

Questions from Prof. Ron Seyb's Webinar

Tuesday, June 16, 2020 12pm EDT

Do you think we're headed for a realignment? Neither Democrats nor Republicans have embraced policies that are consistently backed by a majority of Americans--things like Medicare-for-all--even now as calls have grown louder. There's a large divide between the newly mobilized left in particular and the Democratic Party.

Submitted by: Walker B. '12

ANSWER

The United States has not experienced a party realignment of the "traditional" type since 1932 (i.e., either a re-shuffling of the two major parties' coalitions or an injection of new voters that results in either a new dominant party or a new party). There are, of course, a number of legal and institutional barriers to establishing a competitive third party in the United States (i.e., Single district, first-across-the-post elections for the House and state legislative seats; the Electoral College; ballot access rules in many states; a campaign finance system that has limited opportunities for candidates to receive public funding, etc.) If a realignment were to occur, it would thus likely need to be spurred by either the mobilization of new voters who demand that one or both parties change their policy priorities (or even fundamental values) or a disjunctive event (on the scale of the Great Depression or the Civil War) that prompts existing voters to shift allegiances. I think that the former is a more likely scenario than the latter, given how, as I noted in my talk, partisanship has become such an "affective" bond for so many Americans.

In the example you cite, if the left were able to prompt a number of Americans who subscribe to their views who heretofore have not participated in elections to go to the polls, it might cause the Democratic party to shift to the left (see Daniel DiSalvo, *Engines of Change: Party Factions in American Politics, 1868-2010*). The party would, however, only remain in that position on the ideological spectrum as long as it receives a return in the coin of electoral victory.

If you were teaching the Virtual Republic right now, what is the first book you'd assign to understand how the media intersects with the growing partisan divide?

Submitted by: Peter '15

ANSWER

I would, of course, choose Walter Lippmann's *Public Opinion*. I apologize for triggering traumatic memories for you of reading that book at a tender age.

I think that I would actually choose Michael Schudson's new book, *Why Journalism Still Matters*. Schudson is, in my estimation, one of the most learned and lucid analysts of both the modern state of journalism and of journalism's historical development. This book, as its title suggest, deviates from many recent books on journalism in its conviction that journalism is not a decaying industry but a still relevant and important source of civic instruction for a divided country that needs to be reminded of the fundamental properties and values of American democracy,

More than ever other governments and groups are able to access our society via social media, me being that I was a victim of the fake socialists in Nicaragua, the same that have destroyed Cuba and Venezuela as well,

stripping citizens of all of our rights (I tried going back to my country only to be victimized by the Ortega government again), I am back in the US but I'm scared of what's happening here. How much do you think our youth is being brainwashed here in the US by them?

Submitted by: Hazel A. '88

ANSWER

Your story is one that, perhaps needless to say, is both a harrowing and a cautionary tale for us in the U.S. Your question is an important one, and thus one that many scholars are trying to address. While I do not think that anyone has developed a definitive answer to it, I do think that studies on how we process information can be at least suggestive. For example, many studies have found that people “do not know how they know what they know.” When asked from where they received a piece of information or what is the source of their position, they often “confabulate”; that is, they develop a plausible theory of from whence they got the information to fill the gap in their memory. What this means is that we are all vulnerable to being manipulated by social media posts, advertisements, or propaganda because the information provided by these sources can slip into our minds below the threshold of consciousness.

It is, however, also important to remember that people are loath to change their positions once they have adopted them. Studies of “motivated reasoning” indicate that we filter out information that is inconsistent with our views. We also will find reasons, when we are confronted with disconfirmatory information, to dismiss it (a consequence of what my students know is my favorite concept, the operation of cognitive dissonance). Young people who have not yet formed their political beliefs may hence be susceptible to “fake news.” I recommend Siva Vaidhyanathan, *Anti-Social Media: How Facebook Disconnects Us and Undermines Democracy* to you, if you are interested in learning more about how social media can be employed by nefarious operators to influence public opinion

What role do you think social media, and the presence of politicians on social media, has played in furthering the perception of partisan bickering? Do politicians trying to communicate in 140 characters or less make the situation worse?

Submitted by: Jean-Ann K. '13

ANSWER

I think that social media has definitely accelerated what I see as a long historical arc that has led us to a moment in which, as you note, politicians and public officials are distilling their messages down to the (often primitive) rudiments. I recall when I was an undergraduate back during the Teapot Dome Scandal that media scholars' major concern was the network nightly news' practice of extracting from a politician's remarks “sound bites,” or the most memorable and arresting portions of the speech, failing to provide their viewers with the context for these snippets. Politicians responded to this media practice by organizing their speeches into a string of pithy, imagistic statements that were tailored to attract media attention (the best book on modern speechwriting is Peggy Noonan's account of her time working as a speechwriter in the Reagan administration, *What I Saw at the Revolution*), I thus see Twitter as an augmentation of politicians' long-standing effort to harness technology to convey their message to the public in the most vivid and memorable ways.

