

Political Polarization in the United States: The Influences of Exceptionalism and Religion

The United States is a house divided. Red versus blue, rural versus urban, rich versus poor, conservative versus liberal: bitter partisan divide characterizes the contemporary U.S. In the era of Donald Trump and Nancy Pelosi, the notion of working across the aisle for a greater, unified American good feels like nothing more than a romantic ideal of bygone era. Political polarization has forged two opposing national identities, each holding the other as an unpatriotic betrayal of the nation's heritage and a threat to its future.

How did this one nation under God, this city upon a hill whose people were destined for greatness, fragment into such disparity? How have such vastly different and inconsistent conceptions of U.S. identity emerged? Furthermore, is this current moment a break from the American tradition, or rather a continuation of sociological subcurrents finally brought to the surface? In a nation as culturally diverse as the U.S., epistemological questions of origin and identity lie at the heart of understanding partisan divide.

This paper will explore U.S. identity through three separate but related threads. First: an overview of the current political moment, and a broad examination of the extent of division among Americans. Second: the historical foundations of this polarization, with an emphasis on how Exceptionalism and the American Jeremiad continue to influence U.S. politics and culture. Third: religion, and how questions of God have, and continue to, remain subcurrents to secular political divide. Finally, the paper concludes with brief thoughts on how the nation might move forward.

This paper does not seek to offer concrete solutions or recommendations. Instead, it grapples with the epistemological interplay of identity and political divide. At this paper's heart is the idea that American Exceptionalism and religion has exerted—and continues to exert—significant influence on political division.

A Polarized America

Abraham Lincoln declared in 1858 that a house divided against itself cannot stand. In an era when the U.S. was physically torn apart by Civil War, he believed that the nation would have no recourse but to become “all one thing or all the other.” Today, Lincoln's words seem almost prophetic.

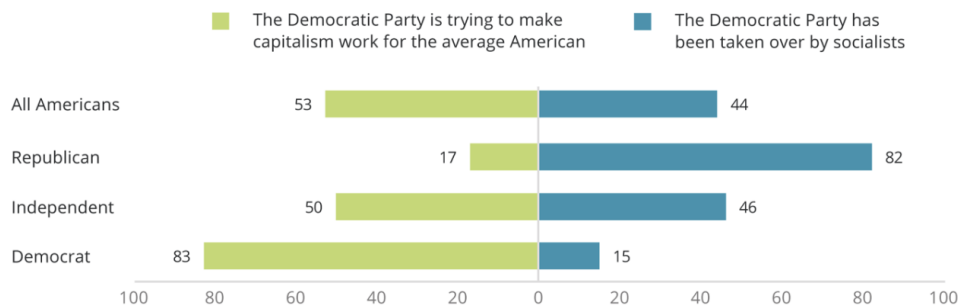
Donald Trump won the 2016 presidential election on a campaign of “us” versus “them,” railing against immigrants he claimed threatened the American way of life and calling for his Democratic opponent to be “locked up.” Contrary to Democratic rebuke, this rhetoric is not some extraordinary breach of norms and values; instead, the Trump campaign and subsequent administration reflect a larger ideological divide within the nation.

According to a 2019 report by the Public Religion Research Institute, none of the top three policy issues for Democrats (health care, climate change, and foreign interference in presidential elections) overlap with those of Republicans (terrorism, immigration, and crime).¹ Moreover, there is a wide partisan gap within specific policy areas. Take the examples of immigration policy and climate change: while 89 percent of Republicans “strongly favor or favor restrictive immigration policies,” only 32 percent of Democratic respondents supported such a position. While 79 percent of Democrats believe that “climate change is taking place and is human caused,” 35 percent of Republicans do not even believe that climate change is happening.

Another 32 percent of Republicans believe that climate change “is caused by natural patterns,” not human activity.²

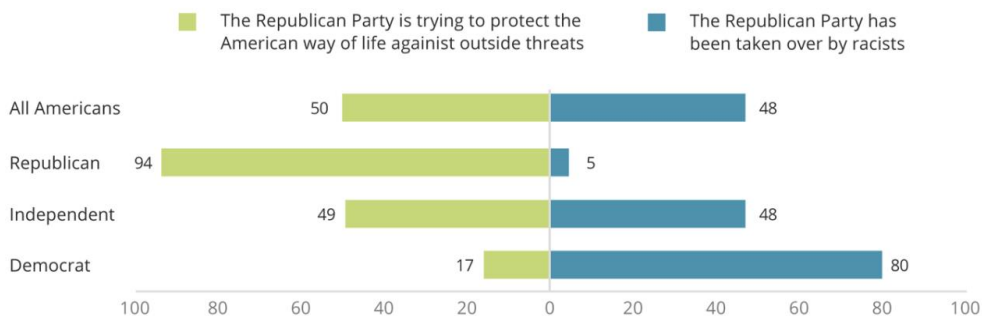
Political divide reaches deeper than policy: it strikes at issues of identity. Consider perceptions of the Democratic and Republican parties. While 83 percent of Democrats believe that their party “is trying to make capitalism work for the average American,” 82 percent of Republicans believe that the Democratic Party has been “taken over by socialists.”³ Conversely, while 94 percent of Republicans view their party as protecting American traditions, 80 percent of Democrats see the Republican Party as having “been taken over by racists.”⁴ These statistics are shown in Figure 1 below (note the divide by Party Affiliation):

Percent who say:



Source: PRRI 2019 American Values Survey.

