

Review Essay

Why Are American Politics Extreme and What Can Be Done About It?

Bill Bishop with Robert G. Cushing

The Big Sort: Why the Clustering of Like-Minded America is Tearing Us Apart.

Boston, New York: Mariner Books, Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2008, 2009.

Michael Tesler

Post-Racial or Most-Racial: Race and Politics in the Obama Era

Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2016.

Lilliana Mason

Uncivil Agreement: How Politics Became Our Identity

Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2018.

Reviewed by Eleanor D. Glor

The Context

Francis Fukuyama in 1992 expanded on his 1989 essay “The End of History,” published in *The National Interest*,¹ with the book, *The End of History and the Last Man*, published by Free Press,² arguing:

What we may be witnessing is not just the end of the Cold War, or the passing of a particular period of post-war history, but the end of history as such: that is, the end point of mankind's ideological evolution and the universalization of Western liberal democracy as the final form of human government.

The National Interest is an American bimonthly international affairs magazine published by the Center for the National Interest, founded in 1985 by neoconservative (neoliberal) thinker Irving Kristol and founding editor Owen Harries. The Center for the National Interest is a public policy think tank established by former U.S. Republican President Richard Nixon in 1994. Originally a programmatically and substantively independent division of the Richard Nixon Library and Birthplace Foundation, the Center for the National Interest was known as The Nixon Center

¹ According to *The National Interest* website, it has “displayed a remarkable consistency in its approach to foreign policy. It is not, as the inaugural statement declared, about world affairs. It is about American interests. It is guided by the belief that nothing will enhance those interests as effectively as the approach to foreign affairs commonly known as realism—a school of thought traditionally associated with such thinkers and statesmen as Disraeli, Bismarck, and Henry Kissinger.” <https://nationalinterest.org/about-the-national-interest>

² According to Wikipedia, Free Press was a publisher specializing in serious nonfiction, including path-breaking sociology books of the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s. After a period under new ownership in the 1980s of publishing neoconservative books, it was purchased by [Simon & Schuster](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Simon_%26_Schuster) in 1994. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Free_Press_\(publisher\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Free_Press_(publisher))

until 2011, when it became a fully separate entity. The Center became the sole publisher of *The National Interest* in 2005 after being a partner in publishing the magazine since 2000, when National Affairs, Inc. sold *The National Interest*.

According to Naomi Klein in *The Shock Doctrine: The Rise of Disaster Capitalism* (2007), the post-Cold War 1990s was the period in which neoliberal politics and especially Chicago School economics became widespread in much of the world. Chicago School economics follows Milton Friedman and is a neoclassical economic school of thought that originated at the University of Chicago in the 1940s with Friedman's first, self-published books. The main tenets of the Chicago School are that free markets best allocate resources in an economy and that minimal or even no government intervention is best. It has been ruthlessly enforced by military dictatorships (e.g., Chile), the USA (e.g., Iraq), the World Bank (e.g., South Africa) and the International Monetary Fund (e.g., Canada). In the USA, the 1990s were the government of George H. W. Bush, 1989-1992 and Bill Clinton, 1993-2001, followed by George W. Bush, 2001-2009 and Barack Obama, 2009-2017. The post-Cold War push toward democracy in South and Central America, Asia and Africa eventually faded and the USA sometimes again began attempting to push out elected governments in favour of unelected ones (e.g., currently, Venezuela, maybe Iran). Post-Cold War did, however, see increases in democracy and economic globalization. Post the four coordinated al-Qaeda terrorist attacks on the USA September 11, 2001, in the USA this was replaced by a preoccupation with security. Security remains a preoccupation with President Trump's southern wall and his mentions of a Canadian wall to keep out illegal immigrants, known in the USA as "illegal aliens".

The Books

At the same time as the USA was engaged in the Cold War and moving toward more extreme capitalism, urbanization, education, income, religious, and cultural movements were occurring in the country. Beginning in the 1970s, Americans had been sorting themselves into demographically similar and like-minded cities and communities within cities. Bill Bishop, a journalist and Robert G. Cushing, a sociologist and statistician, recognized this internal migration and its consequences—a much more extremely divided country at a political level. They describe it in *The Big Sort: Why the Clustering of Like-Minded America Is Tearing Us Apart*. By 2004 the media had recognized the polarization of the USA and the widening of ideological differences. In response to economic hardship and opportunity, Americans had not only divided in terms of occupation, geography, race, ethnicity, income and class, but had also divided into political tribes in their communities, churches and voluntary associations. Americans rarely interacted with others of different opinions.

