

We the People?

The Conservative National Identity and its Role in American Political Polarisation

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Identity drives human agency. Who we consider ourselves and the groups we are part of determines the choices we make. This principle is most evident in the political context of democratic elections. Failure to vote in line with rational interests, such as economic gain, does not occur because people do not understand what is best for themselves, but because rational interests are secondary. People vote for their primary interests, but what these primary interests are has been misunderstood. Understanding that identity drives decision-making is essential to understanding choices made. Two emotive responses determine which of the plethora of identities an individual holds has the greatest salience and therefore is acted upon. Titled colloquially for ease, the first of these emotional responses is *love*: what aspect of ourselves, and which group membership, is most highly valued. Completing the pairing is *fear*: which identity is perceived to be under the greatest threat. Together these determine the priority given to the multiple identities held by each person. It is also important to note that, in this, perception is reality. Who we consider ourselves and the groups we are part of to be, as well as any threats, are determined by perception. Choices are made based on what reality is believed to be, regardless of whether this perception is accurate or not. Therefore, perceptions of identity and circumstance are the most important factors in human agency, past, present, and future.

This paper seeks to understand the roots of political polarisation in the United States; division rooted in a perception of what is considered to be America and American. In other words: what and who is meant by the opening line of The Constitution, which states 'We the People of the United States'? Fear amongst an influential proportion of the electorate, over the loss of their nation and who they are, to those not considered to be equally entitled or American, has both driven and enabled political polarisation within the United States. Whilst both political parties (Democrats and Republicans)

and traditional ideological groups (liberalism and conservatism) have shifted further away from each other,¹ it is from the 'right' that the extremities of polarisation have emerged.² It is amongst the adherents of what I term the 'conservative national identity' that fear over the loss of 'America' is prevalent. The nomination of Donald Trump and subsequent loyalty to him as President is prime evidence for this identity at work and for the power that its adherents possess. Other groups may hold similar sentiments, but they are not in comparable positions of influence and therefore cannot drive and enable polarisation on the scale seen today. This paper is divided into three broad sections: first, highlighting the key components of the conservative national identity; second, exploring how the adherents of this identity enabled and drove political polarisation; and third, briefly considering the identity's future. Throughout, it argues that human agency is fundamentally driven by identity, to which all else is subservient. In the case of America, choices that have resulted in polarisation stem from a conservative national identity, the adherents of which have been driven by a fear for what they love.

The conservative national identity

Uniting the adherents of the conservative national identity is a fear of the changes they perceive to have occurred to the country they love. 'Make America Great Again' perfectly encapsulates the sentiment of the conservative national identity. It places the issue of contention ('America') front and centre, whilst appealing to those who identify with it ('Great'). The salience of this identity, what is it

1 Shanto Iyengar, Gaurav Sood, and Yphtach Lelkes, 'Affect, Not Ideology: A Social Identity Perspective On Polarisation' (2012) 76(3) Public Opinion Quarterly 405, 413.

2 Arlie Russell Hochschild, *Strangers In Their Own Land: Anger And Mourning On The American Right* (The New Press 2016) 7.

to be American and what is meant by America, is further increased by evoking a sense of loss ('Again'). Importantly for electoral appeal, it combines this sense of loss with the hope of salvation ('Make'). In all, it increases the salience of an identity whilst capitalizing on it. 'Take Back Control' had the same effect during the 2016 EU referendum in the UK. Both of these slogans directly appealed to powerful notions of identity that had remained largely hidden from view. Donald Trump was the lightning rod for this group. He allowed its members to feel morally righteous and generally superior to those they considered 'other' or beneath them,³ affirming what they already felt: that they were the true Americans.

Race plays a key, if subtle and coded, role in informing and motivating the conservative national identity. Race has defined America and American identity. It has defined the societal structure and the distribution of benefits in the US since its inception.⁴ Yet perceived changes to the racial hierarchy have induced 'status anxiety'⁵ amongst some elements of white America. Race no longer provides a backstop to descending the social hierarchy.⁶ The growing belief that the push for equal rights has 'gone too far'⁷ reflects the fear created by the erosion of white entitlement. This anxiety is most strongly felt by white working-class Americans, who are increasingly seeing their social and political power decrease⁸ to the benefit of those they do not perceive to be 'real Americans'.⁹ There is evidence that the strength with which a person identifies as American goes hand in hand with the exclusion of minorities from their ideal of America.¹⁰ It is the perception that 'minority groups are, in some way, taking their country away'¹¹ that has driven a proportion of the American electorate to mobilise and polarise. For many, Barack Obama's 2008 election was a manifestation of these changes they feared.¹² It is clear that the adherents of the conservative national identity are not merely concerned with maintaining status and power, but are also, perhaps more importantly, reacting against those perceived to be gaining status and power within America—with whom they do not identify and consequently distrust.

