

# **A SONG OF ANGRY MEN**

Affective Polarization in the United States as a Symptom of a Democratic Deficit

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20-03-2019

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## Abstract

The United States is facing a crisis of democracy. Over the past 40 years, the increased prevalence of neoliberalist policies has weakened democratic mechanisms, while causing rising levels of inequality that, in turn, have driven up antagonistic tribalism. Polarization is accompanied by an unprecedented degree of hostility, causing experts to refer to this trend as ‘affective polarization’. Through analysis of intersecting historic, economic, political and cultural developments, this thesis examines where American democracy is lacking to produce such outcomes, providing insight into the various ways in which affective polarization can be viewed as a *symptom* of a democratic deficit.

Building on Chantal Mouffe’s framework of agonism and antagonism and Rogers Brubaker’s ‘groupness’ theory, it becomes clear that, in the past decade, the collective identity of the white American working class has been politicized through deliberate politics of fear and resentment. Some scholarship, problematically and mistakenly, identifies this as a signal of a democratic *excess*, characterizing ordinary citizens as part of “ignorant masses” that need to be curtailed by the elites. However, this thesis shows that the sense of abandonment and discontent felt by these masses, actually signals a democratic *deficit*. What we are witnessing in many liberal democracies, is a democratic system without its *demos* at the center. Looking towards the future, it is therefore safe to say that unless American democracy strengthens its institutions and thoroughly dismantles corporatism, the system may be at risk of collapsing in on itself.

**Key words:** affective polarization, antagonism, tribalism, neoliberalism, American democracy, groupness theory, politics of fear, politics of resentment, liberal democracy, whiteness theory



## **Acknowledgements**

The realization of this thesis would not have been possible without the following people.

My gratitude goes out, first and foremost, to the North American Studies Department of the Radboud University Nijmegen. I would like to thank my professors for their unwavering dedication, enthusiasm and guidance throughout the past two years. In particular, I would like to thank Dr. Markha Valenta for agreeing to be my thesis supervisor. Thank you for teaching me how to be more critical, to trust my own voice, and to always strive to see beyond generalization.

To my friends—from home, from school, from university, and from United Netherlands. Thank you for all the time you've invested in providing me with advice and support. Thank you for letting me talk to you about this topic for months on end. I owe you all coffee.

Finally, my appreciation goes out to my family, and in particular to my mother, whose opinion I value above everyone else's.

In September of 2017, my father passed away. It's a shame he never got to read any of this. I'm sure we would have had some very interesting discussions about the topic. I have tried to write this thesis critically, with personal conviction, and with an open mind, like he taught me. I hope it shows.





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## Introduction

On September 28, 2018, a striking scene in the elevator of a United States Senate building got captured by national American TV cameras. Republican Senator Jeff Flake, on his way back to a meeting, was stopped in his tracks and confronted by two women: Ana Maria Archila and Maria Gallagher. The day before, on September 27, Christine Blasey Ford had testified under oath in front of the Senate Judiciary Committee, claiming that Supreme Court nominee Brett Kavanaugh sexually assaulted her when they were teenagers. Early in the morning of September 28, Flake released a statement indicating that he would vote ‘yes’ on Kavanaugh’s nomination. Subsequently, Archila and Gallagher, both survivors of sexual assault, publicly questioned him about this decision. Preventing the elevator door from sliding shut, Archila told Flake, “What you are doing is allowing someone who actually violated a woman to sit on the Supreme Court.”<sup>1</sup> Gallagher went on to tell him, “Look at me while I’m talking to you. Look at me and tell me that it doesn’t matter what happened to me.” The moment appears to have gone some way to pricking Flake’s conscience, because within hours of the protest, Flake stunned the room by changing his ‘yes’ to a conditional ‘yes’, and calling for a further FBI investigation into Ford’s allegations. The confrontation was considered a “turning point on another day of drama and chaos on Capitol Hill” (Smith, 2018).

When it comes to public political confrontations, Jeff Flake is not the only name that made headlines in 2018. A few months earlier, in June, Maxine Waters, Democratic Representative for California, rallied for more public confrontation in the wake of the Trump Administration’s decision to harden American immigration policies. When news about the U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement agencies separating migrant families and detaining children in *de facto* cages caused widespread outrage, Waters, apoplectic, encouraged voters to publicly confront and shame Trump Administration officials wherever possible (Bruni, 2018). “Let’s make sure we show up wherever we have to show up,” she told protestors in Los Angeles on June 23. “If you see anybody from that Cabinet in a restaurant, in a department store, at a gasoline station, you get out and you create a crowd and you push back on them and you tell them they’re not welcome anymore, anywhere”<sup>2</sup>. A few days before Waters’ address, Kirstjen

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<sup>1</sup> See “Tearful Woman Confronts Sen. Flake on Elevator”, CNN, September 28, 2018: <https://edition.cnn.com/videos/politics/2018/09/28/jeff-flake-kavanaugh-confronted-by-protesters-elevator-nr-vpx.cnn>

<sup>2</sup> See “Maxine Waters Encourages Supporters to Harass Trump Administration Officials”, CNN, June 25, 2018: <https://edition.cnn.com/2018/06/25/politics/maxine-waters-trump-officials/index.html>

Nielsen, Trump's Secretary of Homeland Security, was shouted out of a Mexican restaurant near the White House by protesters chanting, "If kids don't eat in peace, you don't eat in peace!"(Krieg, 2018).

Both these incidents have raised relevant questions with regard to civility in politics. In the wake of the Jeff Flake elevator moment, several media were lauding the confrontation as an example of democratic expression; *The Guardian* referred to the moment as a "powerful rebuke to Jeff Flake [ on a ] day of drama" as well as "one of the most important elevator pitches in memory" (Smith, 2018); furthermore, *ABC*, *TIME*, and *The Washington Post* all identified the scene as the moment that most likely changed Flake's mind on the Kavanaugh nomination ("Brett Kavanaugh: Was This The Moment That Made Jeff Flake Change His Mind?"; Roberts, 2018; Vesoulis, 2018). However, other media responded negatively to the incident: *The New York Post* suggested that the women were not "sincere" (Fund, 2018) and *The Western Journal* implied that Archila and Gallagher were "paid players in the political arena" (Baldwin, 2018). With regard to the Maxine Waters' incident, Papenfuss argues that the confrontation "marks a new level of American protest" (2018). This confrontation, too, was certainly not praised by all: according to CNN, Democrats in the US House of Representatives were "widely rejecting [ the ] recent rallying cry" (Killough, 2018). Senate Minority Leader Chuck Schumer described Waters' approach as "not American" (Barrett, 2018). In fact, in the wake of the public shaming encouragement, "a significant chunk of the talk in the news and on social media" focused on "whether the country had descended to some unfathomed nadir of acrimony" (Bruni 2018).

Why is it that the case of two women questioning a politician in an elevator is regarded by some of the aforementioned media as a justified approach within the freedom of democratic expression, while publicly harassing Trump Administration officials is more consistently viewed, not only as bad practice, but even as a 'nadir of acrimony'? One can argue that there is a difference between *confrontation* and *shaming*. Surely, chanting shame puts a different register in place than asking politicians to reconsider their decisions. However, where is the line between freedom of democratic expression and incivility? Moreover, why are so many people concerned about this?

In response to the debate, Michelle Goldberg, writing for *The New York Times*, wrote an opinion piece titled "We Have A Crisis of Democracy, Not Manners". In it, she states that what we are seeing is "less a result of a breakdown in civility than a breakdown of democracy" (2018). Notably, Goldberg, is not the only one suggesting this. Giroux argues that "many commentators are quick to argue that Americans have fallen prey to a culture of incivility", but that this discourse of "bad manners" hides a more pressing crisis of democracy (2018). Jones,

too, states that “The call for civility, which by implication indicts incivility as a real problem plaguing American politics, elides the real nature of our ongoing political conflict” (2018). Indeed, civility is an ill-defined term about which no consensus exists. Yet, it often seems to function as a euphemism to suggest the problem is simply a matter of bad etiquette. Incivility, these authors argue, is not the problem; it is merely a symptom of the problem—and it is this problem, the presumed underlying crisis of democracy obscured by incivility, which is the focus of this thesis.

