Partisan America, Non-Partisan Americans

Ken Falgoust

A string of recent attacks has placed political violence in the national spotlight. Senator Nancy Pelosi's husband was injured when a man broke into their home and attacked him with a hammer (Long et al.). President Donald Trump was nearly killed by an assassin's bullet in Pennsylvania during a campaign event (Colvin et al.). UnitedHealthcare CEO Brian Thompson was killed by a bullet engraved with political messages in Manhattan (Geller and Murphy). Governor Josh Shapiro and his family were nearly killed when a man set fire to their house (Levy). State Representative Melissa Hortman and her husband were killed by a man who broke into their home and shot them (Sullivan et al.). Charlie Kirk was killed when he was shot during a political event at a university campus in Utah (Schoenbaum et al.). In response to these events, many people now feel that we are on the brink of "some kind of violent national rupture" (Klein para. 3). Political partisanship has progressed to the point that a shocking number of Americans now say armed conflict with other citizens is likely in their lifetime. A May 2024 poll by The Marist Institute for Public Opinion found that 47% consider a second American Civil War "very likely" or "likely" (para. 2). Many of these negative sentiments about the imminence of a national divorce are

reinforced by the belief that the nation's differences are irreconcilable, but the truth is that disagreement is not a threat to American democracy because democracy was always meant to be a contest of ideas.

The current sentiments do not come from partisanship (disagreement) itself. Rather, concerns about current and continued violence are a result of "affective polarization" (Iyengar et al.). This term emerges in Political Science literature around 2012 and describes "animosity between parties" where American citizens increasingly stigmatize and distrust their political opponents (Iyengar et al. 129). Unlike traditional ideological polarization, where disagreement centers on policy opinions, affective polarization is defined by negative emotions such as hostility, contempt, and malice that are directed at political opponents. Affective polarization is not monocausal, but it is primarily "an outgrowth of partisan social [identification]" (Iyengar et al. 130-131). One of the essential first steps in reducing the wave of political violence brought on by affective polarization will be examining these partisan identities and confronting the many misconceptions that perpetuate them, including the myth of a historically consistent political spectrum, and false partisan animosity meta-perceptions.

It can be helpful to examine partisan identification through the lens of a theoretical model. In his book, *A Rhetoric of Motives*, the literary theorist Kenneth Burke introduces his model, simply titled "identification" (19). His model is centered around discourse, or rhetoric, and is primarily designed to contrast the Aristotelian perspective that rhetoric is meant for persuasion (19). Instead, Burke's model seeks a broader scope on human communication, suggesting that the true objective of rhetoric is to identify commonalities between a rhetorician and their audience such as values, experiences, symbols, or language (19-23). However, Burke argues that rhetoric and discourse are unnecessary when only similarities exist between two parties; complete agreement leaves nothing to be discussed. Likewise, rhetoric and discourse are equally unnecessary when the two parties exhibit only differences (19-23). Discourse is meaningful

when similarities and differences between the parties are held in tension. Examples of this dynamic can be found everywhere, including in American politics—Democrats spend their time debating Republicans, not British Tories, because they have enough in common with Republicans to make their ideological differences meaningful.

This dynamic is clarified in Burke's own words: "Identification is affirmed with earnestness precisely because there is division. Identification is compensatory to division. If men were not apart from one another, there would be no need for the rhetorician to proclaim their unity" (22). When two parties disagree, rhetoric is designed to facilitate discourse oriented toward unity rather than unproductive or adversarial dialogue. Its purpose is not for one party to convince the other that they are wrong; it is for that party to show the other where they agree. For this reason, Burke's theory is uniquely suited to serve as a framework for exploring partisan discourse. His model transcends unidimensional categorization and emphasizes that discourse occurs between parties that are multifaceted, simultaneously sharing similarities and differences. Much of America's contemporary partisan discourse obscures the shared characteristics of the major American parties. Therefore, affective polarization represents a breakdown of Burke's model; many Americans are unable to recognize if, or when, they share values, symbols, or identities with their political opponents, thus their discourse becomes adversarial.