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Figure 1. Perceptions of the Democratic and Republican Parties⁵

How does approval of President Trump differ by party affiliation? Data collected before the 2020 Covid-19 pandemic show that 88 percent of Republicans “approve of his performance, including a 53 percent majority who strongly approve.”⁶ Conversely, 92 percent of Democrats disapproved of Trump, including 77 percent who “strongly disapprove.”⁷ This is shown in Figure 2 below.

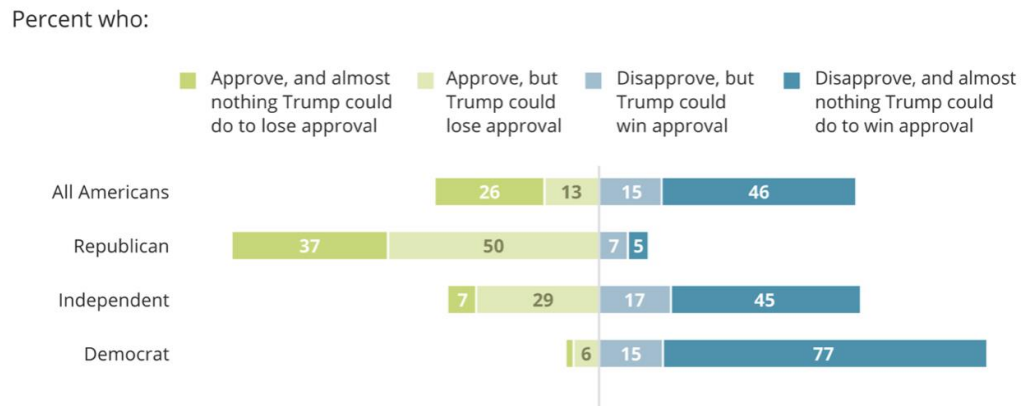


Figure 2. Trump Approval Ratings by Party Affiliation⁸

Extrapolating these divides to the nation as a whole, 74 percent of Republicans say that the U.S. is “going in the right direction,” while 89 percent of Democrats believe the opposite.⁹ The contemporary U.S. is not merely divided by fleeting differences of opinion or strong disagreement on only specific policy areas. Rather, the nation is *polarized*: separated by deep schisms of both ideology and *identity*. It is not merely a question of policy between parties, but vastly different ideas of what each of the two major political parties stand for.

The nation’s current moment seems to be uniquely distinct from any other period in its history. There is indeed deep historical precedent of the American people being deeply divided: from Federalists versus Anti-Federalists to Civil War itself to the Civil Rights Movement. In all those cases, there was a central, fundamental issue which divided the people: be it the Constitution, slavery, or equal rights. These issues and moments have ranged in scope and depth, but there was always a *concrete subject* around which people disagreed.

Today, the issue seems to span a much wider breadth. A wide array of vastly diverse subjects divides Americans: from abortion to gun control to climate change to immigration to healthcare. It is difficult to pinpoint the roots of contemporary political divide—only the myriad consequences. Political disagreement is part of the democratic process, but in the U.S. of 2019, deliberation and debate have gridlocked the very system that they hope to support.

An Exceptionalist Identity

Although the modern political climate is complex, its roots are evident in American history. John Winthrop, in his 1630 sermon *A Model of Christian Charity* declared, “For we must consider that we shall be as a city upon a hill. The eyes of all people are upon us. So that if we shall deal falsely with our God in this work we have undertaken, and so cause Him to withdraw His present help from us, we shall be made a story and a by-word through the world.”¹⁰ The idea that the U.S. is an exceptional land—and that its European settlers were on a God-ordained mission to light the way for the world—predated the nation itself. So argues Charles Kupchan, professor of International Affairs at Georgetown University and a senior fellow at the Council on Foreign Relations, “from its earliest days, the exceptionalist narrative has set the boundaries of public discourse and provided a political and ideological foundation for U.S. grand strategy.”¹¹

In the wake of independence and “unparalleled autonomy,” Kupchan describes how Americans “embraced a messianic mission: they believed that their unique experiment in political and economic liberty would redeem the world.”¹² In this new nation, “monarchy and aristocracy” had been replaced with “equality of opportunity” as “yeoman farmers and small-town shopkeepers” carried forth a national belief of “manifest destiny—the notion that democracy and prosperity would stretch from coast to coast.”¹³ Not only was the U.S. itself exceptional, but so too were its people, so too were the Anglo-Saxons. Congregational minister

Horace Bushnell declared: “out of all the inhabitants of the world, . . . a select stock, . . . the noblest of the stock, was chosen to people our country.”¹⁴ Thomas Paine wrote in *Common Sense*, “A situation, similar to the present, hath not happened since the days of Noah until now. The birthday of a new world is at hand.”¹⁵ At its founding, the United States unified in its destiny for greatness.