The questions previously raised, speak for themselves: many wonder whether American society has indeed descended to some unfathomed nadir of acrimony, or whether American democracy is really breaking down. Moreover, if we are talking about a crisis of democracy, what *type* of crisis are we talking about? While existing literature has focused on each of these questions separately, it is the way in which these issues intersect that will be the center of this research. If one merely questions why civility is in decline, the complexity that is the politization of the public domain is only addressed in a superficial manner. Therefore, in order to effectively analyze the aforementioned complexity, the following research question will be posed: how can affective polarization in the United States be viewed as a symptom of a democratic deficit? This question needs some contextualization, especially with regard to both the concept of ‘affective polarization’ as well as the suggestion of a ‘democratic deficit’.

Historically, interest in polarization has been prevalent since the presidencies of Ronald Reagan and Bill Clinton. In fact, in their book *Polarization and the Presidency: From FDR to Barack Obama* (2015), Smith and Seltzer argue that the basis of polarized politics goes even further back, as far as Roosevelt’s presidency and the legacy of the New Deal. However, the authors state that, “it is generally agreed” that the Democratic and Republican parties “are more polarized at the start of the twenty-first century than they have been at any time since the start of the twentieth century” (1). Certainly, there appears to be something quite distinctive about present-day polarization. What we are seeing is polarization accompanied by an unprecedented degree of hostility; a phenomenon referred to in academic literature as ‘affective polarization’.

Iyengar and Westwood define affective polarization as “the tendency of people identifying as Republicans or Democrats to view opposing partisans negatively and co-partisans positively” (691). What is distinctive about this, is how affective polarization shows that “hostile feelings for the opposing party are ingrained or automatic in voters’ minds” (690). This becomes evident through the Implicit Association Test, originally developed by Greenwald, McGhee and Schwartz in 1998. The test measures the reaction time necessary to “associate ingroups and outgroups (e.g., ‘Democrat’ and ‘Republican’ or ‘African American’ and

‘European American’ with positive and negative attributes)” (Iyengar and Westwood 692). The test is “famous for revealing pervasive evidence of subconscious associations related to race” (Gentzkow 16). However, the Iyengar and Westwood study shows, that when it comes to perceiving the opposite political party, “the level of partisan animus in the American public exceeds racial hostility” (691). In other words, with regard to *partyism*<sup>3</sup>, negative associations are significantly stronger than negative associations with the opposite race.

This development suggests that American politics, perhaps more so than ever before, has become about identity, and in particular about *collective* identity. Increasingly, Republicans and Democrats seem to see themselves as part of cultural groups that are distinctly different. This is also argued by political scientist John Sides, author of the book *Identity Crisis*, who states that the 2016 election was primarily a battle of identity. Over the course of the past decades, the accumulation of various intersecting historic, political, cultural, and economic developments has caused Americans to increasingly associate with people that are very similar to themselves. This trend has been recognized by a variety of authors (Chua 2018; Hochschild 2016; Shapiro 2016) and is generally referred to as *tribalism*, which will be discussed in more detail further on. Because of the multiplicity of identity, it should be noted that these tribes do not adhere to clear-cut distinctions. However, generally, the role of identity and emotion in politics has become increasingly relevant. People tend to feel a “kinlike connection to their tribes; they emotionally invest in them” (Shapiro 14). As a result, people are having more trouble understanding those who are different, even those who live just a few miles away<sup>4</sup>.

What does the development of affective polarization and tribalism tell us about the functioning of democracy? At a surface level, there are concerns about the political effects of polarization, which has been argued to lead to gridlock and institutional warfare (Mansbridge and 2013). According to Mansbridge and Martin, polarization strongly discourages bipartisan negotiation and cooperation, and the larger the ideological schism, the smaller, the “zone of possible agreement” (68). The American Constitution was designed to guard against any factional tyrant through an intricate system of checks and balances (Persily 212, 202). It demands negotiation. Yet, when bipartisanship is thwarted by polarization, both parties will use the institutions they hold to block the other branches of government (Mansbridge and Martin 6). As Mansbridge and Martin state, “the structure of American political institutions requires, but discourages, deliberative negotiation” (11). In terms of affective polarization, Mansbridge

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<sup>3</sup> “*Partyism*, as some call it, currently beats race as the source of divisive prejudice” (Hochschild 6)

<sup>4</sup> This is the thesis on which Bill Bishop wrote his book *The Big Sort: Why the Clustering of Like-Minded America is Tearing Us Apart* (2008).



and Martin argue that literature often overlooks incivility as an important constituent of polarization<sup>5</sup>. As a result of politicians humiliating or annihilating opponents, passing legislation runs the risk of disappearing to the background (Mansbridge and Martin 37). Therefore, the authors argue that bipartisanship can't be reached before incivility is adequately dealt with.

However, as stated before, the crisis of incivility—regardless of the extent to which it is dealt with—likely obscures a deeper running crisis of democracy. Besides surface concerns, what, then, is the relationship between affective polarization and the functioning of American democracy? This is where the concept of the 'democratic deficit' comes in. In his book *Can Democracy Survive Global Capitalism?* (2018). Robert Kuttner argues that it is no coincidence that in present time, far-right backlash is occurring in many liberal democracies at the same time (xvii). In various nations, the impact of globalization on the livelihoods of people has resulted in increased polarization, as well as unfocused and inchoate anger. People "are not quite sure whom to be angry at—immigrants, corporations, the government, politically correct liberals, the rich, the poor?" (xv). But there appears something to be going on with democracy, and Kuttner suggests the following.

According to Kuttner, a major component in the crisis of democracy is the way capitalism has begun to overwhelm liberal democratic systems, creating a so-called 'democratic deficit' that has provoked a two-fold response: a backlash against the system on the political Right and an inability to function within this very system on the Left. It is this suggestion that will be central to questioning how affective polarization can be viewed as a symptom of this democratic deficit. In order to provide a nuanced answer, various systemic and structural functions will be examined.

The first chapter will deal with the question of what affective polarization looks like in the United States. In the first place, data on affective polarization by Matthew Gentzkow will be analyzed. Additionally, Chantal Mouffe's theories of *agonism* and *antagonism* are addressed to illustrate the relationship between affective polarization and democracy, and to introduce the theoretical framework from which to analyze the democratic deficit. The second chapter looks at historic developments that have led to the current political and social climate in the United States, that is to say: the rise in identity politics, the neoliberal shift, and the emergence of white identity politics. In order to contextualize this last development in more detail, Arlie

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<sup>5</sup> A report by the Task Force on Negotiating Agreement in Politics (TFNAP) entitled "Solutions to Political Polarization in America" suggest that polarization can be split into "three separate but interacting phenomena": hyper-partisanship, gridlock, and incivility (Persily 4).

Hochschild's "deep story" of the Right Wing South is used to illustrate the importance of emotion in group-making practices. The third chapter builds on from this, using Rogers Brubaker's 'groupness' approach to theorize how collective identity is deliberately politicized. In this context, politics of resentment, politics of fear and the emergence of tribalism will be addressed—in particular to see how Donald Trump politicized his voter base by invoking an ideology of *white supremacy*. The final chapter examines how these different elements intersect and inform us about the functioning of American democracy. Using Peter Mair's and Robert Kuttner's analyses of liberal democracies, the inherent tension between democracy and capitalism will be examined. Finally, implications with regard to the future of American democracy will be addressed. It will be argued that, unless American democracy truly becomes *more* democratic—through the strengthening of its institutions and a thorough dismantling of corporatism—the system might very well be at risk of collapsing in on itself.