Explanations for where this breakdown originates in American political culture are numerous and widely debated. Many writers believe the breakdown of traditional American cultural values are the causal factor. The political philosopher Leo Strauss's essay "Three Waves of Modernity" describes a "crisis of modernity" in which Americans' collective moral intuitions become fragmented and polarized over time when they "no longer believe that [they] can know what is good and bad, what is right and wrong" (80-81). Strauss attributes this crisis to a collapse of classical political philosophy and the rational foundations that previously offered universally valid moral guid-

ance (82). Similarly, in a more recent publication, the political scientist Jonathan Rauch writes in his book, *Cross Purposes,* that decreased participation in the various American Christian Churches is the cause of many Americans' inability to identify with their political opponents. His argument centers around the commonly held belief of many American founding fathers, such as Thomas Jefferson, that "ethics, as well as religion, [are] supplements to the law in the government of man" (qtd. In Rauch 19). Rauch argues that the churches were seen by the founders as "stabilizing" institutions that promoted civility and mutual identification outside of government (20). Both authors suggest that contemporary partisan divisions may stem from Americans' deeper uncertainties about moral truth and human purpose brought on by secular or postmodern thought. The implications of both writer's work are that overcoming this crisis of modernity will require Americans to re-engage seriously with classical American political philosophy and its religious or metaphysical underpinnings. Their work suggests that such a renewal would reduce existential anxieties and mitigate partisan hostility by fostering a common moral framework.

However, this conclusion is not universally agreed upon in the literature. Research presented by the social psychologist Jonathan Haidt in his book, *The Righteous Mind,* suggests that Americans continue to have a shared moral framework today and differences within that framework are what divide Americans in both "politics and religion" (150-180). His argument begins by explaining that "there are two different kinds of cognition: intuition and reasoning" (53). Some processes are automatic and intuitive, while other processes are controlled and intentional. Haidt's research suggests that moral judgements are intuitive processes that are then rationalized in a post-hoc manner (61-83, 152-153). He argues that the intuitive process of moral decision making can be described in six dichotomies: care v. harm (153-158), fairness v. cheating (158-161), loyalty v. betrayal (161-165), authority v. subversion (165-170), sanctity v. degradation (170-177), and liberty v. oppression (197-205). These are America's moral foundations. Haidt explains that peo-

ple tend to subconsciously favor certain moral foundations over others. He relates this to partisanship by explaining that people who identify politically with the left are more likely to emphasize care, fairness, and liberty in their intuitive decision making, whereas people who identify politically with the right are more likely to emphasize loyalty, authority, and sanctity in their intuitive decision making (180-216). Additionally, people who identify with the Libertarian Party are more likely to emphasize liberty over all other principles (204-205). Haidt's findings are aligned with Burke's model as he concludes that the divergence of Americans' subconscious moral foundations keep them from sharing values, symbols, and identities with their political opponents, which leaves them more divided.

Although each of these perspectives offers valuable insight into the nature of affective polarization, none is sufficient on its own to explain its origins. It is more likely that the breakdown of identification emerges from an interplay of these dynamics, alongside additional factors beyond the scope of the discussion provided by these sources. For example, media influences, geographic factors (rural v. urban), electoral rules, party primaries, etc. As a result, identifying a single, coherent strategy for addressing the real-world consequences of this issue remains challenging. Nevertheless, other research suggests that persistent misconceptions play a significant role in perpetuating and amplifying violent manifestations of affective polarization. Therefore, correcting these misconceptions may be a practical path toward de-escalation.

The first misconception that perpetuates affective polarization is many Americans' belief in a historically consistent political spectrum, or the belief that Americans' disagreements are primarily ideological and that these ideological differences can be categorized as either "left-wing" or "right-wing" (Lewis and Lewis). In their book, *The Myth of Left and Right*, historian and political scientist Hyrum Lewis and Verlan Lewis focus on disproving the popular "essentialist theory" of ideological clustering (5). According to Lewis and Lewis, proponents of this theory believe that distinct political issues cluster together

because they all stem from an American's stance on a single "master issue," commonly understood to be their attitude toward change. According to the essentialist perspective, left-leaning ideologies consistently advocate for and embrace change, whereas right-leaning ideologies seek to halt or reverse it (5–6). Lewis and Lewis reject this perspective.

