

Social Polarization in the United States: Searching for Civility

Panel: Session 5 (Cosmos/Violet)

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Organizing Institution: Hoover Institution

Speakers: David Brady, Hoover Institution (moderator)
William Whalen, Hoover Institution
Tod Linberg, Hoover Institution
Kim Jiyoung, The Asan Institute for Policy Studies

Panel Short Summary

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Tom Linberg began the conversation with an overview on civil discourse. Moderator David Brady followed by describing the dichotomy between electorate and political elite preferences throughout the U.S. polarization. U.S. political elites are polarized, especially on a critical set of issues such as Social Security, global warming, and abortion. However, the general electorate began cultivating increasingly centrist tendencies starting in the 1980's, and growing numbers of independent voters reflect a growing dissatisfaction with the two party system. Although polarized politics are a historic norm, Brady raised the question of whether this dichotomous status is stable over time. If not, what institutional reforms add stability? If institutional reforms are ineffective, what behavior changes are necessary?

Linberg noted the sanction on the use of force as a response to verbal provocation or difference in opinion. In the U.S., constitutional protection for freedom of speech allows inflammatory comments to be made without great risk. Because such remarks draw an audience, public speech, including that of a political nature, actually incentivizes incivility. As long as polarized rhetoric remains distant from political and judicial decision making grounds, however, incivility in discourse will not translate into a crisis of the liberal political order.

American politics has always been a contentious environment. Even in the 18th century, public figures' private lives were exploited by the media and people took advantage

of the media to downplay opponents. Bill Whalen argued that the “24/7 news cycle,” overwhelming internet availability, and pivoting parties in the election process contribute to problems with American political polarity. The question America must ask in this new information age is whether the news outlets will be a responsible source for the people. Voters should take active steps in acquiring the right information from the right venue, and the electoral process unquestionably needs change.

Jiyoon Kim held a slightly different view of the issue of polarization. Polarization in the public is increasing, but not drastically. On the other hand, polarization is pronounced in politics because it sells, but it is doubtful whether it has much effect on voting decisions. Dr. Jiyoon Kim noted polarization results in increased public political participation due to the attention-catching nature of the moral issues debated, but prolonged polarization will cultivate a dysfunctional system wherein the public loses trust in political institutions and their efficacy. Rather than relying on political actors or journalists to fix this problem, the aggregate electorate should be trusted to mitigate polarization through the balancing of extremes, as it has historically done.

Overall, the speakers agreed that the media’s portrayal of polarization is blown out of proportion. Politicians do engage in negative campaign tactics, and will continue to do so until polarized campaigns fail to work. Regardless, the aggregate electorate’s habit of disciplining parties into moderate positions will limit the negative effects of polarization. Election results will depend less on polarized party politics but rather the candidate’s ability to most accurately understand the voters’ needs.

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