## Chapter 1: Polarization in the United States

If we are to believe a large segment of academic scholarship, we are living in a world that is becoming increasingly divided. Ranging from the fields of politics (Gentzkow 2016, Persily 2016, Mickey et al. 2017) to sociology (Brubaker 2004; 2017) to behavioral psychology (Billig and Tajfel 1973), many renowned scholars are turning towards theories of antagonism and tribalism to explain what is happening around the world, and, in particular, what is happening in the United States. In addition to this, ever since the American elections of 2016, there appears to be a newly found interest in academia into the subject of polarization. In part, this is fueled by concerns about the future of democracy.<sup>6</sup> Gentzkow writes, “Whatever the truth about ideological polarization, there is no question that we talk about it more now than in the past” (3). Is there really no question about this? Or could it also be the case that the awareness about polarization simply has increased?

Donald Trump’s victory over Hillary Rodham Clinton was one that stunned not only many citizens but also most political pundits (Gaughan, 2016). With more Americans voting for Hillary Clinton than for any other losing presidential candidate in US history<sup>7</sup>, she won the popular vote, but the United States Electoral College mechanism still elected Donald Trump as the 45<sup>th</sup> president. The outcome of the 2016 elections showed the United States as a nation deeply divided. On January 21, 2017, the day after Trump’s inauguration ceremony, some six hundred cities held women’s marches, an event which “appears to have been the largest coordinated protest in US history” (Klein 197). On the other side of the political spectrum, the response to Donald Trump’s election showed a polar opposite reaction. Many felt elated and joyful. Nearly all Trump supporters (96%) expressed that Trump’s election made them feel hopeful (Pew Research Center).

However, trend data from the Pew Research Center shows that partisan divisions in U.S. politics are actually nothing new. Donald Trump is certainly not the first politically divisive president. In 1981, with the election of Ronald Reagan as the 40<sup>th</sup> American president, the American population was very split about this ‘actor turned president’ who might bring the

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<sup>6</sup> The American political system of checks and balances was designed to demand negotiation. However, as Persily reminds us, veto points can be exploited by a cohesive minority in order to obstruct the majority’s policies, thereby making it impossible to “get policy through congress” (8). Such gridlock can then lead to institutional warfare where both parties will attempt to block the other branches of government through the institutions they control (Mansbridge and Martin 6).

<sup>7</sup> Hillary Clinton outpaced President-elect Donald Trump by almost 2.9 million votes—65,844,954 (48%) to his 62,979,879 (46,1%)—according to the certified final election results.

See: Krieg, Gregory, “It’s Official: Clinton Swamps Trump in Popular Vote”

<https://edition.cnn.com/2016/12/21/politics/donald-trump-hillary-clinton-popular-vote-final-count/index.html>

country to the brink of nuclear war. In the 1950s and 1960s, it was the issue of civil rights that “split the country into warring factions” (Gentzkow 2). And, of course, in the 1860s, during the American Civil War, the political factions of the United States were so divided on the long-standing and controversial issue of slavery that they went to war with each other. Alec Tyson, Senior Researcher at Pew Research Center, argues that the public’s growing partisan polarization is actually evident long before Trump came into office. In particular, from the 1990s onwards, partisan polarization grew across a range of attitudes; from immigration, to the economy, to views of the president himself.<sup>8</sup> However, no other president in the modern polling era has had a larger partisan gap in his approval rating than Donald Trump (Dunn, 2018).

At first glance, Trump’s favorability rating received from the members of his own party does not differ much from the ratings that former presidents Barack Obama and George W. Bush received from their own support base. 81% of Democrats approved of Obama, 81% of Republicans approved of Bush, and 84% of Republicans now approve of Trump (Pew Research Center)<sup>9</sup>. However, the partisan gap is growing. In June 2018, 84% of Republicans approved of Trump’s job performance, compared with just 7% of Democrats (Pew Research Center)<sup>10</sup>. This 77 percentage point gap compares to a 67 percentage divide in ratings for Obama and a 58 percentage divide for Bush.

The aim of this chapter is to establish what polarization in the United States looks like at present. First, data collected by Matthew Gentzkow will be analyzed. It will be argued that there is no clear polarization when it comes to party identification and political ideology. However, polarization does occur when it comes to so-called ‘core issues’ and when considering the unprecedented degree of hostility in the way partisans perceive the ‘other’. This is why one can speak of *affective polarization*. In order to further explain the relationship between affective polarization and the functioning of democracy, Chantal Mouffe’s theories of agonism and antagonism are used as a framework for further analysis. With regard to the research question — how can affective polarization be viewed as a symptom of a democratic deficit? — it is essential to understand when and how agonism turns to antagonism. As will be

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<sup>8</sup> See “How Polarizing is Donald Trump”, Pew Research Center, November 14, 2018: <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2018/11/14/americas-polarized-views-of-trump-follow-years-of-growing-political-partisanship/>

<sup>9</sup> See Dunn, Amina, “Trump’s Approval Ratings So Far Are Unusually Stable – And Deeply Partisan”, Pew Research Center, August 1, 2018: [www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2018/08/01/trumps-approval-ratings-so-far-are-unusually-stable-and-deeply-partisan/](http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2018/08/01/trumps-approval-ratings-so-far-are-unusually-stable-and-deeply-partisan/)

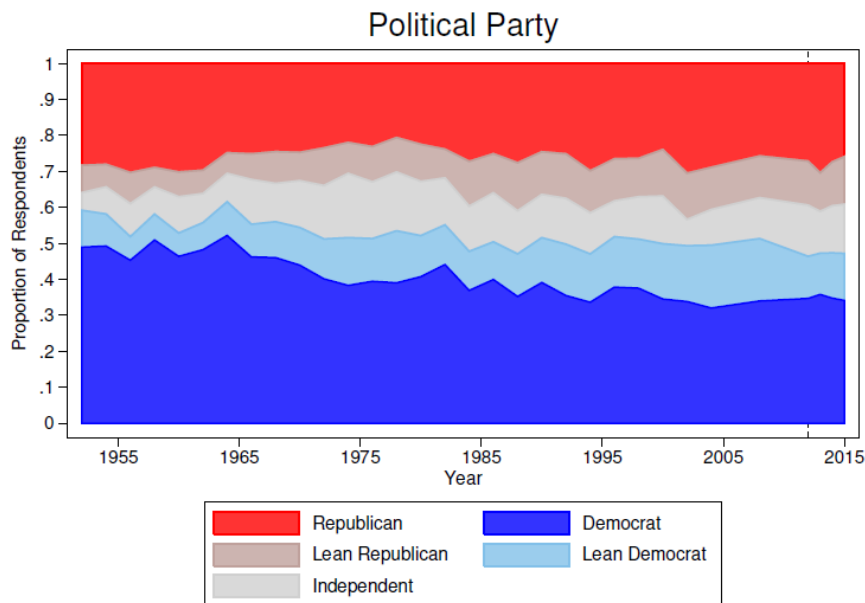
<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

argued, an agonist to antagonist political turn illustrates the current democratic deficit in American democracy. This chapter lays the theoretical basis for understanding the two core concepts of the research question.