The American Jeremiad

Donald Trump’s rhetoric and U.S. political polarization in the current moment are rooted on the foundations of American Exceptionalism. The bridge between Winthrop and Trump is the American Jeremiad, a “mainstream and deeply American way of thinking about the nation’s past, present, and future.”¹⁶ The Jeremiad is a rhetorical tradition founded in the biblical prophet Jeremiad, who “catalogued Israel’s fall from fidelity and warned of the horrible judgements to come,” and whose place in American tradition originates in seventeenth century Puritan New England.¹⁷

There are two central pillars of the Jeremiad. The first is that it “assumed a special covenant relationship that made their society different from others around them.”¹⁸ New England ministers believed in the parallel between the U.S. and Israel: that, in the words of pastor Matt McCullough of Nashville, Tennessee’s Trinity Church, the “threat of divine punishment for moral decline was merely the dark underbelly of his distinguishing, fatherly love.”¹⁹ The second assumption was the existence of a “cause and effect relationship between faithfulness and social flourishing or, on the other hand, unfaithfulness and social decline. The assumption of blessings and curses was part and parcel to the idea of a national covenant.”²⁰

Sacvan Bercovitch described these pillars in his 1978, *The American Jeremiad*, which remains the classic study analyzing the general Jeremiad in the American case.²¹ Tracing its

roots back to Winthrop's exceptionalist vision of a city upon a hill, the Jeremiad proclaims that "we Americans . . . have failed to live up to our founding principles, betrayed our sacred covenant as history's (or God's) chosen nation, and must rededicate ourselves to our ideals, reclaim our founding promise."²² Bercovitch noted that the American Jeremiad "made anxiety its end as well as its means" and sought to inculcate crisis: "whether 'denouncing or affirming,' its vision 'fed on the distance between promise and fact.'"²³ Despite its awareness that the present falls short of past ideals, the Jeremiad "nonetheless can't imagine a future on any other terms."²⁴ There always remained an "unshakable confidence in the distinctive favor of God on their society."²⁵

Andrew Murphy traces the American Jeremiad from Puritan New England to the twenty-first century in his *Prodigal Nation*. He identifies three key components in Jeremiad sermons. First, "jeremiads lamented the harsh realities of the present," trying to explain the crises of the day through the sins of the people.²⁶ There was then "a contrast to the ideal purity of the founding generation," further exacerbating contemporary moral shortcomings.²⁷ Like Bercovitch, Murphy sees that the American Jeremiad is not an "abstract critique," but rather "claimed that piety and godly order had once existed and had subsequently been lost."²⁸ Finally, there was "a call for repentance and renewal, backed by a promise that God would not forsake them if they returned to him."²⁹

The common theme between both Bercovitch and Murphy's analyses of the American Jeremiad is the tension at its heart, as described by McCullough:

What Murphy and others have noticed about the American jeremiad, especially in its Puritan form, is that there's a tension at its heart—a tension between despair and hope. Despair over how far society has fallen. Hope for how God would honor renewed obedience. And underneath the despair and the hope is the confidence that God has established a cause and effect relationship between Christian faithfulness and social flourishing.³⁰

U.S. history is littered with the calls of the American Jeremiad, from King Philip's War in the late seventeenth century to Hurricane Katrina in the early twenty-first century.³¹ Henry David Thoreau called for a return to simpler times in *Walden*; F. Scott Fitzgerald wrote a jeremiad in *The Great Gatsby*; the Beats wrote jeremiads, crying out "America when will you be angelic?"; Norman Mailer's *Armies of the Night* declared, "America, once a beauty of magnificence unparalleled, now a beauty with a leprous skin"; Martin Luther King Jr. and Barack Obama and Ronald Reagan, all have written jeremiads.³² The ideas of the Jeremiad are deeply imbued within the very fabric of U.S. identity. It does not matter whether the nation as is Christian or secular, or whether an individual voter is religious or atheist or agnostic. Instead, it matters that the deeply religious threads of morality and hope, of redemption and an ideal identity, are all within America's cultural foundations.

The Exceptionalism of Donald Trump

This lingering influence of Exceptionalism and the Jeremiad may help reconcile the nation's current polarized political climate with these historical calls for a unified greatness. Just as there had been a tension between hope and despair at the heart of the American Jeremiad, there seems to exist a tension in the rhetoric of Donald Trump.

Many have argued that Trump's populist brand of politics and "America First" foreign policy undermine "the United States' role as an exceptional nation destined to bring political and economic liberty to a waiting world."³³ Daniel Drezner, professor of international politics at the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy at Tufts University, wrote in *The Washington Post* that "Trump's brand of nativism could be the death knell for American exceptionalism."³⁴ Nevertheless, Trump is not, in fact, abandoning the vision of an exceptional America. Instead, he is embracing another, equally established, version of Exceptionalism.