The objective of Lilliana Mason's and Michael Tesler's books is, in effect, to examine Bill Bishop's theory through public opinion polls and panels. Although they do not mention it, they could not test all of the factors Bishop explores, only the ones it is possible to test through polls and panels.

Michael Tesler's *Post-Racial or Most-Racial: Race and Politics in the Obama Era* deals with whether voting during the Barack Obama era 2008-16 was more or less racially motivated

than in the past (he influenced polls before he was elected president). Just as it was said that the end of the Cold War signalled the end of history, so it was sometimes said that the election of Barack Obama signalled a post-racial USA—free from racial preference, discrimination and prejudice. Based on numerous survey and interview-based public opinion panels, Tesler argues (successfully in my opinion) that politics became, instead, more racial during this time, with whites and racial conservatives moving and sorting even more toward the Republican Party and non-whites moving and sorting more toward the Democratic Party. He agrees with Bishop and demonstrates that this realignment of American politics was already well underway before Obama's presidency and was reinforced with the coalition Obama assembled to get elected. The electoral shifts to the Democratic Party that occurred to elect him were actually relatively small but important.

Tesler shows how the Republican Party has become the party of whites with over 50 per cent of white voters' support, while the majority of non-whites favour the Democrats. The Democrats keyed in to the new reality of race and ethnicity in the USA to elect Obama. The Republican's extreme wings (e.g., the Tea Party) and persistent resistance in their majority Congress to the Obama presidency, in turn, led to a reaction that elected Donald Trump in 2016. Racism became a more important issue when a black president was elected in 2008 and the Republicans in Congress and the Congress refused to support a liberal presidency.

The data presented takes several measures of racism. At the same time, there was an increase in the acceptability of anti-Muslim feeling in the USA. Blacks, Asians and Latinos became more engaged with the Democrats, but Black voters did not turn out in equal numbers for the next Democratic presidential candidate, Hillary Rodham Clinton. Although she received almost three million more votes than did the successful candidate, Donald Trump; with a 60.2% turnout, she lost the Electoral College.

Tesler's political science book examines one question, did American presidential and congressional voting become more or less racialized during the period Obama ran for president and was president. The answer is that it became more racial. While Obama's presidency helped make racial attitudes a more important determinant of white American's congressional votes, there is a risk of overstatement (page 135). A number of the prominent public policy issues during the Obama presidency were also seen as being racially linked, such as the Affordable (Health) Care Act, the financial stimulus, tax increases on the rich and the assault weapons ban.

Lilliana Mason, in *Uncivil Agreement: How Politics Became Our Identity*, also studies public opinion polls to uncover identity politics, but she looks at more issues, more years, and takes a broader, social identity perspective. She finds identity politics have developed in the USA from the social sorting of the main political parties. She asserts that this explains the growth of extremism following a decline in extremism after the civil rights movement, 1955-65. While Tesler only considers racism, she explores four factors dividing Americans—race, religion, geography and ideology. Polling shows Democrats becoming even more the party of colour and ethnicity (just over half of its membership), Roman Catholics, the coasts, and the political left-wing. They always have been in the North, so this is at least partially driven by white southerners moving more to supporting the Republicans while black southerners have moved more to support the Democrats. Republicans have become the party of whites, Protestants, the interior of

America and the political right-wing much more clearly than in the past. This is sorting. The books are not, however, linked in any direct way.

Mason describes social polarization in the USA and its political parties, a sorting that generated distinct psychological and behavioural outcomes. Americans have sorted into politically partisan (party support, based on ideology and policy positions) groups and social (racial, religious, geographic, ideological) groups. Because of social sorting, greater polarization of both parties has occurred. This polarization has generated greater partisan prejudice, more political action and more emotionality (reactivity). Her book explains how a well-sorted set of partisan and social identities, a phenomenon beginning in the 1950s and well underway before Obama was elected, is uniquely capable of motivating three polarizations—more partisan, more action and more emotion.