## **1.1 The “Myth” of Polarization**

Gentzkow writes that Americans in 2016 were “more politically divided than ever before” (2). A number of academic studies have found evidence for the rise of polarization. Abramowitz and Saunders write that “Since the 1970s, ideological polarization has increased dramatically among the mass public in the United States” (542). Importantly, they note that these ideological divisions do not just occur between small minorities of activists; rather, they involve “a large segment of the public” (542). However, there are also those who argue that polarization in the United States is largely overstated. Glaeser and Ward find the claim that “America’s political divisions are increasing” to be one of the most prominent “myths of American political geography” (125). Fiorina et al. appear to agree with this. Their argumentation is three-fold: firstly, they argue that most Americans actually hold moderate views on most issues, secondly, that a large section of the American electorate does not self-identity with a strong political ideology, and finally that “distributions of views on issues and self-reported ideology have been largely stable over time” (qtd in Gentzkow 5). In line with this, Ansolabehere et al. also argue that “the great divide across the American states is not really much of a divide at all” (99).

How do academics studying the same data reach such different conclusions in their analysis? Gentzkow argues that “much of the disagreement comes from the way they define the question” (5). When it comes to polarization, two markers to look at are a) party identification and b) self-described ideology. We might expect polarization to show up as more and more Americans identify strongly with one party rather than the other, as well as when more and more Americans describe themselves as strongly conservative or liberal rather than moderate. The data providing these indications comes from the American National Election Study, which has been measuring political views and attitudes, voting intentions and perceptions of political candidates in a nationally representative survey conducted before and after each presidential election since 1948. When it comes to the first marker — party identifications — respondents are asked whether they identify as Republican or Democrat, and those who do not state an affiliation are subsequently asked whether they ‘lean’ toward either one of these parties. Figure 1 shows the results from 1948 onwards.



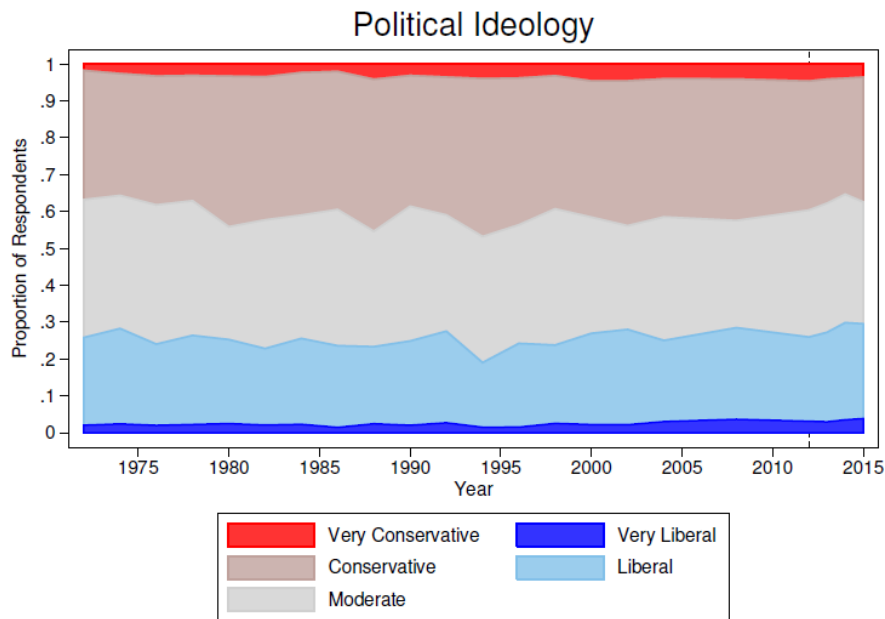
Notes: Figure shows the proportion of respondents to the American National Election Study survey who identify as Republican, lean Republican, identify as Independent, lean Democrat, or identify as Democrat. The post-2012 data comes from a separate survey conducted by the Pew Research Center and is rescaled in such a way that the overlapping time periods have the same mean.

*Figure 1*

Notably, there appears to be no evidence whatsoever of growing polarization when it comes to strong identification with either the Republican or Democratic party. As Gentzkow states, “if anything, there is a small trend in the other direction, with fewer respondents stating a clear party affiliation and more either calling themselves independent or saying they ‘lean’ one way or the other (7).

When it comes to the other the second marker — self-described ideology — respondents to the survey are asked to place themselves on a political scale that consists of 5 points of identification: ‘very liberal’, ‘liberal’, ‘moderate’, ‘conservative’ and ‘very conservative’. Figure 2 shows no clear evidence of polarization either. The majority of Americans consistently call themselves either ‘liberal’, ‘conservative’ or ‘moderate’ with no hint of a move towards the extremes (Gentzkow 7). Results like these are the reason for the aforementioned scholars to argue that polarization in the United States is a myth. However, those on the other side of the debate would claim that merely looking at party identification and self-described ideology obscures other, perhaps more important, trends. One of the alternative trends to examine would be voting patterns<sup>11</sup>.

<sup>11</sup> Examining voting patterns is useful because people don’t always tell the truth on surveys and tend to describe themselves as more moderate than they really are (Gentzkow 8).



Notes: Figure shows the proportion of respondents to the American National Election Study survey who identify as very conservative, conservative, moderate, liberal, and very liberal. The post-2012 data comes from a separate survey conducted by the Pew Research Center and is rescaled in such a way that the overlapping time periods have the same mean.

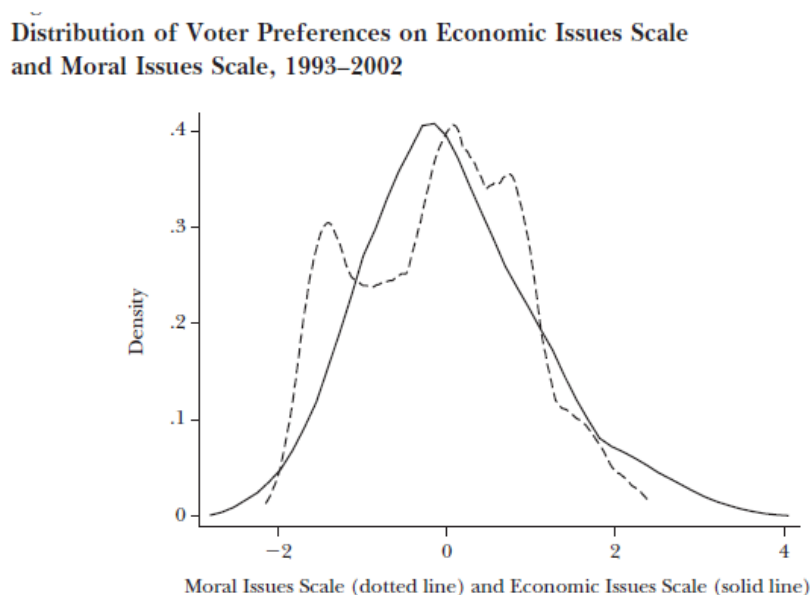
*Figure 2*

With regard to voting patterns, Gentzkow states that, in the first place, we might expect polarization to show up as more people vote consistently for only the Democratic or the Republican party. Secondly, we might “expect to see the likelihood of voters changing their votes from one election to the next falling” (8). And finally, we can expect polarization to show up when voters of different political stripes become increasingly more segregated geographically (8). At first glance, a closer look at voting indicates, indeed, increasing polarization. The share of Americans living in a landslide county has increased substantially since 1976. In addition to this, split-ticket voting<sup>12</sup> has been found to have become less likely (Hetherington 2001; Mayer 1998).

However, when examining voting patterns it is important to note that although measures of polarization have been trending upward, the magnitudes of these trends tend to be small and far from unprecedented by historical standards (Gentzkow 9). Again, the evidence for polarization is not all that strong.

<sup>12</sup> Refers to when a voter in an election votes for candidates from different political parties when multiple offices are being decided by a single election, as opposed to straight-ticket voting in which a voter chooses candidates from the same political party for every election.