Religion is still prominent in American politics. Yet those who 'vote for candidates that put the Bible where it belongs'¹³ are all motivated by the same emotive responses as the conservative national identity. What they perceive to be America and American is under threat. If polarisation solely stemmed from religious observance, then a wider coalition, particularly as Christianity is increasingly diverse,¹⁴ would be expected. Yet it is amongst white evangelicals that conservative

standpoints and Republican partisanship have been adopted.¹⁵ African Americans who regularly attend religious services vote overwhelmingly for Democratic candidates.¹⁶ Polarising issues that are seemingly based upon religious morality, such as abortion or homosexuality, are made subject to the larger conservative national identity. Social and religious conservatism are closely linked to racial attitudes.¹⁷ It is because of this that similarly religiously observant groups, such as African Americans, do not en masse support candidates that espouse these positions. Polarisations supposedly rooted in issues of morality are expressed more explicitly than those concerned with race. This is because the 'religious' aspects are more acceptable to the conservative national identity.

Notions of gender, particularly of *masculinity*, also have a place in the conservative national identity. Trump, the emblem of this identity, consistently enjoys higher support amongst men across all ethnic groups.¹⁸ Robert Self points to efforts in the 1970s to change traditional gender roles as the seminal moment for polarisation.¹⁹ Perceived threats to the traditional dynamic of men being breadwinners have spurred people into action, in the same manner as perceived racial and moral changes. It is the unity in fear for what they consider America and American that has brought these facets together to form the conservative national identity.

Economic insecurity has catalysed this fear. The growing 'wait for the American Dream'²⁰ has made tangible these feelings of decline, loss, and marginalisation. Amid this widespread economic insecurity,²¹ the government is viewed as aiding 'line cutters'²² over the adherents of the conservative national identity.²³ Yet 'honour'²⁴ prevents them from accepting the government aid available. Accepting such support would be tantamount to confessing their fall from grace. The government is therefore perceived as the agent of the very change they fear. Simultaneously, as The Dream has become increasingly unattainable, the importance of 'being an American' has become greater.²⁵ Those who consider themselves to be losing 'their country' are the same as those for whom identifying with it is increasingly important.

Enablers and drivers of political polarisation

Because of the perception that the state is no longer benefiting people like them²⁶ but benefiting undeserving line cutters,²⁷ distrust

3 *ibid* 228.

4 Joel Aberbach, *Understanding Contemporary American Conservatism* (Routledge 2017) 121.

5 Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt, *How Democracies Die* (Broadway Books 2018) 173.

6 Matthew Desmond, 'In Order To Understand The Brutality Of American Capitalism, You Have To Start On The Plantation' *The New York Times Magazine: 1619 Project* (14 August 2019).

7 Aberbach (n 4) 68.

8 EJ Dionne Jr, Norman J Ornstein, and Thomas E Mann, *One Nation After Trump: A Guide For The Perplexed, The Disillusioned, The Desperate, And The Not-Yet Departed* (St Martin's Press 2017) 26.

9 Levitsky and Ziblatt (n 5) 174.

10 Thierry Devos and Mahzarin R Banaji, 'American = White?' (2005) 88 *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 447, 463.

11 Aberbach (n 4) 89.

12 *ibid* 90.

13 Hochschild (n 2) 47.

14 Clem Brooks and Jeff Manza, 'A Great Divide? Religion And Political Change In US National Elections, 1972–2000' (2004) 45 *The Sociological Quarterly* 421, 450.

15 Janelle S Wong, 'Race, Evangelicals And Immigration' (2019) 17 *The Forum* 403, 408.

16 EJ Dionne Jr, 'Polarised By God? American Politics And The Religious Divide' in Pietro Nivola and David Brady (eds), *Red And Blue Nation? Characteristics And Causes Of American's Polarised Politics* (Brookings Institution Press 2006) 185.

17 Aberbach (n 4) 121.

18 Erin B Logan, 'A "man's man": Why some Black men are drawn to Trump's toxic masculinity' *Los Angeles Times* (28 October 2020).

