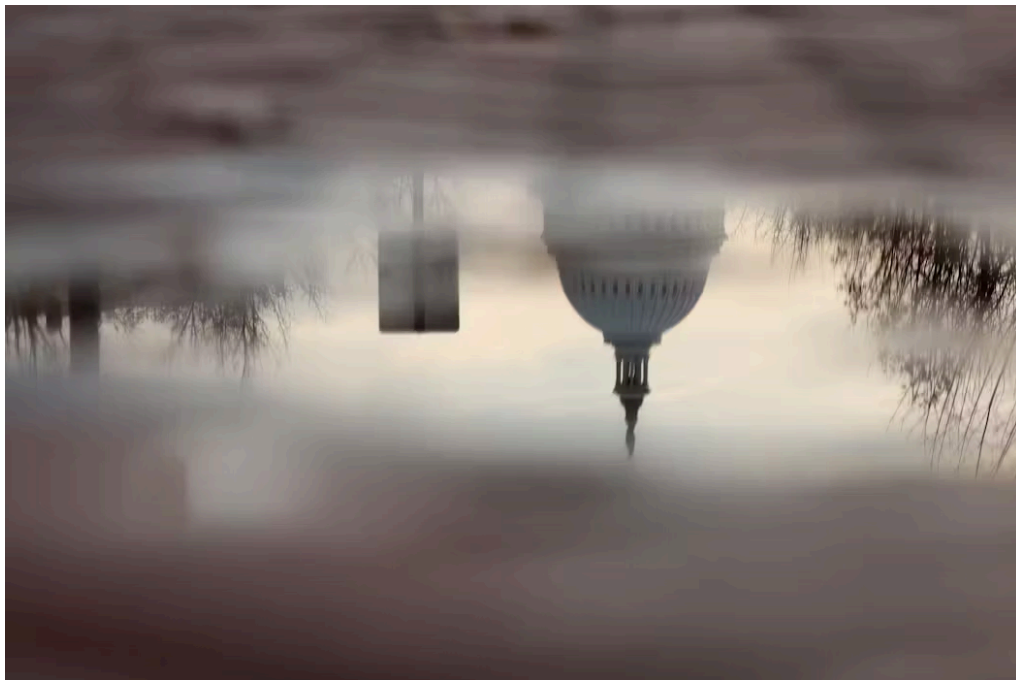


Polarizing political events are leading Americans to increasingly call for a national divorce

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A recent poll found that 64% of Americans think the country is too politically divided to solve the nation's problems.

Kevin Dietsch/Getty Images

The United States government has been shut down for nearly a month, yet another indication that the political system has become deeply dysfunctional.

President Donald Trump has blamed the Democrats and called their negotiating strategy a “kamikaze attack.” Democrats are keen to stand their ground, hoping that the fallout is worse for Republicans. While each side casts blame on the other, it is Americans who suffer.

But the shutdown is just another episode in a series of polarization-fueled events that are leading Americans to lose faith in their government. Every nation has its limits, and one wonders how much America can take before the pressure to divide into separate countries becomes too great.

Consider the aftermath of the assassination of Charlie Kirk, which raised the specter of polarization-fueled conflict in America. Mentions of “civil war” surged online, fears grew over rising political violence, and the Trump administration vowed to crack down on left-leaning groups.

These are merely the latest examples of the mounting pressure on the American political system. A recent New York Times/Siena poll found that 64% of Americans think the country is too politically divided to solve the nation’s problems. The same poll showed that only 42% of Americans held that position in 2020.

In other words, nearly two-thirds of Americans think the system is broken, and the number is growing fast.

Calls for a national divorce

It should come as no surprise, then, that some are calling for radical solutions like a national divorce.

On Sept. 15, 2025, five days after Kirk’s killing, Georgia Congresswoman Marjorie Taylor Greene tweeted that America needs “a peaceful national divorce. Our country is too far gone and too far divided, and it’s no longer safe for any of us.”

National divorce is the term used to describe the splitting of America into two parts: a red America and a blue America. Secessionist movements like Yes California and Red-State Secession have for over a decade been calling for a national divorce along political lines. And a 2023 Axios poll found that as many as 20% of Americans see national divorce as a solution to political polarization.

As a political scientist who studies secessionist conflict, I’ve found that the national divorce argument is commonly used as an analogy with marital divorce. Just as two spouses may be extremely ill-suited for one another, and far better off if they separated, the same can be said of red and blue America. They no longer see eye to eye on a range of issues, from reproductive rights to the environment and gun control.

If they seceded from one another and formed their own countries, the argument goes, then they could establish policies that would ensure the future they wanted.



Rep. Marjorie Taylor Greene, R-Ga., called for a 'peaceful national divorce' in September 2025.

AP Photo/J. Scott Applewhite

But as I show in my new book, there is no way to disentangle red and blue America without tremendous violence. Additionally, a large and increasingly ignored percentage of Americans hold moderate views.

There is no doubt that polarization in America is a problem that is getting worse, but a national divorce is simply not the solution.

And yet America's leaders continue to lead their country toward that outcome. The deployment of National Guard troops to blue cities, the polarization-enhancing consequences of competitive gerrymandering in states like Texas and California, and the spectacle of government shutdown are eroding the public trust. By continuing with policies that amplify polarization and erode the public trust, America's leaders are fueling the calls for a national divorce.

How much can the country take?

The trend toward heightened polarization in America is not irreversible, but there are limits to how much the country can take before secession becomes a serious project. Some of the limits can be identified in advance.

First, it's important that the country's leaders take the pulse of America. If 20% of Americans favored national divorce in early 2023, what is the percentage now? That kind of sentiment can increase surprisingly fast.

Between 2006 and 2014, for example, Catalan support for independence from Spain increased from 14% to 45%. If something like 50% of Americans concluded that America didn't work and was better off broken up into smaller parts, then the country could tip rapidly into a secessionist crisis.



People hold up signs during a memorial for Charlie Kirk on Sept. 21, 2025, in Glendale, Ariz. After Kirk's killing, Trump administration officials vowed to crack down on left-leaning groups.

AP Photo/John Locher

Second, high levels of secessionist support make the country vulnerable to trigger events that convince Americans that secession is the answer. The polarization-inspired assassination of prominent leaders can lead to a cycle of recrimination. Upcoming elections are also a concern. If they are closely contested and the losing side is unwilling to admit defeat, then the bedrock of democracy is broken. Both triggers can accelerate polarization and the turn to secessionism.

A third threshold moment is when a prominent leader decides to champion the cause of a national divorce.

Should someone like California Gov. Gavin Newsom, Texas Gov. Greg Abbott or the sore loser of a 2028 election conclude that the system is rigged, and secession is the only solution, then the entire project gains legitimacy.

It was that kind of elite conversion to the secessionist cause that energized the movement in places like Scotland and Catalonia.

The U.S. is a robust country and the longest-running democracy in the world. Americans have more in common than they realize, and the country can be a positive force in the world.

But without decisive action by political leaders to reduce the polarization that threatens to tear the country apart, the United States is at risk of turning from one country into two.

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