Another place to look for polarization, then, is views on individual policy issues such as health care, abortion, tax policy, gun ownership and global warming. Fiorina and Abrams argue that polarization should be defined as the emergence of two-peaked, so-called ‘bimodal’, distributions of such views, rather than single-peaked, ‘unimodal’, distributions. Here, too, at first glance, data shows that Americans’ views on issues are mostly single-peaked<sup>13</sup>, that is to say, shows no evidence for polarization. This is visible in Figure 3.



Source: Ansolabehere et al. (2006).

Figure 3

However, there is another way to look at this data. When looking at the distributions for self-identified Republicans and self-identified Democrats rather than overall distributions, the data shows growing gaps between Republicans and Democrats, as shown in Figure 4. For each of these eight measures, the red line indicating the average views of Republicans and the blue line indicating the average views of Democrats are diverging.

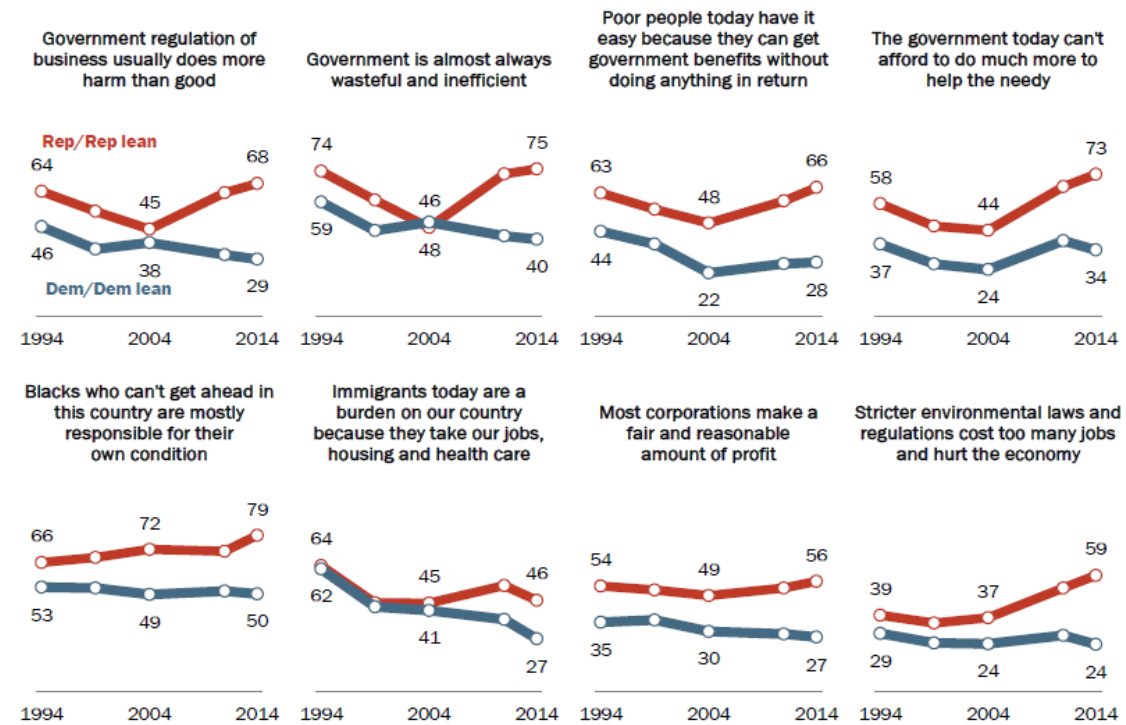
When separating these issue questions into single indexes of conservative or liberal views, the divergence becomes even more striking, as shown in Figure 5. When measured specifically in the subset of people who say they are politically engaged—that is, vote regularly, follow government affairs etc.—the split becomes even larger, as shown in Figure 6 (Gentzkow 12).

<sup>13</sup> See Ansolabehere et al. (2006). Figure 3 shows a distribution of voter preferences on a set of economic and “moral” issues. The economic index is clearly single-peaked, whereas the moral index shows some evidence of bimodality. However, it is still “tightly clustered near the center” (Gentzkow 10).



## Growing Gaps between Republicans and Democrats

% who take the more conservative position on each question in the ideological consistency scale

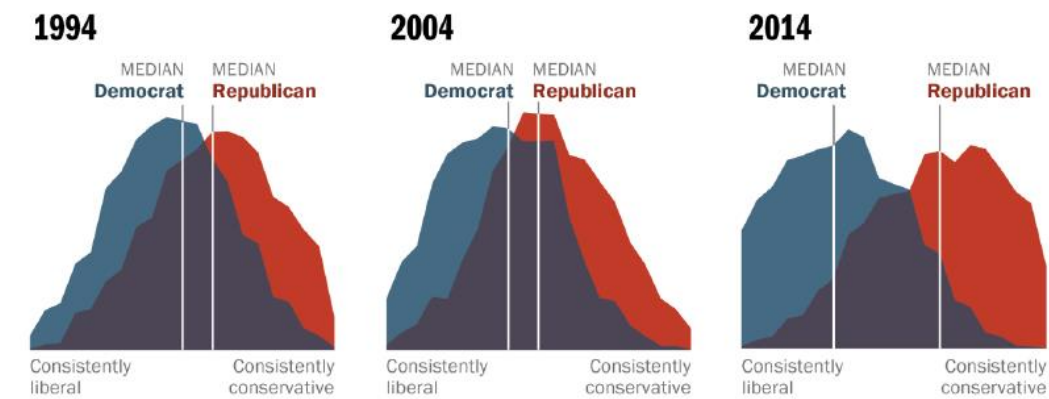


Source: Pew Research Center (2014).

Figure 4

What does this mean? Gentzkow shows that self-identification remains stable while party medians are shifting apart. Notably, the correlation between “people’s views [ and ] their party identification has increased significantly” (12). Parties have become more *ideologically homogeneous*, which means that the frequency of people holding views that diverge from the rest of their group has decreased (Gentzkow 12). As Gentzkow illustrates, for example, the frequency of “Republicans holding pro-immigrant views, or Democrats holding anti-immigrant views” has decreased substantially (12). In addition to this, voters have become more *ideologically consistent*. Whereas “it used to be more common for people to hold liberal views on some issues (...) and conservative views on others”, today, people tend to hold *either* liberal *or* conservative-leaning views across the board (Gentzkow 12). Naturally, inter-homogeneity and intra-consistency are correlated; the more consistently people within a party hold *either* liberal *or* conservative views, the lower the number of people within that party with diverging views will be.

*Distribution of Democrats and Republicans on a 10-item scale of political values*



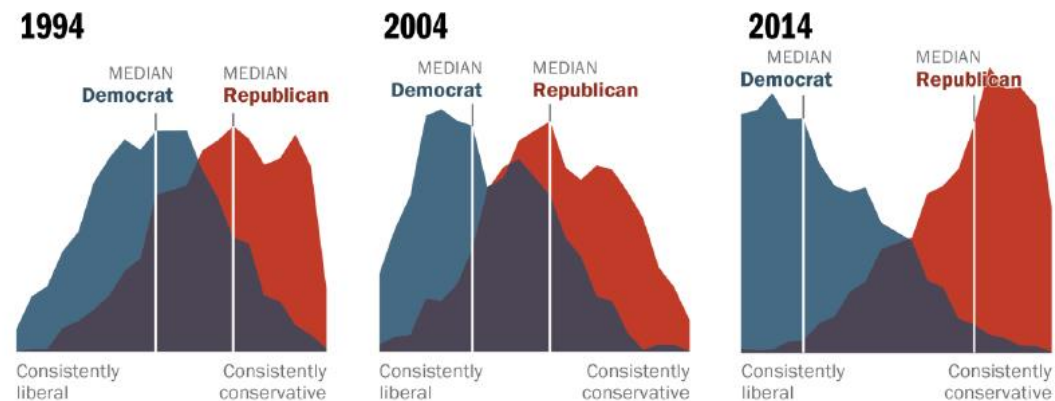
Source: 2014 Political Polarization in the American Public

Source: Pew Research Center (2014).

