

New book by political scientist explains how a moderate nation became divided

August 1 2016, by Bert Gambini

"America is polarized. Our political parties are highly polarized and the American electorate is highly polarized," writes University at Buffalo political scientist James E. Campbell.

But this wasn't always the case and Campbell's new book, "Polarized: Making Sense of a Divided America" (Princeton University Press), provides new insights that explain how and why the divide occurred, developed and widened.

Today, an individual's ideological leanings on specific issues and policies are a good indicator of their party affiliation. Liberals have their natural home with the Democratic Party, while conservatives align with the Republicans.

For a long time, Americans were more moderate, and though it might be comfortably obvious to attribute polarization to deceptively vivid targets like political elites or media bias, neither is principally responsible. Polarization is a very democratic process, according to Campbell, UB Distinguished Professor of Political Science.

"Polarization is not something foisted on Americans. No one is pulling any strings here," he says. "This is a natural process. What we're seeing is representation. Both parties are representing the views of Americans."

Campbell says polarization is a bottom-up process, starting with the public as the base and moving up to the [political parties](#).

"Many people in [political science](#) believe that polarization is a top-down process, starting with the parties and moving down to the public," he says. "But my research shows the reverse is really the case."

Political moderation was widespread in America for decades, especially with the generations coming out of the Great Depression, World War II and the aftermath of the 1950s.

These groups had surviving coalitions from the New Deal period that left both major parties ideologically heterogeneous.

"There were many liberal Republicans," says Campbell. "In New York State, a prime example would be the Nelson Rockefeller and Jacob Javits Republicans in contrast to the Barry Goldwater and Ronald Reagan Republicans out west.

"In the Democratic Party, there were many liberals, but there were also conservative Democratic southerners."

The parties, however, weren't reflecting the divisions that were forming in the public, according to Campbell. That left many people with the impression that the U.S. was still a largely moderate nation.

The divisions created instability and the mix of liberals and conservatives within the same party proved unsustainable.

The cracks that would form and eventually become the expansive divide began about 50 years ago when the parties started catching up with the public.

In the 1960s, after a series of congressional elections, liberals in the Democratic Party got the upper hand over conservative Democratic southerners. Campbell says this tipping point set a string of changes in

motion that made the Democratic Party more liberal in terms of governing and in turn attracted liberals to the party. This also put conservatives in play and Republicans started gravitating in the other direction.

It was a long period of realignment that for generational and institutional reasons took about 30 years to complete.

"There were generational differences, but on top of that there were organizational reasons, too," says Campbell. "Since before the Civil War there weren't really viable state Republican Party organizations in the South. So conservative southerners were voting for Republicans at the presidential level where you really didn't need a local infrastructure, but they were stuck voting for Democrats for Congress. It's not until the 1990s when Republicans broke them down in those states in the South. Once that happened it helped the sorting of conservatives and liberals."

Party polarization now accentuates public polarization when it once lagged behind and muted it.

Campbell says this causes a good deal of animosity that makes governing more difficult and frustrating for both sides across a whole range of issues – which is likely to continue.

"Although [polarization](#) will likely begin to solidify, it doesn't have to generate as much heat," says Campbell. "People see things in different ways and they tend to align with those who are like-minded. This level of polarized conflict is natural to American politics and something we need to get used to and deal with in a respectful way," he says.

Provided by University at Buffalo

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