**Wednesday, Oct. 30, 2024 / Polar opposites**

**[HALF SECOND OF SILENCE]**

**[BILLBOARD]**

SCORING IN <On a Straight Down Train Car>

NOEL: Americans are more politically polarized than ever, you may have heard.

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.google.com/search?sca_esv=7acc2a8aceb80322&q=joe+biden+garbage&tbm=vid&source=lnms&fbs=AEQNm0Aa4sjWe7Rqy32pFwRj0UkWfbQph1uib-VfD_izZO2Y5pt2wBeNNRFhtfGNWgf58yx92Jp-uhTXGV66lJaxGBpwA5xPERCW2nvZPgtahTBof7yTmhNDobVZKeXe10eX55Ne96XXR___GO1xKmW6CzL0R6YEYzf6ww9x1iVDuPPsvmaKaCpFg6XIe_78QaS_C8bAVOnxM91-QY2ebiCJit619FPFRA&sa=X&ved=2ahUKEwjYp721rraJAxXlEVkFHXTjD_gQ0pQJegQIEBAB&biw=1600&bih=796&dpr=1.8#fpstate=ive&vld=cid:f65cf24f,vid:2-E-tThyk1E,st:0)*> President Joe Biden: “The only garbage I see floating out there is his supporters.”*

NOEL: We’re so polarized that seven years ago, political scientists at Johns Hopkins started asking Americans questions like: do you think people who vote for the other party are EVIL? Or even LESS THAN HUMAN?

*<CLIP> LILY: This is the type of thing that we measure in other countries, because it's the type of attitude that exists before if there's a mass violence event. It doesn't always lead to violence, but whenever there is sort of mass violence, you have to have these dehumanizing and vilifying attitudes present beforehand, because otherwise it's really it's hard to harm another human being and still feel like a morally good person.*

NOEL: The results … may disappoint but not shock you. What might shock you, though, is that we’re starting to corral areas of our lives that were a-political into partisan frames. Today, Explained presents: Polar Opposites.

**[THEME]**

NOEL KING (Host): I’m Noel King. A shining example of American hyper-partisanship is playing out in Florida. Next week, voters are making a choice about their school boards. Now, if you don’t have kids, you might wonder: does a school board affect ME? It does, people! A school board spends your tax money. Like most school boards in America, Florida’s are non-partisan. You run for the board; no one knows what your politics are. Florida wants to change that. To find out why, we called Jeff.

JEFF SOLOCHEK (Education reporter): My name is Jeff Solochek and I am an education reporter at the Tampa Bay Times in Florida.

NOEL: So today on the show, we're going to be talking about a change that may be coming to school boards in Florida. Let's talk first about how they currently operate. How does the school board work?

JEFF: School boards, generally speaking, meet once or twice a month and they are in charge of things like policies, expelling students, setting all sorts of calendars for when kids go to school, which is important for us right now as we're looking at hurricane make up days.

NOEL: Hmm!

JEFF: And what we find is that you have school board members who like to say that they are doing things for the best interests of children, not for political purposes. And that's where this whole issue of should they be partizan or not be partizan comes up, because some people say as soon as you add the party politics to the elections of school board members, what you wind up with is more partizan and less policy.

NOEL: So at the moment, if I'm running for school board in a particular Florida county, does everyone know what my party affiliation is?

JEFF: You're not supposed to. You're supposed to be able to talk about what your politics are. So you could say, I really support Governor Ron DeSantis and the things that he stands for. But you're not supposed to say I am the Republican nominee for school board because right now in our Constitution, it says that you are to be a nonpartisan elected official.

NOEL: What are Floridians being asked to change this year?

JEFF: The request is to basically do away with the nonpartisan elections and to make it so that everybody runs as a party affiliate. So you would have a Republican primary, a Democratic primary, and then those would winnow out the candidates to the representatives from each party, they would go to the general election and face any “no party” candidates or writings or whoever skipped the primary process because they didn't have a party. And that would be how it would be selected.

