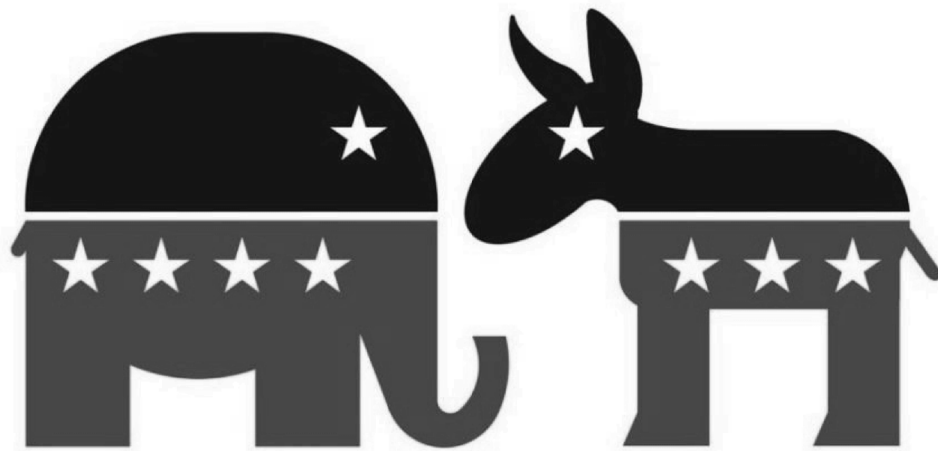


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# Fractured Consensus: American Divides Amidst Shared Values

Sophia Freeman · April 29, 2024



Polarization is growing in the United States, but all is not lost. *Source: Greenie News*

Now more than ever, it's easy to feel discouraged about the state of our democracy and the rampant political polarization in the United States. However, according to an AP-NORC poll conducted in March, nearly 9 in 10 Americans agree that fundamental rights such as equal protection, free speech, and suffrage are extremely important for our democracy. Additionally, 84% of respondents share similar sentiments about the necessity of freedom of religion. These results are certainly striking, as the poll itself cites "extreme partisanship" and a heightened "potential for violence" as not unusual in a tumultuous election year. Besides demonstrating that there was a consensus on American freedoms, the poll

So, what exactly contributes to this idea that we have become so polarized as a nation? Despite this poll's results, it's not an entirely unfounded claim. In 2014, a Pew Research Center study among web-using adults revealed that political polarization had bled into Americans' news preferences, at least partially due to the cajoling and misinformation regarding news sources put forth by former President Trump. The study's updated 2019 data suggested that the chasm had widened in the five years since. Combine this with the fact that more and more Americans are getting their news from social media, feeding into their egos and confirmation bias—if they bother to follow the news at all—and you can easily get stuck in an incredibly depressing loop. Although there is a breadth of common ground among Americans, the ways in which Americans would see these freedoms or the “American dream” implemented vary vastly. Americans seem to agree in favor of freedom of religion. Still, according to a new survey from the Public Religion Research Institute and the Brookings Institution, more than half of Republicans believe the country should be a strictly Christian nation—either adhering to the ideals of Christian nationalism (21%) or sympathizing with those views (33%).

Even setting aside this polarization and potential misconceptions surrounding it, the poll does not look hopeful for the future of American democracy. A more pessimistic assessment of the country was reflected in another finding—that only about 3 in 10 Americans believe the nation's democracy is functioning well. About half say the United States is a poorly functioning democracy, while 14% say the United States is not a democracy. These results are unsurprising, as political scientist Lilliana Mason states that elected leaders “behave in a way that's much more polarized than what the electorate is.” She also told the Washington Post that policy preferences are increasingly linked with an irrational dislike of



government. America has no parliamentary system in which multiple parties form governing coalitions. Add to this fact the redistricting that ensures there are fewer truly competitive congressional races. The two parties have unrelentingly moved further apart ideologically, and leaders are more likely to be punished —“primaried”—if they reach across the aisle. And because many more districts are now deeply red or blue, rather than a mix of constituencies, House members have fewer reasons to adopt moderate positions.

While the recent AP-NORC poll highlights some common ground among Americans, such as the importance of fundamental rights and the value of a democratically elected government, it also underscores and, in some ways, underplays the deep divisions and challenges facing American democracy. The growing polarization in American politics, fueled in part by media fragmentation and political elites, has contributed to a sense of disillusionment with the state of democracy. Despite this, there are still opportunities for constructive dialogue and finding common ground. Decades of research show that when people interact with someone from their social “outgroup,” they often come to view that outgroup in a more favorable light. Significantly, individuals do not need to take part in these interactions themselves. Exposure to accounts of outgroup contact in the media, from news articles to online videos, can also have an impact. Although I pointed out that relying on social media for news can have serious negative repercussions, it can also be an incredibly useful tool for addressing misconceptions and a launch point for further discourse or research. Given that negative and extreme voices tend to be amplified on social media, platforms could instead alert users when they engage with content that overstates the degree of polarization and insert links to more accurate survey results about how polarized the nation truly is. Truthfully, this is unlikely to be implemented by platforms that benefit monetarily from Americans becoming engrossed in their political echo chambers, but



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