:

“When societies divide into partisan camps with profoundly different worldviews, and when those differences are viewed as existential and irreconcilable, political rivalry can devolve into partisan hatred. Parties come to view each other not as legitimate rivals, but as dangerous enemies. Losing ceases to be an accepted part of the political process and instead becomes a catastrophe. When that happens, politicians are tempted to abandon forbearance and win at any cost. If we believe our opponents are dangerous, should we not use any means necessary to stop them?”

It is important to safeguard democracy and restore civility in politics. We need to pay attention to the poor quality of news coverage, digital technologies that promote extremism, voting laws that make it difficult to participate in politics, the loss of economic opportunity that makes voters understandably angry, and a general skepticism over whether individuals matter anymore. Making progress on these root causes of polarization is vital for the future of the country.