This is not to say that politicians prior to the introduction of television and the web provided their audiences with learned, sophisticated addresses. FDR, for example, was accused by his critics of condescending to the public in his fireside addresses by, for example, comparing the federal budget

to a household's budget, and as much as Abraham Lincoln was properly lionized for his eloquence, anyone who reads the Lincoln-Douglas debate transcripts will discern how often he indulged in unilluminating metaphors and analogies and hurled charges at Douglas that were without foundation. I often tell my students that one of the negative externalities of democracy is demagoguery. It is a problem that the founding generation tried to address in various ways (see Jeffrey Tulis, *The Rhetorical Presidency*) but never could quite check.

Why are both parties using a base turnout strategy since more voters register as independents than ever?

ANSWER

The conventional wisdom about independent voters is that many of them, as I noted in my talk, are "cloaked partisans." I do think, however, that a case can be made that, as the parties continue to move toward the ends of the ideological spectrum, more Americans are choosing to be independent because their views are so out of alignment with those of the two major parties. The challenge is to mobilize this "bloc" of voters (though independents, by definition, are not a bloc) to come to the polls. As I noted in my remarks, candidates are often reluctant to do so because independent voters, if they are truly independent, are unpredictable. Candidates do not want to invest resources in trying to persuade voters to endorse their candidacy and then, once they have persuaded them, incentivize them to go to the polls when they have on their lists voters whom they are confident will both vote for them and, with a "nudge," appear at the polls. If you would like to read more about why candidates opt for the base strategy, I would recommend the Sasha Issenberg, *The Victory Lab* and Jacob Hacker and Paul Pierson, *Off-Center*.

Can the "marketplace of ideas" deal with modern-day misinformation, the literal "fake news," that is often designed to mislead and create divisions?

Submitted by: Laura J. '11

ANSWER

The premise of the marketplace of ideas is that, as is true of the ideal form of a market for goods and services, there are no barriers to entry and that consumers are open to listening to all appeals (and prepared to evaluate all of the goods and services available in a dispassionate manner). I do not think that an electorate that has such strong emotional bonds with one of the two parties and such hostility to the opposing party is willing to entertain all ideas and evaluate their merits dispassionately. Perhaps, as I noted in a response to an earlier question, the marketplace of ideas concept has always been flawed because human beings are not "rational processors of information." We have cognitive blind spots, we avoid or discard information that does not align with our beliefs, and we refuse to admit that we are wrong even when we are confronted with incontrovertible evidence that we are wrong (see Kathryn Schulz, *Being Wrong*). An authentic marketplace for political ideas, nonetheless, is a goal to which we should strive, even if we know that our own limitations and the nature of the current information environment make it difficult if not impossible to achieve.

You talk about how more Americans are more politically engaged, but that does not show up at the voting booth. So how are you measuring political engagement? Is it more people posting on social media, people in

the streets...what is the definition of being politically engaged?

Submitted by: Carrie GP '96

ANSWER

This observation is undergirded primarily by polling data, which, alas, is based on respondents' self-reports on their levels of engagement. As you suggest, people can say to a pollster, for example, that "it's very important that [they] become personally involved in politics" without doing anything concrete to act on that impulse. Now, it is important to note that we have seen surges in voter turnout in special and statewide elections since the election of Donald Trump in 2016. Perhaps that is a harbinger of more Americans translating desire into action in the future. Many candidates, however, continue to draw on principles drawn from behavioral economics (e.g., mailings that show that your neighbors' turnout at higher rates than do you) to try to propel people to the polls, which suggests that they do not trust that engagement is enough to increase turnout.

I do think that we sometimes focus too much on voting as the most probative measure of political engagement. As you indicate, protest is also a quite "high investment" form of engagement. I recall that my undergraduate Introduction to American Politics textbook described protest as an "illegitimate form of political participation." We have, thankfully, traveled a long way away from that station.

Are there certain institutional aspects of Congress that heighten internal conflict now more than at other times in American history?

Submitted by: Gayle K. '72

ANSWER

My thought is that the increased deadlock in Congress is not so much a consequence of new institutional structures and processes but the increasing willingness of members of both the House and the Senate to use parliamentary tools that have existed for some time to obstruct action on the other party's agenda. For example, in the House of Representatives, there has been a trend since Jim Wright's speakership for the majority party to use "restrictive rules" to limit the minority party's ability to debate and offer amendments to legislation. In the Senate, filibusters have become so common that the chamber needed to develop a mechanism to continue to conduct business during a filibuster (i.e., the Senate, since the 1980s, can operate on two-tracks: on one a filibuster of a bill is occurring, while on the other, the Senate is addressing other business). There is some talk of requiring senators who wish to filibuster to "hold the floor" like they did in the past (see *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington*). Currently, all a senator has to do is object to "the motion to proceed" and a filibuster is begun without a requirement that the senator speak to the issue.