19 Robert O Self, *All In The Family: The Realignment Of American Democracy Since The 1960s* (Hill and Wang 2012) 338.

20 Hochschild (n 2) 151.

21 Robert Reich, *Saving Capitalism: For The Many, Not The Few* (Icon Books Ltd 2016)

22 Hochschild (n 2) 151.

23 *ibid* 114.

24 *ibid* 114.

25 *ibid* 140.

26 Katherine J Cramer, *The Politics Of Resentment: Rural Consciousness In Wisconsin And The Rise Of Scott Walker* (University of Chicago Press 2016) 146.

27 Hochschild (n 2) 61.

of the federal government has grown²⁸ amongst the adherents of the conservative national identity. In consequence, so has the desire to see its role lessen.²⁹ This opposition to government intervention is the bond between the various constituents of the Republican Party. The success of any constituent in reducing the scope of government powers is perceived as beneficial to all. It is through groups operating on this premise that political polarisation has been enabled. Political and economic elites and adherents of the conservative national identity can openly pursue their interests without compromising their support from the others.

By letting conservative political and economic elite groups forgo moderation and compromise when pursuing their interests, the adherents of the conservative national identity have *enabled* political polarisation. Such unbridled and intransigent pursuit of self-interest is supported because of its perceived benefit: reducing the role of the government. Motivating the adherents of the conservative national identity is the perception that the government is responsible for the changes they oppose. Elites pursuing such policies not only gain support but through their success create a vicious cycle. As the role of the government is reduced, through for example loosening environmental or financial regulation, greater tangible insecurity is created. When experienced, this insecurity compounds the perception amongst adherents of the conservative national identity that change is occurring that threatens their way of life, in turn making this identity even more prominent.³⁰ Because they place blame for this change on the government, they continue to seek to reduce its role, starting the cycle over again. Without such a point of confluence around opposition to big government, political polarisation would not have been able to occur to the extent seen today. Elite groups would not be able to forsake moderation in favour of polarising self-interest.³¹ Nor would the accomplishment of these interests have resulted in entrenched electoral support.

The conservative national identity has *driven* polarisation within the Republican Party, thereby within the political system as a whole, because its adherents are the predominant electoral group at the Party's primaries. Following democratisation of the processes by which Republican nominees for elected positions are selected, power has shifted from party bosses to these 'primary electorates'. Those seeking nomination are therefore no longer selected for their perceived appeal to the average voter,³² but on their actual appeal to this more polarised base.³³ Candidates must either reflect or placate this more engaged and impassioned group. Ironically, the Democratic party has a less democratic nomination process which largely prevents this,³⁴ as does the diversity of its members.³⁵ The strict two-party system also polarises the primary electorate. Extreme groups that in other countries would have a separate political party³⁶ are more likely to be engaged in the political process. They are therefore less easily rejected and more able to wield disproportionate influence. Donald Trump's nomination

for President is the most obvious example of this. Other aspects of the Republican Party enable this polarisation. Partisan identity is increasingly important.³⁷ In recognition of the perceived mutual benefit from electoral success, those who do not adhere to the conservative national identity continue to support the party that its adherents control. Trump's victory in the 2016 presidential election was due in no small part to the fact that 'he was the Republican nominee'.³⁸ The conservative national identity can drive political polarisation on a large scale because of its position of power within the primary electorate of the Republican Party, as well as the continued support of other factions within the party.

Attempts to reduce polarisation through a reform of the Republican Party have failed or not been attempted for two reasons. First, the party has not experienced a loss of political power serious enough to prompt such a reform.³⁹ Thanks in large part to the federal structure, Republicans have multiple avenues through which power can be acquired and maintained, making the loss of power less absolute than in other democratic systems such as the UK. Republicans also benefit from the non-majoritarian nature of the US political system. In presidential elections 'in which they narrowly lose the popular vote', the Republican nominee should be expected to win 65% of the time.⁴⁰ Second, there is little incentive for elite groups in the party to pursue reform. Self-serving political and economic elites can openly pursue their interests in collaboration with the adherents of the conservative national identity. Both sets continue to support each other as long as there is perceived mutual benefit. Seemingly inconsistent policies put forward by Republicans do not matter to these groups as long as they do not encroach upon their primary interests, preserving what they consider to be America and American. In other words, why fix it if it works for you? Rather than attempting to contain or reverse the influence of this polarised group, Republicans have sought to accentuate its electoral power through voter suppression and gerrymandering.