Mason compares similarities and differences between high and low partisanship. On a continuum, partisan prejudice leads to demonization of the other party. Greater political action has been driven by greater emotional reactivity rather than greater commitment to policies. Emotional reactivity has led the most strongly sorted identity group members to feel heightened anger in the face of group threat and greater enthusiasm when the group is victorious. This is a psychological effect of party identity. These changes are driven by social sorting not by greater partisanship in and of itself. Even when the parties agree on policy, partisan prejudice and social sorting make it next to impossible for the parties to agree to support the same policies. The least emotionally reactive group is not the least partisan group, but rather the least socially sorted group because the least socially sorted are willing to and do spend time with people with whom they disagree. Sometimes they react similarly, but always with less anger. Mason found “The more sorted we become, the more emotionally we react to normal political events, and the more cross-cutting our identities, the more calmly we respond. The anger on display at Cliven Bundy’s ranch [for being required to pay fees to graze his cattle on federal land], at the 2010 town hall meetings over Obamacare, at the 2011 Occupy Wall Street protests, and at Donald Trump’s 2016 rallies is fuelled by our increasing social and partisan isolation.” (Mason, 2018: 100).

Mason describes the way societies and groups naturally³ organize themselves into conflictual groups, and how this has happened in the USA, where ideological and social sorting has occurred. As a political scientist, Mason describes society as sewn together by its social divisions: “The more divisions there are, and the less organized those groups are around any one division, the more peaceful and cooperative a society can be. Each group conflict is tamped down by a separate group allegiance....Once the chaotic mess of group loyalties begins to organize itself around a single line of cleavage, however, society is in danger of ‘falling to pieces’”.

The American Democratic and, especially, Republican parties have sorted themselves much more ideologically than in the past. Mason describes two kinds of ideology, as an identity and as a set of issue positions. Democrats have become about 7 percent more liberal on the total ANES ideology scale and Republicans have become about 10 percent more conservative.

³ Both Tesler and Mason describe an experiment with boys at camp which divides them into non-hierarchical groups that leads to sorting and, unexpectedly, violence. They describe this as natural.

Republicans were distinctly more ideological than Democrats from 1972 to 2000, the period measured, with scores farther from the moderate midpoint of a 7-point scale. Democratic social identification with liberals increased by about 24 percentage points; Republican identification with conservatives increased by about 35 percentage points. In 2000 more than 60 percent of Republicans identified with conservatives, an increase from 25 percent in 1972 and 1992. Republicans are nearly twice as likely as Democrats to feel socially connected to their ideological group. Identity-based ideological sorting increased in the USA. Partisans by 2000 had found their ideological clans. Ideology as a set of issue positions also showed a growing partisan divide (Mason, 2018: 28).

Bill Bishop with Robert G. Cushing tell this story more completely and understandably and they actually quote many more political scientists than the political scientists Mason and Tesler. This is in part due to not limiting their topics to what has been measured by polls and panels. Bishop considers such factors as geographic movement, cities, communities, education, income, churches, race, age, and ideas. He describes an economic, social and political chain reaction. All three books conclude the clustering of Americans has led to the major changes that have occurred in American politics and political parties over the last four decades.

Unlike Mason and Tesler, Bishop considers the economic causes of this change—wages, occupations, slow growth, which cities have secured more patents, which people moved and which did not. He found voting aligned with economics and created an economic, social and political chain reaction. People, when they moved, moved into communities of people like themselves—economically, socially, religiously, racially, and politically. Churches, communities, organizations sorted into like-minded people. As a consequence, today people interact very little with others of different opinions. Although these phenomena have occurred in both groups, as agreed by Mason and Tesler, political sorting and extremism is more marked among Republicans than Democrats.

While both Tesler (page 1) and Mason (p. 128) mention the American Civil War and the enduring racial divisions in American society prior to the Obama presidency, they nonetheless perceive the Obama presidency as exacerbating these divisions. Both of their presentations are largely ahistorical: The civil rights movement was a more-or-less successful attempt to overcome earlier, harsher sortings following slavery and the reconstruction failure after the Civil War.

Why Has This Happened?

Robert Putnam(1993) explained a decline in participation in cross-cutting social groups (social isolation) as a decline in social capital, which he defined as “features of social organization, such as trust, norms, and networks that can improve the efficiency of society by facilitating coordinated actions” (1993: 167) and which he found to be key to high institutional performance and the maintenance of democracy. In *Making Democracy Work: Civic Traditions in Modern Italy*, he and his co-authors demonstrated that regional governments worked best in areas of Italy where the population was actively interacting with dissimilar people, through group activities such as soccer clubs and choirs, but not in areas where the Roman Catholic Church was strongest: “...in Catholic Italy, [the church] is an alternative to the civic community, not a part of

it” (page 107). Trade unions, on the other hand, involved a wide range of workers and contributed positively to civic culture (pp. 106-7).