*Figure 5*

*Distribution of Democrats and Republicans on a 10-item scale of political values, by level of political engagement*

**Among the politically engaged**



Source: Pew Research Center (2014).

*Figure 6*

These findings, in particular, provide very relevant insights with regard to the research question of how affective polarization can be seen as a symptom of a democratic deficit. In recent debate, it has been argued that the red-blue split in the United States has become so divisive in recent decades that “a purple American has all but disappeared” (Wasserman, 2017). The development of parties becoming more ideologically homogeneous, and voters becoming more ideologically consistent, fits directly into a larger argument that polarization has increased as a result of changes in where Americans choose to live. This is the thesis of Bill Bishop’s book *The Big Sort: Why the Clustering of Like-Minded Americans is Tearing Us Apart* (2008). Bishop argues that, in the past four decades, Americans have started to move house, not in

search of better opportunities and living circumstances, as was historically the case, but to live near others who share their views. Americans are segregating themselves into “different emotionally toned enclaves” which causes their views to become more extreme as they hear their beliefs reflected and amplified in their confinement to like-minded company (Bishop 9). He states that the United States “may be more diverse than ever coast to coast” but the places where Americans live are becoming increasingly crowded with “people who live alike, think alike, and vote alike” (27). Collective identities are becoming increasingly relevant.

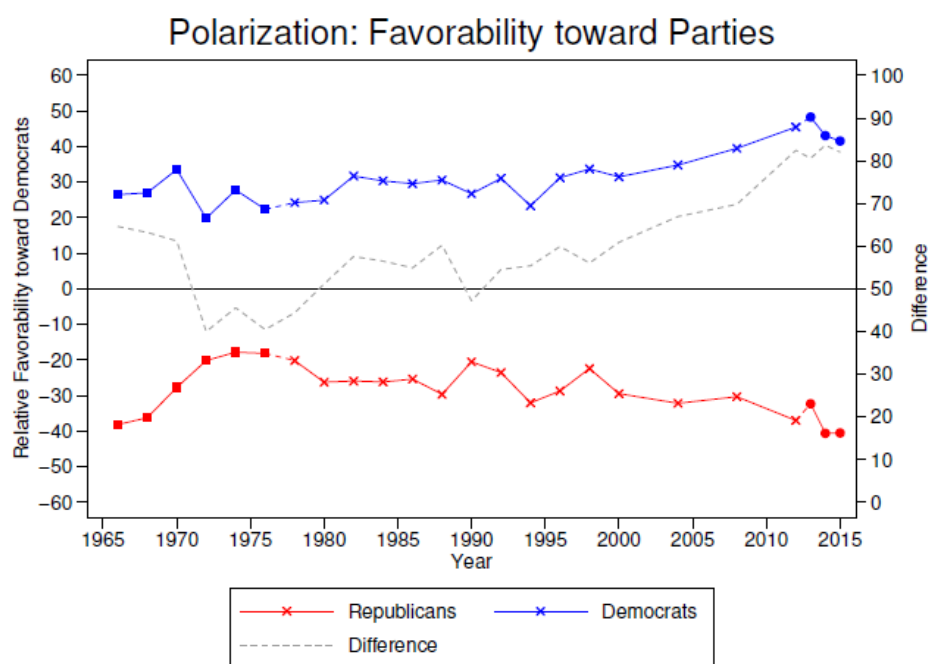
The evidence for Bishop’s theory becomes visible in the recent increase of so-called “landslide counties”—counties where the winning presidential candidate had a margin of 20 percentage points or more (Teixeira 7). In 1992 the number of voters who lived in such counties was 39 percent, moving up to 50 percent in 2012. It is an accelerating trend that clearly shows how the split between red and blue America is deepening. Aisch et al. write that “nearly all of this 10-point increase from 2012 came from Republicans in rural and small-town America, who swept Donald J. Trump into office” (2016). Voters in less populous but more numerous ‘deep red’ counties account for a greater share of the total vote than the far fewer but more populous ‘deep blue’ counties. There are now nine times as many Republican landslide counties as Democratic ones—a 2,232 total against a 242 total (Aisch et al., 2016). More people live in Democratic landslide counties—a total of 99 million people against 94 million people in Republican landslide counties—but in 2016, the Democrats in landslide countries only made up 28% of the vote against 31% Republicans.

This growing tendency of like-minded people to live near one another is not an accidental transformation. It has been previously mentioned that tribalism is recognized as the tendency of people to increasingly associate themselves with like-minded “tribes” (Shapiro 14). This development is an accumulation of different historical trends. Teixeira names the suburbanization of metropolitan areas after World War II and the “various ‘movements’ of the sixties” as examples. However, also economic developments such as the rise of neoliberalism intersect with, and thereby influence, this development. The second chapter of this thesis will analyze this in more detail. The question to ask at this point is: in what way do these developments of increasing polarization and tribalism relate to *affective* polarization?

## **1.2 Affective Polarization**

When examining polarization, the data previously analyzed is primarily concerned with how Americans describe their own political views and affiliations. However, to see the clearest

evidence of increased divisions “we need to look not at how they describe themselves, but how they see each other” (Gentzkow 13). One of the most significant changes has been the way Americans increasingly regard their own co-partisans in a positive manner and those on the other side of the political spectrum in a highly negative manner. Whereas partisans always feel more “warmly”<sup>14</sup> about their own party, the magnitude of the gap gives us a sense of the depth of the division. Figure 7 shows the trend over time.



Notes: Using data from the American National Election Study, the red line shows the average favorability of Republicans towards Democrats minus the average favorability of Republicans towards Republicans on a scale from 0-100. The blue line shows an analogous time series for Democrats. The grey line plots the difference between the blue and red lines over time. The National Election Study changed the phrasing of their question over time. The square points represent the original phrasing, the x points represent the revised version of the question, and the circle points represent a similar question used in monthly political surveys by the Pew Research Center. The different time series are then rescaled so that the average values of the overlapping time periods are equivalent.

Figure 7

In a 2014 Pew Survey, 27% of Democrats and 36% of Republicans states that the opposite’s party’s policies “are so misguided that they threaten the nation’s well-being” (11). The differences between own (‘in’) and opposite (‘out’) party ratings are also growing for markers such as ‘intelligence’ and ‘selfishness’. Back in 1960, respondents thought members

<sup>14</sup> The National Election study uses a ‘thermometer’ scale to measure how respondents view the Democratic and Republican parties: 0 indicates feeling very ‘cold’ toward them and 100 indicates very ‘warm’ (Gentzkow 13).

of the opposite party were similar in terms of intelligence and only moderately less selfish, but by 2008, these gaps had “grown dramatically” (Gentzkow 15, 16). Moreover, when it comes to inter-party marriages, in 2008, more than one fifth of both parties said they would be displeased if one of their children married someone of the opposite political party, as opposed to few people of either party in 1960 (Gentzkow 16).

As stated before, the Implicit Association Test conducted by Iyengar and Westwood shows that when it comes to perceiving the opposite political party, “the level of partisan animus in the American public exceeds racial hostility” (691). This, perhaps, is one of the most shocking implications following the analysis of data on polarization. As Gentzkow writes, “We don’t see those on the other side as well-meaning people who happen to hold different opinions (...) We see them as unintelligent and selfish, with views so perverse that they can be explained only be unimaginable cluelessness, or a dark ulterior motive” (17). Americans do not simply disagree about policy reform; they believe that those on the other side are out to destroy the United States.