How does social media impact partisanship today?

Submitted by: Emily V. '06

ANSWER

Recent studies show that more Americans are getting their news from Facebook (one poll, for example, suggests that 52% of Americans receive the majority of their news from Facebook). I do think that there is merit to the argument that Americans are increasingly placing themselves in "filter bubbles" that impel them to engage in what Cass Sunstein calls "enclave deliberation" (*Republic.com* 2.0). I also, however, know that there is other polling data that suggests that at least some Americans

are making conscious efforts to access multiple sources of news (e.g., it appears that more viewers of cable news are switching among CNN, MSNBC, and Fox News than was true in the past).

I think that it is also important to remember that many Americans make a concerted effort to avoid news about public affairs. Kevin Arceneaux and Martin Johnson show in *Changing Minds or Changing Channels?* that many people, if given the option, will spend the bulk of their time imbibing sports or entertainment programming on T.V. or social or recreational posts and stories on social media (the ol' "Facebook is for Ice Buckets, Twitter is for Ferguson" issue). Social media may hence be less a persuasive than a mobilizing force that animates (and even agitates) those who are already "true believers" in one or the other party's cause.

Do you see any other period in history in which the operational structure of the federal government (in agencies such as the State Department, EPA, etc.) are headed by political appointees with no prior experience --- and key managerial roles formerly held by career civil servants have been left vacant?

Submitted by: Mary M., staff

ANSWER

If we focus on the modern era (i.e., post the FDR presidency) then I think that the answer is a qualified "no." I qualify it only because Richard Nixon planned during his second term, which was, of course, derailed by Watergate, to place in cabinet and subcabinet positions "loyalists," many of whom had worked in his campaign or were members of the Committee to Reelect the President (CREEP) (see Richard Nathan, *The Plot That Failed*). Nixon also sought, through various means, to "encourage" many career civil servants whom he and his top aides suspected were still acolytes of LBJ and JFK to leave public service. While I certainly do not condone this strategy, it does place in sharp relief the tension woven into the U.S.'s executive establishment by the combination of political appointees and career civil servants. Even when the views of political appointees and the careerists in their departments and agencies coincide, there can be conflict (for example see Robert Reich, *Locked in the Cabinet*).

What media outlets and news sources would you recommend for a more objective and nuanced understanding of current issues and events?

Submitted by: Brenna C '97

ANSWER

I think that *ProPublica* performs superb, non-partisan, investigative journalism. I would also recommend *RealClearInvestigations*, which is a recent addition to the *RealClearPolitics* franchise. I, finally, think that *Frontline* produces excellent documentaries on domestic and international affairs. While these documentaries, like all documentaries, have a point of view, I think that, for the most part, the producers seek to provide a balanced and nuanced view of complex issues and events.

To what extent do the DW-NOMINATE developers' proposed explanations for partisan polarization in Congress (income inequality & immigration) operate through political-cultural factors?

Submitted by: Roger W. '14

ANSWER

This is a question that highlights what I think is a fundamental concern for all of those who study American politics: how much of the current partisan polarization is driven by current issues and

events and how much is founded on deeper currents in American history or culture? As your question suggests, I think that both short-term and long-term forces are likely operating in tandem: one's view, for example, of the importance of and the proper remedies for income inequality are likely filtered through one's understanding of what those who share their partisan identity believe about this issue or problem.

I do not want to burnish my mossback credentials too much, but I do think that *The American Voter's* concept of partisanship as a "perceptual screen" has a lot of resonance today. The in-group-out-group dynamic that Shanto Iyengar identifies suggests that many Americans wish to mirror the views of those who are "like them," and our efforts to identify who is "like us" are increasingly being driven by perceptions of partisan compatibility.

Given this increased partisanship, the effect of the electoral college (and its weighting towards 'small states' that currently lean Republican) seems all the more important. Do you foresee any success among the various efforts to decrease the importance of (or eliminate) the electoral college? Thanks!

Submitted by: Geoff H. '93

ANSWER

I do think that the National Popular Vote campaign has some promise (i.e., recruiting enough states that pledge that they will deliver their electoral votes to the winner of the national popular vote, regardless of which candidate receives the plurality of the vote in their state). I always do remind my students, however, that the Electoral College does have at least one advantage: it magnifies the importance of certain under-represented groups in the general electorate. The Latinx vote in the Southwest, for example, is one that presidential candidates need to court, and Democrats, of course, if they wish to have any success in the South, need to appeal to and mobilize African-American voters. What would be, for all intents and purposes, a direct popular election would likely encourage candidates to concentrate their resources in major media markets in an effort to attract primarily white voters. I think that perhaps a district system (i.e., giving one electoral vote to the candidate who wins a plurality of the vote in each House district in a state, with a bonus of 2 votes to the candidate who wins the plurality of the statewide vote) might be a better approach.