Only after the Second World War did American Exceptionalism center on what Kupchan describes as “the idea of a Pax Americana upheld through the vigorous export of U.S. power and values.”³⁵ The critical moment was the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941, after which the factory worker replaced the yeoman farmer as the bedrock of an exceptional American Dream. This is the Exceptionalism taught in elementary schools and the ideology championed by liberals: an exceptionalism without “racial tinge,” strong in its conviction “that the melting pot would successfully integrate a diverse population into one civic nation.”³⁶ This was the era in which U.S. identity preached “pluralism and tolerance” and valued cultural diversity as a social and economic boon.³⁷ As Kupchan writes, history is more complicated than the storybook picture of the U.S. as a diverse and welcoming nation:

But before that [World War II], American exceptionalism meant insulating the American experiment from foreign threats, shunning international entanglements, spreading democracy through example rather than intrusion, embracing protectionism and fair (not free) trade, and preserving a relatively homogeneous citizenry through racist and anti-immigrant policies. In short, it was about America first.³⁸

This is the American Exceptionalism that Donald Trump and his Republican Party have embraced. These dueling visions of Exceptionalism—one predating the Second World War and the other emerging in its wake—lie at the heart of contemporary political divide. Both sides hold the U.S. as an exceptional nation. While Barack Obama and his Democratic Party believed inclusivity is what sets the nation apart, Donald Trump holds sovereignty as that distinctly American value. At its heart, Trump’s is a vision of the more homogeneous U.S. of the past:

Restricting immigration; ending Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals, or *daca* (the Obama administration’s program that shielded undocumented immigrants who were brought to the country as children); insulting Hispanic Americans; sending back Haitians, Salvadorans, and others displaced by natural disasters; and equivocating on neo-Nazis in Charlottesville—all these moves are not-so-subtle paeans to the days when Christians of European extraction dominated the United States. For Trump, making America great again means making it white again.³⁹

This idea of America's whiteness—an idea that transcends partisan rhetoric on either side—is deep at the core of U.S. history. Consider, for example, the enduring legacies of chattel slavery and racial discrimination. In June of 2020, amidst the nationwide rioting and widespread racial unrest that followed the deaths of Ahmaud Arbery and George Floyd, it is as clear as ever that race is intrinsic to U.S. identity.

A Nation of Church and State: Historical Foundations of Religion in the United States

Alphonso F. Saville, the Andrew W. Mellon postdoctoral fellow for American Religion and Slavery in the Department of Theology and Religious Studies at Georgetown University, argues that “America’s past informs the kind of religious and political polarization that we’re experiencing in the present moment.”⁴⁰ He describes the existence of an “underlying theological foundation that informed political ideology in America’s formative years.”⁴¹

Saville emphasizes the importance of understanding historical context: “the contemporary moment can really be better understood by understanding what the religious foundations of political difference—political ideological difference—are in America’s history.”⁴² “I don’t think that this represents a particularly unique moment,” Saville continues, “I think that this [moment], in many ways, crystallizes what is in a microcosm the whole in totality of the American experience.”⁴³ Going back to slavery and the origins of the black church, he makes the point that “political polarization and religious difference is the story of America.”⁴⁴ Saville’s argument is supported by Stacey Floyd-Thomas and Anthony Pinn in their book, *Liberation Theologies in the United States*:

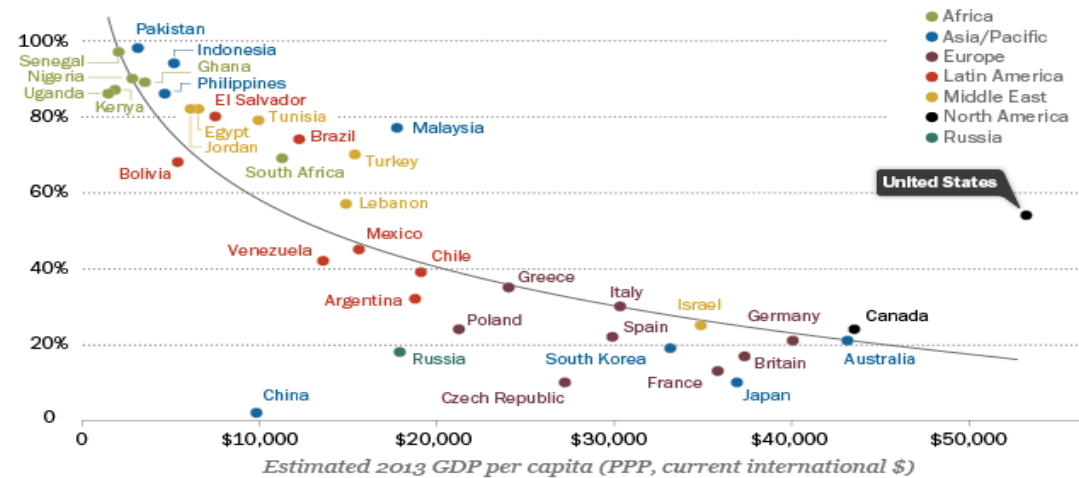
From the initial movement of European explorers forward, the creation of what became the United States entailed the destruction and rearrangement of cultures and worldviews. The United States has always been a contested terrain, forged through often violent and destructive sociopolitical arrangements. Markers of “difference” such as race and gender are embedded in the formation and development of this country. One cannot forget, however, that much of the struggle relating to this development took place within the

framework of religious belief and commitment that informed, justified, and shaped the self-understanding of the nation.⁴⁵

The influence of religion on U.S. society and politics is widespread and deeply ingrained. Recall that the language of religion, and specifically of Christianity, is found repeatedly in exceptionalist narratives; recall the nation's Puritan heritage, God's ordainment in Manifest Destiny, and the hope for salvation in the Jeremiad. But religion's influence stretches beyond the scope of Exceptionalism. Though the U.S. is founded on a separation of Church and State—a fundamental tenet enshrined in the First Amendment of the Constitution—religion has nonetheless always had a pervasive and influential presence in the nation's culture and politics: from colonization to the Great Awakening to abolitionism to moral codes to foreign policy. As shown in Figure 4 below, the U.S. is unique in the context of religious influence. Americans pledge allegiance to “One Nation Under God”; the nation's currency is marked with the words “In God We Trust”; U.S. presidents end speeches with “God Bless America”; and in the face of adversity—in the face of natural disasters or national tragedy—Americans as a society turn to religion for meaning and comfort.⁴⁶