An important, critical note to make is that the deepest divisions, naturally, are found among the most interested, informed, and active citizens. As Abramowitz and Saunders state, “polarization is consistently greater among the well-educated and politically engaged segment of the American public than among the poorly educated and politically disengaged segment” who hold more moderate views (545). However, the authors still argue that divisions are “not confined to a small minority of activists—they involve a large segment of the public” (542).

Iyengar and Westwood define *affective polarization* as “the tendency of people identifying as Republicans or Democrats to view opposing partisans negatively and co-partisans positively” (691). This affective separation results from the classification of opposing partisans as members of an ‘outgroup’, a group to which the person doing the classification does not belong, and co-partisans as members of an ‘ingroup’, a group to which that person does belong (Iyengar and Westwood 691). Psychology studies show that the mere act of identifying with a particular group—no matter how trivial the basis for group assignment—is already sufficient to trigger a negative evaluation of people in the outgroup<sup>15</sup>. In the United States, group evaluations are polarized along party lines, as shown in the previous section. The specific content of outgroup stereotypes has also followed suit. As Iyengar and Westwood state, “While Republicans view fellow partisans as patriotic, well informed, and altruistic, Democrats are judged to exhibit precisely the opposite traits” (691).

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<sup>15</sup> See Billig and Tajfel (1973); Chua (2018)

As a result of increasing polarization and tribalism, differences between ingroups and outgroups have become more relevant. As a result, hostility has increased. Affective polarization, then, indicates the increasing importance of both collective identity and of emotions in politics. Chantal Mouffe recognizes these two developments in her theories on agonism and antagonism. The following section will elaborate on this. It will become clear that democracy weakens when agonist politics turns to antagonistic politics. This, in turn, provides relevant implications about the democratic deficit in American society.

### **1.3 Agonism and Antagonism**

Chantal Mouffe argues that there are two concepts that determine the nature of politics, namely ‘hegemony’ and ‘antagonism’ (2009, 549). Hegemony refers to the political, economic, or military control of one state over other states (Oxford English Dictionary). Antagonism is hostile conflict between groups, in which the ‘other’ is viewed as an enemy that has to be eliminated. Antagonism differs from agonism, which aims to keep hegemonies pluralistic. In agonist conflict, Mouffe argues, the ‘other’ is mainly considered an adversary, whereas in antagonism, the ‘other’ is considered an enemy. This is an important distinction to make. Mouffe argues that “adversaries fight against each other because they want their interpretation of the principles to become hegemonic, but they do not put into question the legitimacy of their opponent’s right to fight for the victory of their position” (2013, 29). Agonism holds that conflict can only be curtailed, not eradicated (Mouffe 2009, 550). Deriving from the Ancient Greek word ἀγών [ ah-goan ], meaning ‘struggle’ or ‘contest,’ agonism suggests that two parties can clash for dominance without the contest turning destructive, because the setting has rules that contain their struggle. Antagonism, then, develops when the contest *does* turn destructive. This is often the result of a shift in perception of the ‘other’ when one feels that their identity gets questioned and/or threatened.

It is for this reason, that, next to the concepts of agonism and antagonism, Mouffe recognizes the importance of what she refers to as ‘collective identity’ and ‘affects’. She argues that there are two main approaches in democratic theory: the aggregative model which sees political actors as being moved by the pursuit of their interests, and the deliberative model which stresses the role of reason and moral considerations (2013, 26). However, according to Mouffe, both these models disregard the “centrality of collective identities and the crucial role of affects in their constitution” (26). She writes that it is “impossible to understand democratic politics without acknowledging ‘passions’ as the driving force in the political field” (26).

When it comes to collective identity, Mouffe argues some of these, like national identities, might, “thanks to long periods of historical sedimentation, appear as something natural, they are always contingent constructions made possible through a variety of practices, discourses and language games, and they can be transformed and re-articulated in different ways” (2013, 81). She recalls Freud’s writing on the processes of collective identification in *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego* (1921) and *Civilization and Its Discontents* (1930). Freud argues that groups are “clearly held together by a power of some kind: and to what power could this feat be better ascribed than to Eros, which holds together everything in the world” (92). In this way, a collective identity—a “we”—results from an *affective* investment to create a strong identification among members of a community, which Mouffe affirms. Love, however, is not the only affective driver. Society, Freud stresses, is constantly threatened with disintegration because of the inclination to aggression present in human beings. This, in turn, results in collective identity. As Freud writes: “It is always possible to bind together a considerable amount of people in love, so long as there are other people left over to receive the manifestation of their aggressiveness (111). Recognizing the malleability of group identity, is essential in order to understand how collective identities can become politicized, which will be addressed in more detail in the following chapters.

This us/them distinction is central to Mouffe’s theories of agonism and antagonism. She states that political identities are always collective identities because “we are dealing with the creation of an ‘us’ that can only exist by its demarcation from a ‘them’” (2009, 550). She explains that an us-versus-them relationship does not necessarily have to be an antagonistic one, but in any case there is “always the possibility of this relation us/them becoming one of friend/enemy” (2009, 550). Any form of us/them becomes the locus of an antagonism when others—who had previously been considered as simply different from us—start to be perceived as threatening ‘our’ identity and ‘our’ existence (Mouffe 2009, 550). Naturally, differences between ‘us’ and ‘them’ groups result from differences in opinion and values. Mouffe argues that when different groups and different people hold different views, disagreement is inevitable (2000, 6).

When it comes to politics, and in particular, when it comes to pluralist democracies, the concern is always the “creation of unity in a context of conflict and diversity” (Mouffe 1999, 755). In order for an ‘us/them’ division to be compatible with pluralist democracy, the ‘other’ cannot be seen as an enemy to be destroyed, but must rather be viewed as an adversary, “somebody with whose ideas we are going to struggle but whose right to defend those ideas we will not put into question” (Mouffe 1999, 755). However, when disagreement cannot be

resolved through deliberation and rational discussion, an antagonistic element enters the relation (Mouffe 1999,755).

Agonistic politics can turn to antagonistic politics for two reasons. In the first place, it occurs, as mentioned before, when one social group is perceived to pose an existential threat to another social group. Secondly, it occurs when “resistances against [ the ] hegemonic order cannot find legitimate forms of expression” (Mouffe, 2009, 552). This causes a strong sense of *disengagement*. Each of these are essential in understanding the current functioning of American democracy; analysis from the following chapters will suggest that affective polarization can, in part, be viewed as a symptom of a democratic deficit because both these two developments as illustrated by Mouffe are presently occurring in the United States. The findings from this chapter suggest that in the United States, the political climate is turning increasingly antagonistic. As mentioned in the previous section, partisans perceive the other to be an existential threat to their own identity. Emotions, like Mouffe argues, are central to this development: this is why we speak of *affective* polarization. Furthermore, as a result of the negative effects of neoliberalism, a large segment of the American population feels disengaged from politics.

It has been argued that America’s “culture war” is “a clash of visions about fundamental moral issues” (Graham et al. 1029). Because morality is based on emotions, it is perceived as non-negotiable” (Mouffe, 2016, para. 11). The perceived existential “threat” for partisans, then, is that the United States might be remade according to the “wrong vision of a good society” (Graham et al. 1029). Therefore, the political hostility between active partisans seems to be a battle for the future of the United States—and it seems that antagonism is driving each party to the belief that this future, too, is non-negotiable.



## Chapter 2: The Beginning

In order to fully understand how affective polarization can be viewed as a symptom of a democratic deficit, it is essential to examine the structural and historic patterns that have led to the development of affective polarization. Therefore, the aim of this chapter is to go back to the ‘beginning’. What forces have been driving affective polarization? How have these manifested themselves? And what do they imply about the functioning of American democracy?

