

A House Divided



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The Founding Fathers were relatively certain that a Democratic Republic would protect America from the viciousness of partisan conflict. In Federalist No. 10, James Madison wrote, “Among the numerous advantages promised by a well-constructed Union, none deserves to be more accurately developed than its tendency to break and control the violence of factions.” The U.S. was safeguarded from intense bipolarization by the strength of the Constitution, or so the Founding Fathers thought.

Yet, when George Washington decided to leave the presidency in 1796, he saw the reality of America: an easily divided nation with fighting factions. In his farewell address, Washington urged Americans to seek to overcome their party differences in the future and focus on the one unifying identity all citizens share: being American. His farewell address eerily foreshadows the modern U.S. political sphere, as many characterize it as the most divided time in history since before the Civil War.

There are many factors to be accounted for when studying the current division. However, many social scientists and political activists believe the lack of diversity in political parties is to blame. Many wonder if the United States would be more harmonious if something other than the two-party system existed. Ideally, a mix of several different parties would allow people to find a party that more closely fits with their personal ideals. The increase in party diversity could also decrease polarization, as certain parties could share common ground rather than being diametrically opposed.

America has nearly always existed in a two-party system, but many social scientists, such as Lee Drutman, a senior fellow at the Political Reform Program of New America, believe that the system is no longer serving its purpose. The two-party system was once said to produce moderation through convergence of the median. Essentially, candidates must make an appeal to both sides if they wish to win elections. What we see in America today is whichever party has the larger voter turnout—or more effective voter suppression—seems to win. According to the Pew Research Center, in the 2020 Congressional elections, there was less split-ticket voting than ever before. This indicates that the median is disappearing and voters are

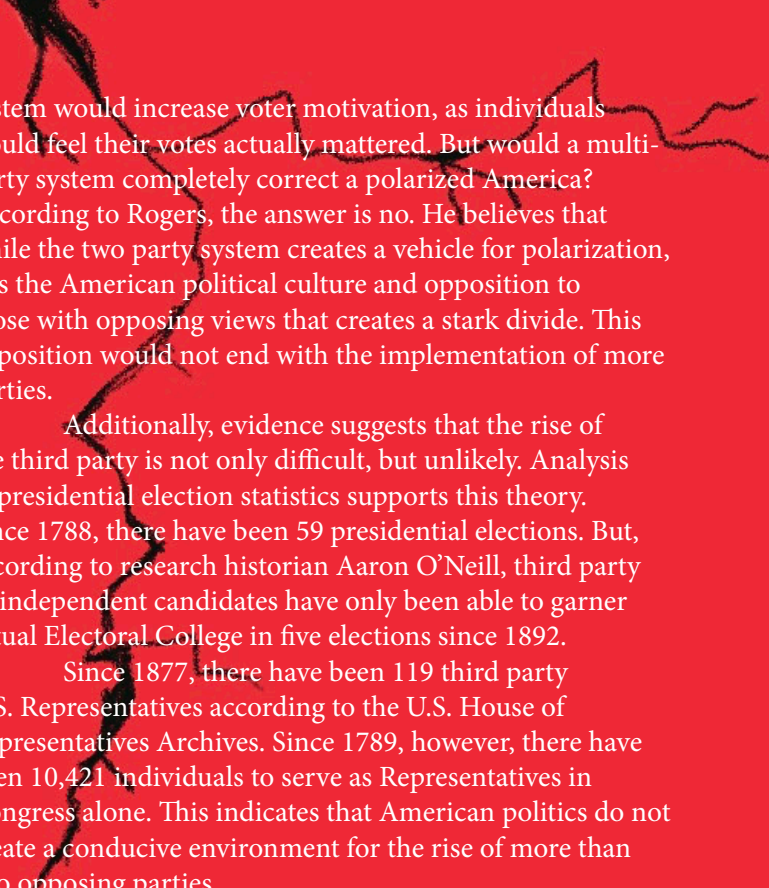
becoming increasingly partisan.

Steve Rogers, associate professor of political science at Saint Louis University, believes this partisanship can be attributed to a process called “voter sorting.” Due to the visibility of political elites and the abundance of headline news, it is much easier to identify what it means to be a Democrat or Republican than it has been in the past. Additionally, Rogers believes that the polarization is not one of citizens becoming more liberal or conservative; rather, American voters are just feeling more anger, hatred and opposition toward those whose political beliefs do not align with their own.

American citizens are not the only source of polarization. Rogers hinted that there is also more contention among governmental elites than in the past. To prove this point, he noted that between 2000-2010 there was a significant increase in the use of filibusters. As defined by the U.S. Senate, a filibuster is “any attempt to block or delay Senate action on a bill or other matter by debating it at length, by offering numerous procedural motions or by any other delaying or obstructive actions.” The rise in filibuster usage indicates a decrease in bipartisan dialogue and an increase in conflict.

With polarization existing within the U.S. populus and government, many are wondering what can be done to ease tensions. As previously mentioned, some believe that the installation of a multi-party system would benefit the nation greatly. Drutman is one of these believers. In an interview with the Niskanen Center, a nonpartisan think tank that works to promote an open society, Drutman states, “The answer’s that we change the way we vote, allow for more parties, become a multi-party democracy and break the the zero sum hyper partisanship that is a fundamental threat to our democracy in this moment.” Drutman is not alone.

“In any other country, Joe Biden and I would not be in the same party, but in America, we are,” stated Representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez (D-NY). A variety of options for the voter would allow more sentiments to be truly reflected. There is no doubt that a multi-party system would increase voter motivation, as individuals would feel their votes actually mattered. But would a multi-party



system would increase voter motivation, as individuals would feel their votes actually mattered. But would a multi-party system completely correct a polarized America? According to Rogers, the answer is no. He believes that while the two party system creates a vehicle for polarization, it is the American political culture and opposition to those with opposing views that creates a stark divide. This opposition would not end with the implementation of more parties.

Additionally, evidence suggests that the rise of the third party is not only difficult, but unlikely. Analysis of presidential election statistics supports this theory. Since 1788, there have been 59 presidential elections. But, according to research historian Aaron O'Neill, third party or independent candidates have only been able to garner actual Electoral College in five elections since 1892.

Since 1877, there have been 119 third party U.S. Representatives according to the U.S. House of Representatives Archives. Since 1789, however, there have been 10,421 individuals to serve as Representatives in Congress alone. This indicates that American politics do not create a conducive environment for the rise of more than two opposing parties.

The only true remedy for the current political polarization in the U.S. is actively working to engage in bipartisan dialogue and legislation. The Bridge Alliance, a coalition of nearly 100 organizations, works to nurture consistent and open communication between members of all parties. If citizens and elected officials would like to save democracy from the dangers of a two party system, they must stop isolating themselves from members of the opposite party. Too often, Americans dismiss one another because of their Republican or Democratic label. How can common ground ever be found if we refuse to engage in dialogue?

The implementation of a multi-party system would add great benefits to the U.S. as a whole. However, many social scientists, including Rogers, believe this is nothing more than a far-fetched dream. Until the nation shifts to a point where multiple parties can successfully run for office, there are concrete steps each American individual can take to help save democracy. Have the tough conversations; do not just walk away. Be okay with being uncomfortable. Change is not easy. Build bridges with those you typically would shy away from. Everyone can do their part to decrease political rage and increase democratic harmony.