Wealthier Nations Tend to Be Less Religious, But U.S. a Prominent Exception

% saying religion plays a very important role in their lives (2011-2013)



Note: The curve represents the logarithmic relationship between GDP per capita and the percentage saying that religion plays a very important role in their lives. Germany, France, Britain % data from spring 2011; U.S., Japan % data from spring 2012. Source: Spring 2011, 2012, 2013 Global Attitudes survey. Data for GDP per capita (PPP) from IMF World Economic Outlook Database, April 2014.

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Figure 4. Religious Influence on U.S. Society⁴⁷

Religious influence in the United States began with its Puritan founding. In the words of Alexis de Tocqueville: “Puritanism, as I have already remarked, was scarcely less a political than a religious doctrine.”⁴⁸ This religious history spans from the Mayflower Compact to the current moment, and Tocqueville noted the “intimate union of the spirit of religion with the spirit of liberty.”⁴⁹ Tocqueville’s work *Democracy in America* speaks at length about how religion undergirds U.S. culture and society. In it, Tocqueville considered religion the “foremost” political institution, and deemed it critical to the sustenance of U.S. democracy: “from the earliest settlement of the emigrants politics and religion contracted an alliance which has never been dissolved.”⁵⁰ Here there is a connection between religion generally and the American Jeremiad specifically. Just as ideas of the Jeremiad have been imbued within the ethos of the American identity, so too did Tocqueville argue that religion constituted an intrinsic element of the U.S. state. Tocqueville described how “in the United States, religion exercises but little

influence upon the laws and upon the details of public opinion, but it directs the manners of the community, and by regulating domestic life it regulates the State.”⁵¹

Within this wide scope of American religion lie several significant developments. Among these was the emergence of liberation theologies in the twentieth century. Floyd-Thomas and Pinn described these theologies, “concerned with the transformation of social existence (i.e., liberation), as a religious quest. They are contextual, tied to the experiences and needs of concrete communities. They are political in nature and religious in commitment.”⁵² Liberation theology in the United States has manifested itself in various forms, starting with Black Theology but evolving to include Native American, Asian American, Mexican American, gay, and feminist communities, among others. With all their overlaps and differences, these oppressed groups all shared in their struggle to “reenvision life in ways that promote justice and freedom.”⁵³

Each of these distinct communities “recognized the merit of political struggle” and committed themselves to a “synergy of religious thought and political ideology . . . an understanding that religious faith demands struggle against sociopolitical injustice.”⁵⁴ Religion and politics and religion and society are deeply intertwined in the fabric of U.S. identity and in particular with its history of minority oppression.

Christopher Evans, professor of the History of Christianity at Boston University, notes that “throughout American history, religion has played a significant role in promoting social reform.”⁵⁵ For example, Floyd-Thomas and Pinn talk about how the 1950s Civil Rights Movement “framed its activities with a Christianity-centered demand for transformation.”⁵⁶ Religion's influence extends beyond history and into the present. Evans talks about the enduring influence of the Social Gospel: how religiously progressive leaders “unite around the social

gospel belief that religious faith must be committed to the transformation of social structures.”⁵⁷

He notes that despite lacking social infrastructure and the increasing secularization of the political left, the ideas of the Social Gospel may serve as a counter-position to what he calls “the perceived dogmatism of the religious right.”⁵⁸ Religion not only marked social movements of the past, it continues to influence politics today.

Religion and Politics

In the second Tanner lecture at Harvard University, James Q. Wilson, the Ronald Reagan Professor of Public Policy at Pepperdine University, proposed that “religion may be one of the most important sources of polarization in American politics.”⁵⁹ His thoughts reminiscent of Tocqueville’s in *Democracy in America*, Wilson proposed two reasons for this importance: first, the “extent of religiosity among Americans,” and second, “the kind of religiosity a country such as America, with a clear separation of church and state, develops.”⁶⁰

The significant influence of religion in U.S. society stands in stark contrast to Europe, “where religion has almost ceased to have any cultural or political role at all.”⁶¹ Despite levels of church attendance being roughly equal in the U.S. and U.K. until around a hundred years ago, American adults now attend church ten times more than their British counterparts, at fifty to five percent respectively.⁶² Wilson argues that this difference results from the fact that “in Europe the church has traditionally been, and still is, intimately connected to the state.”⁶³ In Europe, political and religious identification thus tend to go hand in hand, which then “means that opposing the party that endorses a particular religion means opposing the religion and not just the politics of the party.”⁶⁴

Wilson points out that there is “no comparable situation in the U.S.,” where there is a formal separation of church and state.⁶⁵ As the result of churches receiving neither tax money nor

governmental endorsement, “American churches find themselves in a free market where their existence and growth depends entirely on their own efforts.”⁶⁶ This privatization, like businesses in the open market, “encouraged growth.”⁶⁷ Additionally, Wilson argues that the American environment encourages more demanding churches (i.e. stricter and less tolerant of outside religious views), discourages “religious activists from having much impact on national or even state policy,” and also Americanizes churches, since “to persuade Americans, you must be American.”⁶⁸

