

STUCK IN THE MIDDLE: THE EXTREMES PULLING AMERICA APART

To many Americans, it feels these days like politics has become an arena for extremists and elites to show off how much they can hurt the other side. The average American is left stuck in the middle without a voice. What happened to “power to the people?”

Researchers studying American politics have identified this as “political polarization,” or an increasing divide across the political aisle between the political left (Democrats, liberals) and the political right (Republicans, conservatives). Two types of polarization have been identified.

Ideological polarization: Liberals and conservatives or Democrats and Republicans in the American public drifting farther apart over time in their policy opinions (attitudes toward welfare, immigration, abortion, taxes, for example). Opinions on how much this has really occurred are [mixed](#).

Affective polarization: Liberals and conservatives or Democrats and Republicans in the American public expressing increased animosity against one another. Evidence of this type of polarization is [clear](#) and researchers tend to agree it is increasing in America.

Some important findings from the research:

- Americans are more likely now [than any time in recent U.S. history](#) to feel negatively toward each other [and to want nothing to do with each other socially](#).
- [Over 40% of Americans](#) think a civil war is likely within the next decade.
- Most Americans [just hate politics](#) all together. Nonetheless, scholars see increased polarization as a [significant threat to American democracy](#).

WHERE DOES POLARIZATION COME FROM?

- The Human Mind and “[Cognitive Biases](#)”

- Humans are [innately wired](#) to simplify the social world into “ingroups” (groups we belong to) and “outgroups” (groups we do not belong to).

- Societal Trends

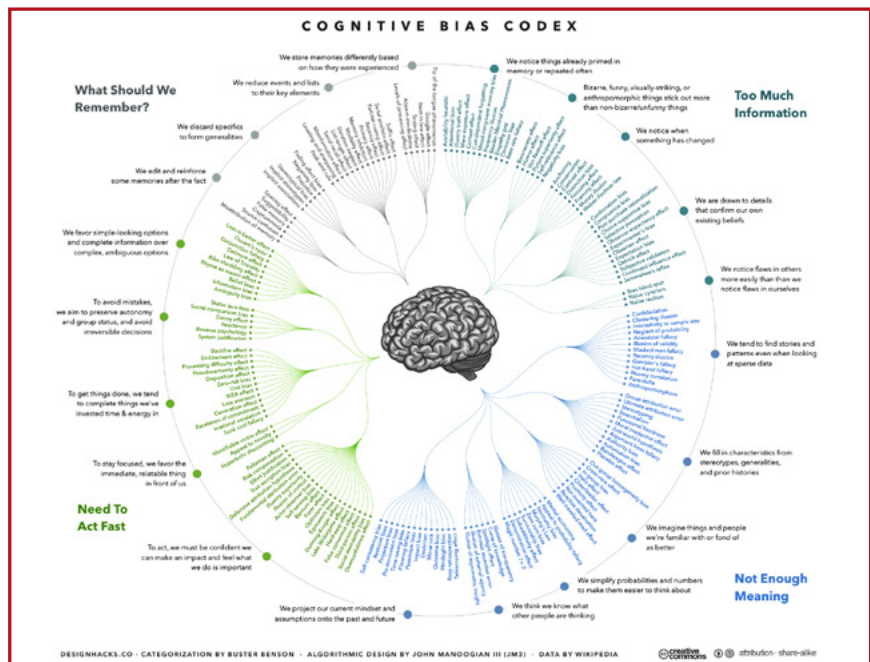
- [Social sorting](#) is when identities like race, religion, and ideology all become aligned with a political party. Today, more than in the past, Republicans are likely to be white, non-Hispanic, Christian conservatives and Democrats are likely to be non-white, Hispanic, non-Christian liberals.

- The Media

- Social media has allowed people to form “[bubbles](#),” in which they surround themselves with people and news outlets that are likeminded and easily avoid diverse viewpoints. These bubbles are made worse by [social media algorithms](#).

- Social media is full of *fake news* and *misinformation*. [There is profit to be made by spreading fake news](#) since viral posts generate advertising revenue.

- People tend to continue to share fake news because of several human tendencies, including a) [lack of critical thinking](#) and b) [desires to harm political outgroups](#).



To view the Cognitive Bias Codex in high resolution, visit:
https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Cognitive_bias_codex_en.svg

- **Foreign nations** have utilized social media to spread misinformation to make polarization worse and destabilize the American political system.
- News coverage has become **increasingly nationalized over time**, meaning there is less coverage of local political issues. This **has been tied to polarization** because national issues tend to be much more divisive.
- The American Political System
 - The U.S. has **“winner-take-all” elections**, which means there is only one winner of an election, and they represent the entire constituency. This ensures a two-party system (i.e., third party candidates are very unlikely to win) **and is argued to increase polarization** and create a **“two-party doom loop”** in which vocal, extreme minorities maintain power over the majority of the public.
 - Influential members of political parties control nominations and endorsements in state legislatures **in a way that favors extreme candidates**.
 - **Legislative process**, such as how leaders of each party are chosen and who chooses who gets to sit on which committees, **contributes to polarization in Congress**.
- Economic Conditions
 - Interestingly, **wealth inequality** has been shown consistently to lead to greater polarization.

CONSEQUENCES OF POLARIZATION

- Desire to distance oneself from members of the other party socially and physically.
- Seeing people with opposing political views as less than human.
- Taking delight in harm being done to members of the other party.
- Support for using violence to influence politics.
- “Motivated reasoning” (i.e., ignoring painful truths and making excuses to justify one’s own opinion).
- Negative health effects, such as anxiety, depression, and sleep disorders.

HOW TO REDUCE POLARIZATION AND BRING BACK POWER TO THE PEOPLE

Bringing People Together

- **Common Ingroup Identities**: Highlighting that we all belong to one larger group (e.g., Americans) rather than the smaller groups that are fighting (e.g., Republicans and Democrats)
- **Correcting Misperceptions**: Informing people that the other side is not as extreme or hateful as they may have thought.
- **Accuracy prompts** on social media that remind people how important it is to check that news is true and accurate.
- **Increased contact** between groups with equal power to get to know one another.
- **“Perspective-Taking,”** or learning to “walk in the shoes” of the other side.
- Emphasizing **how fragile our democracy** is.

Changing the Rules/Laws

- **Ranked choice voting**, in which voters rank the candidates in order of preference and then runoff elections are held until one wins a clear majority.
- Regulating **money in politics**.
- Reducing **wealth inequality**.
- Reducing **the power of congressional leaders**.
- Revitalizing **local newspapers**.