In “Bowling Alone: America’s Declining Social Capital” (1995) and *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*, Putnam discussed ways in which Americans had disengaged from political involvement including decreased voter turnout, public meeting attendance, serving on committees, working with political parties, and growing distrust of government. Voting increased later, but with a different motivation, as explained in Mason’s book. While he acknowledged the possibility that lack of trust could be attributed to political tragedies and scandals since the 1960s, he believes trends in civic engagement of a wider sort are more important, especially the loss of membership and volunteers in many existing civic organizations: religious groups (e.g., Knights of Columbus, B'nai Brith), labour unions, parent–teacher associations, Federation of Women's Clubs, League of Women Voters, military veterans' organizations, volunteers with Boy Scouts and the Red Cross, and fraternal organizations (Lions, Elks, Rotary, Kiwanis). Illustrating why decline in Americans' membership in social organizations is problematic democracy, Putnam used bowling clubs as an example. Although the number of people who bowl has increased in 20 years, the number of people who bowl in leagues has decreased. If people bowl alone, they do not participate in social interaction and civic discussions that might occur in a league environment. Some authors (e.g., journalist Nicholas Lemann) disagreed, suggesting people are just doing different things now, but still in groups that expose them to people with other opinions.

Putnam then contrasted the countertrends of ever increasing mass-membership organizations, non-profit organizations, and support groups to the data of the General Social Survey, one of the polls Tesler and Mason used. This data shows an aggregate decline in membership of traditional civic organizations, supporting his thesis that U.S. social capital has declined. He then asked the obvious question “Why is US social capital eroding?” He does not believe that the movement of women into the workforce and other demographic changes had much impact on the number of individuals engaging in civic associations. Instead, he suggested the main cause is technology that individualized people's leisure time via television, social media and “virtual reality helmets”.

Some argue that while group activity may have decreased, social media (not isolation) may have substituted for it and even increased interaction. The question is whether texting, tweeting, exchanging opinions, commenting on Facebook, etc. are their own kind of alienation (they have certainly given intolerance fora) or whether they are contributing positively to civic community and if so, what kind of civic community. While social media have, for example, allowed people to communicate effectively for local purposes (e.g. demonstrations), they have also connected people on many other levels, including internationally.

Bill Bishop also highlighted the divisive effects of having aligned neighbourhoods, cities, churches, and news stories along partisan lines. Mason also cautions about the effects on politics and the electorate due to sorting of society and political parties. She points out that sorting is a more powerful effect than partisanship in creating extremism. Research indicates that the USA gradually became less sorted after the 1860s Civil War and up until the 1950s, when conservative southerners gradually moved from the Democratic to the Republican Party. From

unsorted parties, they then became even more sorted, by race, religion, geography, and politics. Since then, the parties have steadily increased their social sorting. At its extremity, sorting leads to tribalism and demonization of opponents. When this happens, winning rather than the public interest becomes the primary interest of parties and extreme partisans who are not interested in compromises. The common good disappears as an objective.

What Can Be Done?

When partisan identities are aligned with other social identities, increased bias and social distance is induced. Social sorting of parties leads their members to react more emotionally to political messaging, to vote more and to become more aggressively active, with the objective of winning even if this fails to secure favoured policies and makes things generally worse. Of course, there are those who think that tribalism and extremism would most likely fail to achieve desired policies if their party didn't win.

Levels of polarization in Congress in 2016 were relatively close to what they were after the Civil War. With a major change in the racial composition of the USA occurring, and the USA nationally soon and some individual states now having white minority status, it is important this hyper-partisanship change: Research has demonstrated a positive relationship between size of a minority group and levels of white prejudice against minorities (Mason, 2018: 137). If current patterns hold, the Republican Party also faces increased periods out of power because of these demographic changes to parties and the population. According to Mason, this could lead to exits from the Republicans and in turn reduced social polarization of parties. It could, however, lead to increased social polarization of parties, if the people leaving the Republicans were the racial minorities and the more liberal thinkers.

Mason indicates partisans need to learn to like or at minimum humanize their partisan opponents. For this to be able to happen, more people in the parties and the electorate need to develop more cross-cutting identities that allow them to interact with, understand, and be friends with people of the other parties, people unlike them in other ways, and people with different opinions. There is, however, a lack of incentives for them to do so.

Mason took a social psychological approach to much of her work. She turns to it for ideas about what needs to happen for party and social polarization to turn around. She therefore suggests that extremists need more self-affirmation. She indicates, fortunately, that something as simple as reminding people of their self-worth can significantly reduce extremism and ideological close-mindedness.