The net result of these factors, Wilson concludes, is that “the effect of religion on political polarization in America is unmistakable. Religious conservatives have become an influential part of the Republican Party and secular liberals an important part of the Democratic Party.”⁶⁹

Both Melissa Rogers, who served in the Obama administration, is currently a visiting professor at Wake Forest University Divinity School, and holds a nonresident fellowship at the Brookings institution, and Peter Wehner, who served in the Bush and Reagan administrations and is a senior fellow at the Ethics and Public Policy Center, agreed in an interview with *Religion and Politics* that religion continues to exert significant political influence today.⁷⁰

Wehner opened by stating that, “I would say that religion as a general matter is making things worse, not better . . . you would hope that religion would be a force for reconciliation. I think that’s not happening, and I think what’s increasingly happening is that religion is being weaponized in politics.”⁷¹ Wehner continued, “what happens is people take their ideologies and they sacralize them, they baptize them, and they think that these views and these approaches have somehow been ordained by God.”⁷²

In the context of political polarization, Wehner talked about how it's easy to give those in one's own party "too much of the benefit of the doubt, and not enough" to the other side.⁷³ He continued that "religion is being used as an instrument to advance partisan causes":⁷⁴

I'm old enough to remember the stance of conservative evangelicals toward Bill Clinton when they argued that morality was central to political leadership and that a president had radiating effects on the wider culture. And they beat Bill Clinton upside the head with a moral club. And now that the situation is reversed and it's a Republican president who has ethical and moral problems even beyond what Bill Clinton did, and they not only don't call him out on that, but in many cases they're a sword and his shield, his defender.⁷⁵

Rogers expands on these ideas. She talks about how "people tend to be sorted into communities based on their political beliefs or policy views," and how "there are fewer purple churches and more red and blue churches."⁷⁶ She expands this idea past religious boundaries, saying that in any setting a variety of perspectives tend to "moderate one another," but that in the current climate "there's a race to the edges."⁷⁷

Jessica Stern, currently a research professor at the Pardee School of Global Studies at Boston University and a member of the Hoover Institution Task Force on National Security and Law, makes a similar point. She points out that while religion has a universalist impulse to unify people, it also has a particularistic impulse.⁷⁸ Stern talks about how "people are really, really divided in terms of where they live, what schools they go to."⁷⁹ She elaborates: "at this point, it is *hard* for me to find Republicans in my classrooms, let alone Trump supporters . . . I feel like I live in a bubble."⁸⁰ She expresses regret that her students do not have opportunities to engage in debate, and says that it's "bad for the country that we don't run into each other in the way we have in earlier times."⁸¹

A “Solution” to Political Polarization?

Abraham Lincoln once believed that the natural result of American disunity would be absolute hegemony: the victory of one side and the defeat of the other. However, the U.S. cannot bridge its current political divide through such extreme measures. In fact, it is worth considering whether “bridging” the political divide is still possible, or even desirable. Even as Democrats and Republicans argue for opposing American identities, they are reaffirming the divisions intrinsic in U.S. history. In a nation as culturally diverse as the U.S. and whose history is full of division—from the Jeremiad to Exceptionalism to slavery to religion—the simple idea of “solving” these deep-rooted divisions may *not* be possible. But resolution and cooperation are far from mutually exclusive.

At the foundations of the divide are American Exceptionalism and religion: their creation of symbolic and idealized Americas which are perfect and incorruptible. It seems common sense that when one side views the other as a threat to the true American identity—as an “other”—they become unwilling to compromise on their own vision. Americans as a collective society must move away from a black-and-white “us versus them” mentality. Tzvetan Todorov, in his book *The Conquest of America: The Question of the Other*, uses the conquest of the New World to describe how “we have already seen as much with Columbus: difference is corrupted into inequality, equality into identity.”⁸² Todorov makes explicit the link between connecting “identity to difference.”⁸³

In Todorov’s words, communication is key: “it is only by speaking to the other (not giving orders but engaging in dialogue) that *I* can acknowledge *him* as subject, comparable to what I am myself.”⁸⁴ Melissa Rogers says the following about her time as the executive director of the Obama White House’s Office of Faith-Based and Neighborhood Partnerships:

One of the things that we knew was that we could use that office to try to build bridges with people. There would be people who might not agree with some of the top policy priorities of the president, but they would agree that we should feed hungry children. My overture to everyone was to say: Let's find at least one thing we can agree on, and let's build a partnership around that, even if you think you don't agree with us on anything else. Of course, that never turned out to be true. Once we found one thing, we found more and more. So, that was a great part of the work.⁸⁵

It is a fair rebuke that Rogers' words are of an ideal, and that Americans must instead navigate through politics pragmatically. Recognizing and preaching the need for social cooperation and communication is, while necessary, not sufficient; one only needs to look at U.S. politics since President Obama to see the truth of that statement. Looking through history, fundamental structural change must be preceded by shifts in public opinion: by the *motivation* and the *belief* that change is *necessary*.