NOEL: How would you describe the stakes of this decision? What's everyone worried about?

JEFF: I think what they're worried about is that people who don't spend the time looking into the actual things that these candidates stand for and are hoping that the R or the D will substitute in for all of the things that that they believe in and represent, will make a difference and that suddenly you'll see, you know, a political school board. One that is based on people who voted based simply on political party as opposed to the issues.

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-Wmh12E_pB8&t=2078s)*> USF:*

*Damaris Allen, the executive director of Families for Strong Public Schools: In the last few years, school board members will not meet with people who are not of their same party, and I’m concerned this will perpetuate that problem and not fix it.*

NOEL: And the U.S. is very divided. And we know that politics get ugly. And it seems like a school board is a place where at least we don't have to get as ugly as we have been elsewhere. So why do proponents of this measure want the school boards to become… to become political?

JEFF: Really, since we had the pandemic and people got really upset about masks and schools closing and things of that nature, people started to really take sides. And and school board meetings did become very political.

SCORING IN <That Parachute Deam>

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LsVwHq5qrQo)*> SARASOTA SCHOOLS:*

*Crystal Matusas: Our country is certainly heading toward communism and mask mandates are just the beginning. Mandatory vaccines are next until we have no freedom of choice at all.*

you had a lot of shouting and screaming going on.

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uSdjRhv4cf8)*> FOX13 TAMPA BAY:*

*<<shouting>>*

*Sarasota parent 1: Do your job!*

*Sarasota parent 2: These are our kids, not yours! Where are yours?!*

And here in Florida, at least, and I'm sure in a lot of other places, sides formed. And what you had basically was people taking the Republican or the Democrat position, and and they say now you should know who who you should be transparent. You should know what these people stand for.

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WoK5ffosUrA)*> WMBB NEWS 13:*

*Steve Moss, Bay District School Board Member: Like all the other constitutionally elected officers. It would make sense, I believe, that school board would be just the same as county commission, governor, and president…and all those other type of offices out there that they would be partisans…*

And the R and D are stand ins for a lot of the things. You'll know what they stand for, not just on education issues, but on a whole variety of issues. How do you want to spend taxpayer dollars? What do you think about the philosophy of parents and all the other things? It's supposed to be just a good, easy substitute. Be clear. Tell the truth. Why should you not tell the truth of what you stand for and who you are?

SCORING OUT

NOEL: Where is this push coming from? If we were to say, go right up to the top and say, who wants this? Who wants this?

JEFF: The Republican Party in Florida, the lawmakers in the legislature pushed this agenda and they got it on the ballot.

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.myfloridahouse.gov/VideoPlayer.aspx?eventID=8867)*> Florida House of Representatives:*

*Senator Gruders: The reason why the kids will be better off under this bill, is because you have these school districts that are managing billions of dollars. I encourage everybody to vote yes on this resolution because at the end of the day, the voters deserve full transparency when it comes to elections.*

NOEL: The Florida Republican Party is the one pushing to make the school boards political. The the top, the tippy top of the Florida Republican Party would be Governor Ron DeSantis. How does DeSantis fit in on questions of local county school boards?

JEFF: Ron DeSantis has really taken steps that no other governor in Florida really has ever taken before.

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_BttWl9WZ7o)*> Moms for Liberty:*

*Florida Governor Ron Desantis: Let me tell you something.. You start messing with our kids, we’ve got problems.*

Back in 2022, he made it clear that his education agenda, which is heavily involved in the parental rights movement, as he likes to call it, is something he wants to see supported at the local level.

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0M042jHxXNo)*> CBS MIAMI:*

*Florida Governor Ron DeSantis: We will continue to recognize that in the state of Florida, parents have a fundamental role in the education, healthcare, and wellbeing of their children*

In 2022, he endorsed a whole bunch of candidates for school board, I think it was 30, and he had very good success rate with that. He asked them to sign a form basically saying, I support your agenda. And then he endorsed them, put money behind them.