Alternately, she suggests safeguarding disadvantaged white Americans, an economic upturn or a change in economic status could lead to less polarization. Of course the Republican party and Trump say this is what they are doing. Mason also looks to what happened between the Civil War and the 1950s. People came together to solve major problems like the Great Depression and World War II, and cohered around a sense of national identity. Mason does not mention the Red scares, lynchings and trade union repression that also occurred during this period nor the organizing of agricultural movements, trade unions, political movements, political

parties and Social Gospel movement in the progressive churches that were the prime movers in finding solutions. The economic changes in the western world, due to technology and economic globalization and the ones ahead due to greater inequality and robots reducing work availability even further could be done in a way that protects people. Previously, such issues were dealt with through social assistance and union organization. It is not clear from these books how it might happen this time.

In *Bowling Alone* Putnam suggests closer studies of which forms of associations create the greatest social capital, how various aspects of technology and changes in social equality and public policy affect social capital, emphasizing the importance of discovering how the USA could reverse the trend of social capital decay. (Wikipedia, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bowling_Alone).⁴

Missing Discussions

There are some things missing from these books that I would have liked to see discussed.

1. What is “race”? Tefler’s book is entirely about race but he does not identify the races he mentions: white, black, Hispanic. What is a white person? Race was identified by American (and Canadian) immigration agencies until the 1940s and 1950s. The definition used by American Immigration was changed but was also identified informally (<https://www.archives.gov/publications/prologue/2002/summer/immigration-law-1.html>). A definition would have helped in these books. Tefler indicates Obama is a black man: this is common parlance in the USA and in the three books. Obama had a white parent and a black parent. Why isn’t he a white man? Why isn’t he a mixed-race man? Why is that something that is mentioned so often about him? Why does it matter so much? A discussion of these issues would have helped (Bishop published his book before Obama entered the presidential race; so, this is not an issue for his book with regard to Obama, but Bishop also uses polling data that asks about race).

2. These poll- and interview-based studies are constrained by their sources of information, as are all surveys, panels, and examples-based discussions. Bishop actually quotes more political scientists than does Tefler or Mason, who have written political science books. None the three books discusses possible biases in their work, created, for example, created by unrepresentative sampling, inability to reach people sampled, and refusals (omission bias) and human tendencies to prefer the status quo to change, even when the status quo will lead to change (Ritov and

⁴ Some authors questioned Putnam’s argument. Everett Carll Ladd claimed Putnam ignored existing field studies, especially the Middletown studies, which raised the same concerns during the 1920s with radio. Other critics questioned Putnam’s major finding—that civic participation has been declining. Journalist Nicholas Lemann proposed civic activity in the US during the 1990s assumed different forms: Parents integrated themselves into social networks and contributed to social capital e.g., through youth soccer leagues.

Baron, 1992). Each of these books should have had a discussion of how representative their sources – polling and panel studies – were and a discussion of potential biases.

3. The studies are also constrained by what the pollsters and interviewers addressed. What would the authors have liked to have seen addressed in polling and panels, in addition to the issues that were? What is missing? Could anything have been dropped from their perspective? Bishop's book is much more complete in this regard, as he analyzes individual communities, campaigns, and issues such as the kinds of organizations people belonged to in 2008-09 (children's sports leagues, political parties).

4. There are many tables and figures in both books. Mason relies on figures in the text and puts the tables in appendices. In the figures in the text, her vertical axes are not labelled. I found this made the work of understanding the figures more difficult.

5. Finally, I am concerned with Tesler and Mason placing the problem with natural human reactions of which we are unaware and which we cannot control. According to Mason, all we can do is continuously expose ourselves to a variety of people, not just people like ourselves. Personally, I do not find it easy to judge the politics, social class or race of the people I am exposed to. We do not discuss politics or religion or race or geography. We just play badminton, sing in the choir, go to church with each other. I also wonder how certain this is to have the effects they suggest. It suggests there is no need for a role for governments, other institutions, non-government organizations, churches, that it will just happen if we do what she says. I wonder. It seems to me these are more likely structural than human relations issues.

Overall, I would say *The Big Sort* is the most interesting and the most comprehensive of the three books. Bishop is a good story teller, has done a tremendous amount of both scholarly and personal research, and provides the most comprehensive picture. Tesler and Mason limit themselves to polling and panel data and look in depth at it. They demonstrate, even more than Bishop did, that he was right and that the phenomenon of sorting has continued since 2009. We all need to spend some time with people who are not like us, and to listen to what they have to say, but a change in sorting and politics will not "just happen". It requires active organizing.

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