The future of the conservative national identity

It is overly optimistic to assume that the defeat of Trump marks the end of the conservative national identity's power, although hopefully, it marks the passing of its zenith. There are four broad ways through which the polarising power of this group may be reduced. Each of the points outlined below deserves further consideration, but this initial overview should provide a starting point.

1. Constructing an alternative national identity

Providing an alternative national identity means this conservative variation is no longer the sole point of reference for the all-important American narrative. This conservative notion of what is America and American will continue to define the American national identity as a whole if unchallenged. There are two forms an alternative national identity can take. Either, a *negative/reactionist* national identity, one that relies upon an 'other' against which an identity can be defined. Easy to construct, its exclusionary nature could have serious implications when applied to a democratic multi-ethnic-cultural society. Or, a *positive/proactive* national identity, one that defines itself by what it 'is' not what it 'is not'. Although significantly harder to construct, the principles it may

28 Cramer (n 26) 152.

29 Aberbach (n 4) 43.

30 Hochschild (n 2) 140.

31 Aberbach (n 4) 77.

32 Levitsky and Ziblatt (n 5) 51.

33 Morris P Fiorina and Matthew S Levendusky, 'Disconnected: The Political Class Versus The People' in Nivola and Brady (eds, n 16) 71.

34 Levitsky and Ziblatt (n 5) 51.

35 Joel Aberbach, 'The Future Of The American Right: Evidence and Questions from the Bush Years' in Joel Aberbach and Gillian Peele (eds), *Crisis Of Conservatism? The Republican Party, The Conservative Movement, & American Politics After Bush* (Oxford University Press 2011) 47.

36 Aberbach (n 4) 112.

37 Dionne, Ornstein, and Mann (n 8) 32.

38 *ibid* 32.

39 Aberbach (n 4) 113.

40 Ezra Klein, 'Why Democrats Still Have To Appeal To The Center, But Republicans Don't' *The New York Times* (24 January 2020).

be based upon already exist (the equal right to 'life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness').

2. Reducing the prominence of identity

Identity is the fundamental omnipresent driver of human agency, but circumstances can act as catalysts for its prominence, or the polarising nature of its different aspects. Removing these catalysts, the most obvious being economic insecurity, would dampen the extreme polarisation currently seen.

3. Reducing the power held by polarising groups

This may occur through a *structural shift* in the distribution of political power. An increasingly democratised political system, free of partisan manipulations, would offer such a structural change, but would also face significant political obstacles. An alternative is a *societal shift* in the acceptance of these groups and their beliefs. Either, it is perceived that insufficient mutual benefit is derived from the success of these polarising elements, thereby making support or toleration no longer worthwhile. Or, this polarising expression of national identity reaches such a point of extremism that it threatens the identities of those that support or tolerate it. This may already have started occurring in light of the storming of the Capitol on 6 January 2021.

4. Waiting it out

Demographic shifts and the growing political power of historically marginalised groups mean it is only a matter of time before adherents of the conservative national identity become such a minority that even the non-majoritarian political system can no longer afford them power. However, this strategy is not as well founded as popularly believed.⁴¹ Furthermore, the danger of 'waiting it out' emerges when considering how much damage will be wrought to the nation if polarising and exclusive identities continue to define it.

Conclusion

The conservative national identity is founded on the perception that what is considered to be America and American is under threat. Opposition to changes in racial, moral, and gender-based hierarchies has been exacerbated by economic insecurity. Distrust of the government and consequent desire to see it curtailed have provided the basis for a mutually beneficial alliance between the constituent parts of the Republican Party. Afforded disproportionate power by the political system, the adherents of the conservative national identity have enabled Republican economic and political elites to engage in an uncompromising and polarising pursuit of self-interest. In turn, they have found themselves in the driver's seat of the party, steering it to further extremism. Donald Trump exemplified the power this group held, just as the Republican Party's support for him exemplified the reluctance of others to constrain polarisation in light of mutual benefit. Resolution and reconciliation require the recognition that it is not merely policy that divides America, but the very identity of people as Americans. Who is meant by 'We the People' remains highly contentious.

⁴¹ Thomas B Edsall, 'Democrats Are Anxious About 2022 — and 2024' *The New York Times* (10 March 2021).