They argue that no essential principle is all-encompassing enough to unite multiple issues under a single ideology that maintains historical consistency for either major party. On the contrary, they prove that advocacy for many prominent political positions (Federal power v. States rights, free trade v. protectionism, etc.) have recurrently shifted between the major political parties throughout history (26-38). One political position that illustrates this argument well is foreign intervention v. isolationism. In 1991, Congress authorized the Gulf War under the Bush administration—Democrats opposed (S.J.Res.2 - 102nd Congress). In 1999, Senate Democrats passed a resolution to authorize the Kosovo Air War—House Republicans opposed and failed to pass the resolution, military action continued under President Clinton's authority without specific Congressional approval (S.Con.Res.21 - 106th Congress). In 2002, Congress authorized the Iraq War under the George W. Bush administration—Democrats opposed (H.J.Res.114 - 107th Congress). The Obama administration sought authorization for campaigns in Libya (H.J.Res.68 - 112th Congress) and Syria (S.J.Res.21 - 113th Congress)—Republicans opposed. In 2024, the Biden administration authorized aid for Ukraine—Republicans opposed (H.R.8035 - 118th Congress). Also in 2024, the Biden administration authorized aid for Israel and Gaza—support and opposition to this aid was mixed (H.R.8034 - 118th Congress). In 2025, the Trump administration launched strikes against Iranian nuclear sites prior to seeking Congressional approval, citing the War Powers Resolution of 1973 as justification—responses to this action were mixed, but mostly opposed by Democrats (Zengerle).

Is foreign intervention a Democratic or Republican position? Are isolationism and the pursuit of peace more strongly

associated with the political right or the left? Historically, the answer to both questions appears to be yes. Lewis and Lewis argue that this pattern of fluidity demonstrates that no essential principles inherently distinguish the ideological left from the right. On the contrary, essentialist explanations for ideological clustering function as post-hoc rationalizations; stories constructed to retroactively justify a group's alignment with bundles of issue positions after those stances have already been adopted (6). Lewis and Lewis propose that what really unites various issue positions within the ideological left or right is simply the reality that each position is simultaneously supported by a majority of Americans who identify with that side at a given time. In other words, an ideology is only reflective or predictive of social consensus among political party members (6). Thus, "left-wing" and "right-wing" are not ideological positions, but descriptions of a social group that could support anything. Lewis and Lewis argue that this reality renders the very idea of the traditional left-right political spectrum conceptually obsolete (15-16).

The second misconception that perpetuates affective polarization are the false partisan animosity meta-perceptions that many Americans have about each other. A meta-perception is a person's belief about how others perceive them. Recent research in political psychology shows that Americans consistently overestimate how much their political opponents hate them (Lees et al.). In their study, "Why partisans feel hated: Distinct static and dynamic relationships with animosity meta-perceptions," Lees and his co-authors found that most partisans believed that members of the opposite party rated them extremely negatively and harbored hostile views of them when, in reality, the ratings were significantly more positive. The study also concluded that meta-perceptions are not static beliefs; they change based on contextual information, including misinformation. Another second study by Jeffrey Lees and Mina Cikara titled, "Inaccurate group meta-perceptions drive negative out-group attributions in competitive contexts," concludes that partisans are more likely to harbor negative beliefs about their political opponents if they believe their opponents feel the same way or worse. This

dynamic causes a vicious cycle in which Americans respond to imagined hostility with hostility.

This cycle may be one of the reasons that many Americans to enter political discourse convinced that the other side despises them. When citizens assume the worst about their political opponents, they may come to see political competition as a zero-sum struggle for survival rather than a contest of ideas or ideologies. Under these conditions, affective polarization evolves from a breakdown of discourse into justification for preemptive aggression. When a person's political opponents are believed to be hateful, irrational, or tyrannical, then political violence may begin to appear defensive or necessary.

Clarifying these misconceptions reframes partisanship from an irreconcilable ideological divide, into a contest between social groups that frequently misperceive the intensity of one another's animosity. But diagnosis alone may be insufficient to reverse course. If citizens are to move beyond affective polarization, they must adopt a practical mechanism that acknowledges substantive disagreement but enables meaningful civil connection. One such mechanism emerges from an external observer of American democracy.

In the early 1830's a French aristocrat named Alexis De Tocqueville visited the United States to compare its democracy to that of post-revolutionary France. He was interested in discovering why America's democracy seemed to be successful while France's devolved into a dictatorship under Napoleon in 1804. He later wrote about his findings in a two-volume publication titled, *Democracy in America*. His exploration highlights two key vulnerabilities of democracies everywhere: the "tyranny of the majority" (239-250) and the threat of rampant "individualism" (482-485).