In twentieth-century China, the widespread death and destruction of Mao Zedong's Great Leap Forward and Cultural Revolution sparked economic modernization, a rejection of personalized rule, and the beginnings of a global superpower.⁸⁶ In South Africa, the systemic racial segregation and discrimination of apartheid, with its accompanying economic inequality, lasted for fifty years.⁸⁷ Today, South Africa's politics remain steeped in that legacy, and the core of the nation's electoral and political systems have been vastly reformed; a proportional representation electoral system has better allowed all South Africans to have a political voice.⁸⁸ For an American example, it took centuries of slavery before the American Civil Rights Movement succeeded in instigating change—and even today, racial injustice remains a paramount social issue in the U.S.

All of these historical events required that citizens recognize their nation's faults. Contemporary political polarization in the U.S. is no exception. Before the situation can proceed towards a more cooperative style of politics, Americans must first break free from the threads of

the Jeremiad. Americans must accept that the “solution,” (if it could be called that) does not lie in a return to the past or in recovering some lost ideal of American identity. There needs to be a recognition of the critical flaw within jeremiads: “that they often compared the best parts of a former generation with the worst parts of their own.”⁸⁹ Indeed, the golden age which jeremiads, and which Donald Trump’s Republican Party, preach may never have existed in the first place:

When third generation Puritans hankered after the days of their grandfathers, they were talking about a society marked by thriving churches, widespread attention to biblical preaching, and a code of law deeply influenced by biblical ethics. It was also the society that gave us the Salem Witch Trials. It was a society in which Native Americans were displaced, Quakers were executed, Baptists were whipped or banished, and voting was restricted to adult male propertied church members.⁹⁰

The Jeremiad and Exceptionalism both call for a return to the past. But the romanticized ideals that they call for are unattainable. The very idea of Exceptionalism, of a *superior* people or nation, is intrinsically unreceptive to compromise—a fundamental element of democratic deliberation. Through the lens of Exceptionalism, compromise would be seen as corruption of the ideal. This raises the idea that the U.S. should turn away from the idea of returning to some “greater” past. It should not reject the lessons of history, but it should nevertheless consider itself as forging a *new* path forward.

How might the U.S. move towards greater social cooperation and open political communication? Examining the historical examples listed above, a common thread seems to be the length of time before motivation for change reached critical mass. China endured twenty years of Radical Maoism, South Africa five decades of segregation, and the United States centuries of chattel slavery. Does the U.S. simply need to bide its time before a grand revolution engulfs its great-grandchildren?

Perhaps not. As Saville pointed out, the U.S. has been stewing within simmering lines of divisions since its Puritan founding and the establishment of slavery. Recent social unrest

following the deaths of Ahmaud Aubrey and George Floyd in June of 2020 was not a spontaneous development, but has rather been simmering in the nation's cultural and sociopolitical backdrop for decades. There are signs that the U.S. may be moving away from regarding difference through the lens of Todorov's *other*: among the multitude of social media posts calling for systemic change in June 2020 appeared the words "I understand that I will never understand. However I stand." History is a recursive sequence: a spark leads to wider systemic change. It is far too early to speak as to whether contemporary racial unrest will cascade towards broader political and cultural change, but it seems that the U.S., and particularly its youth, is becoming increasingly aware of longstanding divisions undergirding its society. In the process of rejection, they seem to be simultaneously turning away from the ideas of the Jeremiad and Exceptionalism and seeking a new, uncharted future for the nation.

The obvious key to bridging divide, though difficult, is to find common ground. At the beginning of his book, Todorov writes: "we can discover the other in ourselves, realize we are not a homogeneous substance, radically alien to whatever is not us: as Rimbaud said, *Je est un autre*."⁹¹

Conclusion

For its entire history, the United States has been shaped by the ideas of Exceptionalism and the influences of religion. However, in the current moment, amidst a political climate of bitter polarization and divide, the nation is being torn apart at its ideological seams. The notion of bipartisan deliberation towards the greater good of all Americans often seems naught but a lofty ideal. Democrats and Republicans are fighting a battle over the identity of the United States, each trying to reconcile the nation's complex and multifaceted history with today's sociocultural contexts.

The extent of contemporary partisan polarization is unique, but not without historical foundation. American Exceptionalism, guiding the American people since before the nation's founding, is deeply imbued within the ethos of U.S. identity. Along with the ideas of the Jeremiad and religious influence, it has created a vision of an ever-elusive past that the present and future must forever strive to live up to. These goals of Exceptionalism and religion—these romantic ideals that leave little room for the compromises of democratic deliberation—have in the contemporary U.S. resulted in partisan gridlock.

The way forward is unclear. There is no single solution to resolving partisan conflict. And in a nation which has historically prided itself on its cultural diversity, the question of what “resolution” may look like is opaque. Regardless of what form the solution takes, there remains a poignant historical insight from examining Exceptionalism and religion in the American context: The United States must move not backwards into the past, but forwards *from* the past.

