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The Big Sort: Why the Clustering of Like-Minded Americans Is Tearing Us Apart; Bill Bishop and Robert G. Cushing, Houghton Mifflin, 2008

Sorting It Out

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The daily barrage of snarky exchanges between opposing campaign consultants and the all too predictable party line divisions on so many state and federal policies remind us almost daily that partisanship is very deeply rooted in contemporary U.S. politics. Thanks partly to

the introduction of red and blue maps depicting areas won by the Republican or Democratic candidates, voters are more aware than ever before that partisans tend to cluster geographically. This phenomenon is the subject of Bill Bishop's book, *The Big Sort: Why the Clustering of Like-Minded Americans Is Tearing Us Apart*. Bishop, a journalist who has collaborated with a sociologist, Professor Robert G. Cushing from the University of Texas at Austin, has written an ambitious, easy-to-digest book that blends journalistic observation with academic findings from demography, political science, and psychology, arguing that like-minded sorting accounts for the country's increasing political polarization.

Bishop begins with the observation that more voters live in landslide counties (i.e., counties where one presidential candidate defeats the other by more than 20 points) now than in the period before 1976. He rightly argues that gerrymandering only makes a marginal contribution to this

trend. Self-sorting by lifestyle and personal values is a more important explanation, and it has serious consequences:

The old systems of order—around land, family, class, tradition and religious denomination—gave way. They were replaced over the next thirty years with a new order based on individual choice. Today, we seek our own kind in like-minded churches, like-minded neighborhoods, and like-minded sources of news and entertainment. As we will see later in this book, like-minded, homogenous groups squelch dissent, grow more extreme in their thinking, and ignore evidence that their positions are wrong. As a result we now live in a giant feedback loop, hearing our own thoughts about what’s right and wrong bounced back to us by the television sets we watch, the newspapers and books we read and the blogs we visit online, the sermons we hear and the neighborhoods we live in.

While the big sort is not primarily driven by political considerations, it has significant partisan consequences. Because social, cultural, and religious similarities create homogenous political concentrations at the same time, they yield a nation of red and blue patches. And within the geographic patches, the reinforcement of similar

messages, Bishop argues, creates more extreme views and polarization.

A central theme in the book is that geographic concentration is an aspect of a more general sorting process that arises because individuals have more choices with respect to information sources and organizational membership. The internet and cable television offer citizens more opportunities for informational self-selection, shielding them if they so desire from uncomfortable, dissenting perspectives. Modern organizations contribute to this sorting process as well. Eager to build up their memberships, churches have discovered that people are more likely to join organizations that cater to specific lifestyles and cultures, but by designing their services in this way, they unwittingly provide yet another venue of insulation from value differences.

Citing social psychology research on the polarizing impact of group conformity and social norms, Bishop speculates that if these trends continue, there will be more polarization and social tension in America’s future, undermining the basis of stable democracy. As he concludes at the end of the book: “‘Tailor-made’ has worked so well for industry and social networking sites, for subdivisions and churches, we expect it from our government too. But democracy doesn’t seem to work that way.” Democracy requires some degree of consensus and shared values, and

Bishop frets that our sorting ways may be undermining the basic sociological conditions of a stable, well-functioning democracy.

It is hard to quarrel with his claims about geographic sorting. As Californians know, immigration and domestic migration have created a patchwork state consisting of many homogenous areas of varying economic circumstances and political leanings. A recent IGS book entitled *The New Political Geography* documents the state's east-west divide, a dramatic example of political clustering with blue or Democratic voters dominating the coastal counties and red or Republican voters in the inland and mountainous ones. And as Bishop suggests, the partisan sorting in California overlaps with religious, economic, and racial concentrations as well.

What Bishop neglects to say however is that homogenous sorting can occur at different levels: sometimes regionally (as in the inland-coastal split in California), sometimes by county, and often in neighborhoods within a city. Areas that are homogenous with respect to one level of government might not be homogenous at other levels: there might be common aggregations in a few particular neighborhood council districts but not the city as a whole, or in a constituent county but not an entire state legislative or congressional district. Racial concentration is legally protected in the redistricting process and therefore more uniformly reflected in district lines than other kinds of common interests such

as income, housing type, community organizations, and the like. Whether these nonracial interests are placed neatly within jurisdictional boundaries is often just a matter of chance and political bargaining. In general, it is better in a district-based representation system to be geographically concentrated than not; so, ironically, segregated groups get a seat bonus in U.S. politics.

The most controversial aspect of the Bishop thesis is the allegation that sorting is tearing us apart. To begin with, much of his evidence comes from social psychology studies done in laboratories, often with student subjects. I am willing to believe that the phenomena of conformity and polarization these studies document are real in their controlled context (i.e., the studies are internally valid), but I question how far they can be extended to generalizations about American democracy (i.e., the problem of external validity).

Bishop casually dismisses Morris Fiorina's argument that attitudes on critical issues have not become significantly more polarized in recent decades and that most Americans still hold moderate views. He also overlooks John Petrocik et al.'s argument that the main polarization in U.S. politics has been in voter feelings about opposing parties and politicians, not policies. Given this evidence, one wonders whether the United States is really coming apart at the seams. Perhaps the heated feelings that people have towards the rival political parties are more about the partisan actions

of elected officials than about real electoral divisions. And while some internet sites provide unbalanced points of view, many sites that simply aggregate news from various sources like Hotline, Rough and Tumble, Yahoo and Google news, etc. seem to be following mainstream media norms about balance and proper sourcing.

In the end, socio-economic and political concentrations are not new. America has always had ghettos, barrios, factory towns, rich suburbs, fancy parts of town, and the like. People have always socialized with like-minded friends. Is the threat of polarization from homogenous concentrations and biased information sources truly greater today than in the past? Perhaps, but some of this is the artifact of focusing on counties and regions rather than census tracts. The red and blue maps look much more complex when they are plotted by precincts or census tracts. But whatever the reality of geographic concentration in America, there are very few clear signs of polarization other than partisanship. Immigration-led diversity has exposed all Americans to a wider range of culture and cuisine than existed in American even 30 years ago. We do not seem to be experiencing an upsurge in hate crimes or racial tensions. Indeed, the trend on all forms of toleration over recent decades is upward.

Americans have always been of two minds when it comes to handling differences. One approach, the assimilation ideal, aspires to blend people with different racial, ethnic, cultural, and religious backgrounds into a

single American model. The other approach emphasizes tolerance, allowing people to retain their differences but looking for institutional means and social norms to contain the potential conflicts and tensions that inevitably arise when different groups have to live and interact with one another. Is it possible that social sorting will eventually undermine U.S. democracy? Maybe. But our Madisonian institutions that fracture power and create multiple levels of government are levies that have successfully contained the waves of previous demographic storms without collapsing. I suspect that they will hold once again.