Tocqueville warns that the democratic majority is "omnipotent," able to legitimize nearly any action with popular support (235). Such unchecked authority, he argues, can become tyrannical in many circumstances. One circumstance relevant to the topic of affective polarization is its ability to stifle freedom of thought. In his analysis of the American democracy,

Tocqueville writes, "I do not know any country where, in general, less independence of mind and genuine freedom of discussion reign than in America" (244). In the aristocratic societies of Europe, rulers could silence speech using authoritarian methods, but they could never fully extinguish their subjects' private thoughts. However, in a democracy, the majority have the power to establish an Overton Window of acceptable opinions. This creates a social pressure that forces citizens to self-censor in order to avoid ostracism, creating a tyranny over both speech and thought (243-245). Today, this dynamic is mirrored in both major political parties—each serving as its own majority that establishes conformity by pressuring its members to self-censor dissenting ideas within their ranks. This explanation of American political culture is strikingly similar to recent scholarship on affective polarization and the breakdown of identification between the major political parties discussed in this paper.

Tocqueville also describes the way rampant "individualism" causes citizens in a democratic society to become more isolated in their equality and self-reliance (482-484). In a democracy, there is no king or ruler for citizens to be guided by. Individuals tend to retreat into private life and focus on their own material well-being. This leads to what Tocqueville calls "individualism," a recently coined term at the time of his writing. He describes it in these terms:

> These [citizens] owe nothing to anyone, they expect [...] nothing from anyone. They are in the habit of always considering themselves in isolation, and they willingly fancy that their whole destiny is in their hands. Thus, democracy [...] constantly leads [them] back toward [themselves] alone and threatens finally to confine [them] wholly in the solitude of [their] own heart. (484)

Tocqueville believes that individualism mutates beyond simple selfishness into a kind of social apathy. Democratic citizens withdraw from public life and cease to care about the common good due to exhaustion, indifference, or preoccupation with their private affairs. When combined with the ideas presented

earlier in Tocqueville's work, this concept further reflects the apathy and hostility exhibited by partisans in both major American political parties.

One solution that Tocqueville suggests as a remedy in both cases is "association" (489-492). Tocqueville observed that American democracy succeeded because its citizens were constantly forming associations:

> Americans of all ages, all conditions, all minds constantly unite. Not only do they have commercial and industrial associations in which all take part, but they also have a thousand other kinds: religious, moral, grave, futile, very general and very particular, immense and very small; Americans use associations to [hold celebrations], to found seminaries, to build inns, to raise churches, to distribute books, to send missionaries to the antipodes; in this manner they create hospitals, prisons, schools. Finally, if it is a question of bringing to light a truth or developing a sentiment with the support of a great example, they associate. (489)

He believed that in America, association was a political necessity. When people joined together, they practiced essential skills for a democratic society: deliberation, compromise, organization, and respecting differing views. These are "habits of the heart" deeply internalized civic responsibility and behavior that made American democracy work (489-492). Democracies are grounded in individual autonomy, which disintegrates the tightly woven social fabric of aristocratic societies. By dismantling institutional hierarchies, democracies leave citizens without the familiar structures that once guided their collective action. In France, the people had long relied on the state for direction, and when the aristocracy collapsed, the resulting power vacuum was not filled by voluntary associations. Tocqueville believed that this failure contributed heavily to the collapse of the French democracy, because its citizens lacked the habits of association that sustained American democracy.

Tocqueville's remedy mirrors the insights of many modern scholars. Lewis and Lewis argue that Americans must "find heal-

thier tribes" (94–95), Haidt recommends cultivating "at least one friendly interaction with a member of the 'other' group" (364), and Rauch urges citizens to "reject the ethos of permanent warfare, perpetual fear, and us-versus-them" in favor of civic charity (127). Contemporary research suggests that many Americans' partisan identities have crowded out every other form of common ground; their party affiliation has become their primary social identifier, eclipsing local community, religion, profession, and family of origin (Mason; Iyengar and Westwood). Burke's theory of identification combined with Tocqueville's thinking suggests an escape: As Americans associate in forums that are not partisan, they form other social identifiers, allowing shared experiences and symbols with their fellow Americans to precede political disagreement. America may be partisan, but Americans are not; beneath the labels of "left" and "right" are identities that naturally bind citizens together—parent, neighbor, friend, veteran, teacher, believer, teammate, volunteer. By reinforcing shared, apolitical identities, Americans can restore the civic trust that sustains democracy, reject the emotional pull of affective polarization, and choose a future defined peace, rather than political violence.

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