<[CLIP](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dyitkwHJulg)> NEWS4JAX:

Florida Governor Ron DeSantis: These school board races, they will reverberate in significance. I used to not think much of them, I’ll admit it, I mean I would research the candidates…

he continued to do that in 2024 with a little less success rate. But and he also started attacking incumbent school board members who he didn't like. And so the first time he just endorsed people who he did like. This time he came out against people who he didn't like,

*DeSantis: You have a leftist school board member who was denigrating one of our folks as being a token, how disrespectful is that? Is that the kind of person you want on the school board? Someone that’s derogatory and is controlled by the union?*

indicating very clearly that his agenda is one that he wants to see in place. And those sitting school board members who did not support his position, would not get his support, and actually somebody else would.

NOEL: So Floridians do get to vote on whether or not they want this. What is the polling data telling us? Do they want this?

JEFF: The most recent poll that I saw was from the University of North Florida, and it showed about 40% support, which is far short of what it would need to pass in Florida. You need to have a 60% to pass and an amendment. But there was also a 30% undecided in there. And also it's a poll. And so who knows? Who knows what's going to happen exactly. But it has a chance. But a small chance I think.

NOEL: So could the fact that Florida residents, residents themselves seem, eh, like maybe they don't want this, could that be a sign that Florida is not as politically divided as we thought or that people are kind of retaining their senses and saying, no, for goodness sake, we have to do this everywhere else. Let's not do it in the school, too?

JEFF: I think that Florida is pretty divided in a lot of ways, but I think that people have been tired of the division when it comes to the schools. It got really old listening to people scream and yell about things that most people don't want to deal with when it comes to their children and education. They want to see their children be educated. And and I think we've seen with the election results that we had just in August that a lot of the candidates who Moms for Liberty who and and groups like that, the 1776 Project and Ron DeSantis backed did not do well even in heavily Republican counties.

SCORING IN <cubic step>

It's a hard question to answer because there are there's a lot of politics still out there. And also now we have, you know, hurricane weariness….so it's kind of hard to say what people are thinking anymore.

NOEL: Jeff Solochek, Tampa Bay Times. Next up, a political scientist who gave Americans permission to say our worst - and we did.

**[BREAK]**

**[BUMPER]**

*<CLIP> STAR WARS EP 1:*

*Yoda: Fear leads to anger. Anger leads to hate. Hate leads to.*

*Patrick Boyd: Today, Explained*

LILY MASON (Political Scientist): I'm Lilliana Mason. I am an associate professor of political science at the SNF Agora Institute at Johns Hopkins University. And I study political psychology and political polarization and attitudes about political violence.

NOEL: Two main parties in the United States, Democrats and Republicans. What do you know as a scholar? As a researcher? What do you know about what we think about the other group that is incorrect?

LILY: Everything!

NOEL: Oh!

LILY: we all we all overestimate the extent to which people in the other party are extreme in terms of the policies that they would prefer, we also overestimate the degree to which the party is made up of groups that we kind of think of as like the stereotypical groups associated with the party. So Republicans think that the Democratic Party is majority Black. It's not. Democrats think that the Republican Party is majority wealthy people who make over $250,000 a year. It's actually like 2%. And so we tend to assume that the stereotypical group that we think of when we think of the party, we tend to assume that that makes up the whole party and we're all wrong. And and in fact, political scientists and sociologists have done experiments where we correct people's misperceptions and it actually makes them hate the other party less because they hadn't realized that the party wasn't made up of maybe people they didn't like or wasn't made up of people who are really extreme in their policy preferences. We are overestimating the extent to which the other party is made up of people that we assume we would really dislike.

NOEL: You've written two books that seem relevant here. Tell me the names of your books.

LILY: The first book is *Uncivil Agreement How Politics Became Our Identity*. And the second book is *Radical American Partisanship.*

NOEL: How do you define Partisanship?