ENDNOTES

¹ PRRI Staff, *Fractured Nation: Widening Partisan Polarization and Key Issues in 2020 Presidential Elections*, October 20, 2019, accessed November 24, 2019, <https://www.prrri.org/research/fractured-nation-widening-partisan-polarization-and-key-issues-in-2020-presidential-elections/>.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ PRRI Staff, *Fractured Nation: Widening Partisan Polarization and Key Issues in 2020 Presidential Elections*, October 20, 2019, accessed November 24, 2019, <https://www.prrri.org/research/fractured-nation-widening-partisan-polarization-and-key-issues-in-2020-presidential-elections/>.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ PRRI Staff, *Fractured Nation: Widening Partisan Polarization and Key Issues in 2020 Presidential Elections*, October 20, 2019, accessed November 24, 2019, <https://www.prrri.org/research/fractured-nation-widening-partisan-polarization-and-key-issues-in-2020-presidential-elections/>.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ John Winthrop, "A Model of Christian Charity," in *A Library of American Literature: From the Earliest Settlement to the Present Time*, ed. Edmund Clarence Stedman and Ellen Mackay Hutchinson (New York: Charles L. Webster & Company, 1892), 1:307, accessed November 30, 2019.

¹¹ Charles A. Kupchan, "The Clash of Exceptionalisms: A New Fight Over an Old Idea," *Foreign Affairs*, March/April 2018, accessed November 19, 2019, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/2018-02-13/clash-exceptionalisms>. It is also interesting to consider American Exceptionalism from the lens of Comparative Politics: considering majoritarian and consensus democracy, self-expression versus traditional values, etc...

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Matt McCullough, "The American Jeremiad: A Bit of Perspective on the Rhetoric of Decline," 9marks.org, last modified October 23, 2014, accessed November 19, 2019, <https://www.9marks.org/article/the-american-jeremiad-a-bit-of-perspective-on-the-rhetoric-of-decline/>.

¹⁷ Ibid; Wen Stephenson, "American Jeremiad: A Manifesto," *The New York Times*, March 23, 2010, accessed November 19, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2010/03/28/books/review/Stephenson-t.html>.

¹⁸ McCullough, "The American," 9marks.org.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Stephenson, "American Jeremiad."

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ McCullough, "The American," 9marks.org.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Stephenson, "American Jeremiad."

³³ Kupchan, "The Clash."

³⁴ Beinart, "How Trump."

³⁵ Kupchan, "The Clash."

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Kupchan, "The Clash."

⁴⁰ Alphonso F. Saville, IV, interview by Terence Armstead, et al., Georgetown University, Washington D.C., November 18, 2019.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Stacey M. Floyd-Thomas and Anthony B. Pinn, "Introduction," introduction to *Liberation Theologies in the United States: An Introduction* (New York: NYU Press, 2010), 1, accessed June 5, 2020, <http://www.jstor.com/stable/j.ctt9qgdgx.4>.

⁴⁶ There are a number of explanations proposed within the field of comparative politics for why the U.S. has not secularized to the same extent as other comparable democracies, which offer interesting perspectives on the subject from a more outward-oriented origin. This, however, is beyond the scope of this paper.

⁴⁷ George Gao, "How Do Americans Stand Out from the Rest of the World?," pewresearch.org, last modified March 12, 2015, accessed December 1, 2019, <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2015/03/12/how-do-americans-stand-out-from-the-rest-of-the-world/>.

⁴⁸ Alexis Tocqueville, *Democracy in America, Volume 1 (of 2)*, trans. Henry Reeve (Urbana, IL: Project Gutenberg, n.d.), Chapter II: Origin of the Anglo-Americans - Part I, accessed June 5, 2020, https://www.gutenberg.org/files/815/815-h/815-h.htm#link2H_4_0001.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Tocqueville, *Volume 1*, Chapter XVII: Principal Causes Maintaining The Democratic Republic—Part II.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Floyd-Thomas and Pinn, "Introduction," introduction, 1.

⁵³ Ibid., 2.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 8.

⁵⁵ Christopher H. Evans, "How the Social Gospel Movement Explains the Roots of Today's Religious Left," theconversation.com, last modified July 17, 2017, accessed June 5, 2020, <https://theconversation.com/how-the-social-gospel-movement-explains-the-roots-of-todays-religious-left-78895>.

⁵⁶ Floyd-Thomas and Pinn, "Introduction," introduction, 2.

⁵⁷ Evans, "How the Social," theconversation.com.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ President and Fellows of Harvard College, "Lecture II: Religion and Polarization," ethics.harvard.edu, last modified November 3, 2005, accessed November 24, 2019, <https://ethics.harvard.edu/event/lecture-ii-religion-and-polarization>.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

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⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ Jessica Stern, telephone interview by the author, Georgetown University, Washington, D.C., November 19, 2019.

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁸¹ Ibid.

⁸² Tzvetan Todorov, *The Conquest of America: The Question of the Other* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1999), 146.

⁸³ Ibid, 146.

⁸⁴ Ibid, 132.

⁸⁵ Leopold, "Religion and Polarized," religionandpolitics.org.

⁸⁶ Andrew G. Walder, *China under Mao: A Revolution Derailed* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015).

⁸⁷ Christopher C. Lowe et al., "South Africa," in *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, last modified November 10, 2019, accessed November 16, 2019, <https://www.britannica.com/place/South-Africa>.

⁸⁸ Electoral Commission of South Africa (IEC), "Election Results," Elections.org.za, accessed November 13, 2019, <http://www.elections.org.za/content/Elections/Election-results/>.

⁸⁹ McCullough, "The American," 9marks.org.

⁹⁰ Ibid.

⁹¹ Todorov, *The Conquest*, 3.