LILY: The classic understanding of Partisanship is just sort of which party that you which party you vote for based on your assessments of politics. But. But more recently, we're starting to think of Partisanship as a social identity, meaning it's a psychological connection to to the other people that are in the party and feeling like what happens to our party impacts our own sense of self-esteem and self-worth. The traditional view is thinking of choosing who to vote for like a banker chooses an investment. And and really what we're doing today is more like being sports fans cheering on our team.

NOEL: That's partisanship. What is polarization?

LILY: So Polarization can also be two things. It can be more than that, actually.

NOEL: <<laughs>>

LILY: But the classic understanding of polarization was that we are disagreeing about issues. So so Democrats are really liberal and Republicans are really conservative on all of these different issues. But increasingly, what we're finding now is that our polarization is, it's partly about that, but it's also about how we feel about each other. So Democrats and Republicans really don't like one another, and we call that affective polarization. So it's based on feelings. And really the important thing about understanding the effect of polarization is that it doesn't require us to disagree in order to hate each other. We use theories from social psychology about why any groups don't like each other, to explain why Democrats and Republicans don't like each other, and it doesn't necessarily require that they disagree on, you know, marginal tax rates.

NOEL: Lily, does the data really say that people of different parties dislike or even hate each other?

LILY: Yeah. In fact, in my first book, I looked at …asked people kind of how would they feel if their child married somebody from the other party or how would they feel if someone from the other party moved in next door to them? And and those types of questions, people really don't like the idea of someone, of their child marrying somebody from the other party.

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=14HlkTHC9yE)*> BILLYONTHESTREETTV:*

*Billy Eichner: Would you have sex with a Trump voter?*

*Woman on the street: <<barf sound>>*

*Eichner: Oh ok thank you*

They don't really want to have social contact with people from the other party. And and that type of feeling isn't entirely rooted in disagreement. So people who have really moderate policy preferences can still dislike really dislike people from the other party. In the second book, we really started to ask more extreme questions. So we asked do you think people on the other party are not just wrong for politics, they're downright evil? Or even do they deserve to be treated like humans because they behave like animals? So a dehumanization question, which is kind of the most extreme of the questions and we are finding that, you know, about 50% of partisans are willing to say that their partisan opponents are evil and between 20 to 40% are even willing to dehumanize people in the other party.

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OrVm_n5-a0c)*>POLITICO:*

*Grant Candone: She’s a fake and a fraud, she’s a pretender…her, and her pimp handlers, she will destroy our country*

*David Ren: She is the devil - whoever screamed that out! She is the antichrist!*

NOEL: And you're talking about both Republicans and Democrats are willing to do this.

LILY: Yeah, it depends. I mean, it depends on the question. So Republicans are slightly more likely to do this to Democrats. And in fact, the more recent research that I've just been doing, we actually found that it's not even just just all Republicans, it's Republicans who believe that Trump won in 2020 are the most likely to vilify Democrats, more than really anybody else in the electorate and more than Democrats vilify Republicans. But they're a very specific group.

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3c4NVafdib4)*> SKY NEWS:*

*Trump supporter: We the people own plenty of firearms. There’s more gun owners than enlisted service men, and they are not gonna go against Patriots. If you’re gonna try to put me in a detention camp or try to re-educate me, I’ll kill ya.*

NOEL: Tell me about what kind of polarization we're seeing these days.

LILY: So what we're seeing really is mostly this what I've called affective polarization. So it's it's basically the type of polarization that means that we don't like one another. And if you think about kind of human groups throughout all of human history, there are plenty of reasons that two human groups don't like one another. Right. And they don't necessarily come out of their their differences over the appropriate size of government, right? Humans hate one another for all kinds of reasons. And it's very much that type of kind of visceral dislike and distrust that any two social groups can have against each other, that we're observing and the Democratic and Republican parties right now

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sBwR9BXTGko)*> FOX NEWS:*

*Donald Trump: It's just the amorphous group of people, but they’re smart and they’re vicious and we have to defeat them*…

NOEL: Disagreeing on policy seems to me quite normal, thinking that a person in the other party is evil seems a bit less normal to me. What is this rooted in, this affective polarization? Where did this come from?

LILY: A lot of this animosity between Democrats and Republicans has come out of a trend over the last many decades of not only our partisan identities being the thing that we fight over during elections, but also all of these other identities. And over really since the 1960s, our racial identities are religious identities, all other kinds of sort of cultural, even geographic identities have moved into alignment with our party identities.

SCORING IN <loopbox dark orange>

So what happens is that when we're thinking about politics and who wins and who loses, we're not just thinking my party wins or my party loses. We're thinking if my party wins, then my racial group wins and my religious group wins. And all of these other parts of my identity are winners and it feels really good and vice versa. If my party loses, all these different parts of my identity are also losing and that feels really, really terrible. So the stakes get a lot higher when we think about our our electoral choices and who is in control of our government as reflective of who we are as a human being. And so over a really 50 or 60 years, what we saw was this gradual, I call it social sorting. It's a sorting process between the parties where they became socially and culturally really distinct from each other. And that that type of distinction that when you feel like the people on the other side are so different from you, not just in their political views, but in what they look like and who they worship and or how they worship and where they shop, that it's a lot easier for us to dehumanize people who are just unlike us across so many different dimensions. And that's what really what we've been doing.

SCORING OUT

So we started asking this question in 2017, no one had really asked Americans this before. Basically, we got about 20% of Democrats and Republicans saying the other people in the other party are not human. And that's gone up to currently our most recent data. It's about 40%.

The reason we asked the question is because this is the type of thing that we measure in other countries, if there's a mass violence event. This type of attitude exists beforehand. It doesn't always lead to violence, but whenever there is sort of mass violence, you have to have these dehumanizing and vilifying attitudes present beforehand, because otherwise it's really it's hard to harm another human being and still feel like a morally good person. And really, the only way to do that is to think that they are a threat to you, that they're evil and that they're subhuman. And so when we see genocide in other places, for example, these attitudes exist before before the violence occurs. And what we wanted to know was, did these attitudes exist in the American electorate? And no one had really asked that question before.

NOEL: I would like to not live in this version of America. It isn't pleasant. I don't like it. I don't like hearing that people don't think of each other as human. I'm stressed out. I want to cry sometimes and I can't. There's an election to cover. How do we, in all seriousness, fix this problem?

LILY: I mean, <<sighs>> we need to get something back, right? I mean, one of the things I think that the last few years have done, and I think Trump as a candidate himself in particular, is really break the norms of what's acceptable behavior in American politics and in American society. The idea that we can use racist and misogynistic language against our fellow citizens, the idea that we can tell lies and not be punished for it. You know, a lot of the things that we are that our politics is characterized by right now are things that 20 years ago would not have ever been allowed on the political stage. And there are plenty of Democrats and Republicans that just remember a different time. And and what worries me is that young people don't. So we're increasingly in this world where young people don't know that it could that ever was nicer than it ever was, more kind of diplomatic and and the and the so the things that I that I, you know, hope is that we can pay attention to the norms that have been broken because the only way to enforce a norm is for people around you, when you break the norm, for people around you to tell you to stop it. Right. Laws are enforced with law enforcement. Norms are enforced with us, with people.

SCORING IN <temperature change>

And the reason that shame is such a powerful emotion, right, is, is because it's the way that we enforce norms. To the extent that together as a community, right, if we see somebody behaving in a way that we think of as unacceptable, that we as a community can say to them, that's that's beyond the pale, that's that you just crossed the line. I'm not accepting that kind of behavior. And we haven't been doing that to each other in in many years, I think. But to the extent that we can kind of remember what it's like to be normal people and treat each other like we're part of a community together and that we're part of the same society, You know, that's something that we all can do on our own.

NOEL: Liliana Mason, Johns Hopkins. Victoria Chamberlin produced today’s episode. Matthew Collette edited. Laura Bullard fact-checked. Andrea Kristindottir and Patrick Boyd engineered. I’m Noel King. It’s Today, Explained.

**[10 SECONDS OF SILENCE]**