In the first place, the rise of identity politics in the 1960s and 1970s will be addressed, The increase in tribalism as identified in the previous chapter is a direct result of this. Secondly, the neoliberal shift of the 1980s and its effects on American democracy will be examined, in particular with regard to the inherent tension between capitalism and democracy. This analysis suggests that neoliberalism has also been driving up tribalism, strongly affecting the functioning of American democracy at the same time. Furthermore, the emergence of *white identity politics* is discussed with regard to the rise of Donald Trump. Finally, the relevance of collective identity and emotions in politics, as previously identified in the previous chapter, will be further contextualized by looking specifically at the political and social developments on the American political Right. This will be done through an analysis of Arlie Hochschild’s study *Strangers In Their Own Land* (2016).

### 2.1 Identity Politics

As has been stated before, the deepening divide in the American society is increasingly driven by *identity*. How do polarization and identity relate to one another? In order to understand this, we have to go back to the emergence of *identity politics*. Some disputes exist with regard to the exact origin of the term. However, Wiarda writes that “almost all authors, even while disagreeing over who was the first to use the term, agree that its original usage goes back to the 1970s and even the 1960s” (150).

Identity politics emerged out of the more radicalized political atmosphere of those two decades, originally as a way of consciousness-raising among marginalized groups—black groups, women’s groups, gay and lesbian groups etc. (Wiarda 150). Identity politics was meant to provide these groups with a means of empowerment in the societies in which they felt uniquely oppressed (Wiarda 150). The aims were raising self-awareness and gaining political power. Heyes states that “Identity politics starts from analyses of oppression to recommend, variously, the reclaiming, redescription, or transformation of previously stigmatized accounts

of group membership” (2018). Subsequently, in the United States and Europe, the 1960s and 1970s saw the emergence of large-scale political movements, and it was this milieu in which identity politics emerged. Wiarda states that, “Each group *identified* with its own individual cause” and wanted to increase their own power so as to reduce their marginalization (150). This statement requires some nuance. Movements overlapped or paralleled each other, thereby shaping and giving expression to identity in a more multifaceted way than Wiarda recognizes. As Langston states, for example, “The visions and strategies of liberal and radical feminism find their roots in the black political theories and social change movements of the 1960s” (158). Still, the focus on identity as a means to wield politics certainly became much more prevalent than in previous decades.

In the 1980s and 1990s, identity politics took center in the political discourse on the Left. Conservatives and mainstream politicians, as Wiarda writes, “were slow to grasp its implications” often on the basis of “the American (national) dream of liberty, equality, freedom, and pluralism” (150). The Democratic Party was the first to recognize the potential political power of using identity, and even *win* elections “on the basis of collecting all these disparate minority voices under its umbrella” (Wiarda 155). It was not until the 1990s that the range of political movements that fall under the identity politics label widened beyond “radical” groups.

Today, the term identity politics generally refers to “political attitudes or positions that focus on the concerns of sub-groups in [ a ] society” (Wiarda 148). They are “political arguments emanating from the self-interested perspectives of self-identified societal interest groups” (148). As a result, people’s politics are increasingly shaped by narrower (non-national) aspects of their identity.<sup>16</sup> Notably, the politicized nature of these collective identities is very relevant with regard to the research question. When examining affective polarization and the functioning of American democracy, the rise of identity politics is a key part of the beginning of the story because tribalism—and as an extension affective polarization—is a direct result of this very development. Moreover, identity politics is no longer merely in the domain of the American Left. The Republican Party has begun catching up. This has become particularly visible in the rise of *white* identity politics. This trend will be discussed in more detail later on. First, several implications of the increased relevance of identity politics will be examined.

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<sup>16</sup> An important note to make is that minority identity politics could also have been a response to the naturalized white identity politics of the time; thereby, not so much on the basis of a “narrow” identity aspect, but rather a response to larger structures. Following from this, the recent rise of white identity politics can, in turn, be seen as a response to this. The scope of this thesis does not allow for an in depth analysis, but further research could focus on the way these two developments continuously influence one another.

Heyes states that the phrase *identity politics* is something of a “philosophical punching-bag for a variety of critics” and is often used as a blanket description (2018). Historian Arthur Schlesinger Jr. argues that a liberal democracy requires a common basis for culture and society to function. His argument is that politics based on group marginalization is what fractures the civil policy and that identity politics “works against” creating real opportunities for ending marginalization. Brendan O’Neill, similarly, suggests that identity politics causes—rather than recognizes and acts on—political schisms along the lines of social identity. By contrast, one could argue that society is already fractured along lines of power based on aspects of identity such as race, gender, and sexuality, which inherently influence power dimensions. However, O’Neill’s argument suggests that these divisions, to the very least, are strengthened by identity politics.

Another argument in line with this, which is often made against the growing relevance of identity politics, is that the group-specificity of identity politics diverts attention away from issues that are assumed to be more fundamental and overarching such as class and economics. Charles Derber, for example, argues that the American Left is “largely an identity politics party” that “offers no broad critique of the political economy of capitalism” (Hedges, 2018). While Derber argues that not all identity politics should be eliminated, he claims that the fragmented nature of identity politics is what has caused the far-right resurgence.

Others, however, argue against claims like these. Naomi Klein writes, “it’s short-sighted, not to mention dangerous, to call for liberals and progressives to abandon their focus on ‘identity politics’ and concentrate instead on economics and class—as if these factors could in any way be pried apart” (91). Indeed, factors of identity politics—gender, race, sexuality etc.—intersect with economics in a way that cannot and should not be ignored. Klein writes that “[ the American ] modern capitalist economy was born thanks to two very large subsidies: stolen Indigenous land and stolen African people” (94, 95). This system consistently ranked the relative value of human lives and labor by placing white men on top. This is why political theorist Cedric Robinson describes the market economy that gave birth to the United States not simply as *capitalism* but as *racial capitalism*. In line with this, civil rights lawyer Michelle Alexander<sup>17</sup> writes that “the politics of racial hierarchy have been the ever-present accomplices

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<sup>17</sup> Author of *The New Jim Crow* (2010) which argues that American elites have used race as a wedge “to decimate a multiracial alliance of poor people” (33)

to the market system as it evolved through the centuries” (qtd in Klein 95). Hedges supports this claim, by writing that, “capitalism, at its core, is about the commodification of human beings and the natural world for exploitation and profit” (2018).

Another factor to consider here, is ‘intersectionality’. Kimberle Crenshaw, in her key text *Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence Against Women of Color*, argues that the problem with identity politics “is not that it fails to transcend differences, as some critics charge, but rather the opposite—that it frequently conflates or ignores intragroup differences” (6). She states that groups come together based on a shared political identity, but then often fail to examine the differences among themselves *within* those groups. Identity politics are useful, Crenshaw, argues, but we must be aware of *intersectionality*; the different ways class, gender and race intersect with one another. Interesting enough, Derber agrees. He states that “as the [ capitalist ] system universalizes and becomes more and more intersectional, we need intersectional resistance” (Hedges, 2018). While the scope of this thesis does not allow for an in depth analysis, the *function* of identity politics in the larger political economy, then, is one to examine in more detail.

What follows from the various debates about identity politics, is that identity itself is never separate from economics, especially not in a liberal democracy like the United States. This calls for a closer look at the economic system in question, and in particular the relevant intersections in the relationship between neoliberalism, identity, and democracy.

### *Neoliberalism*

The United States is one of the richest countries in the world, but also one of the most unequal countries. In a measurement known as the ‘inclusive development index’<sup>18</sup>, which measures the distribution of income and wealth, and the level of poverty, the United States ranks 23 out of 30 developed nations. The World Economic Forum states that the United States “is lagging behind most other advanced economies in economic inclusion” and that poverty rates “remain among the highest in advanced economies at 16.3%, surpassed only by Israel”<sup>19</sup> (2018). One of the most important reasons for the United States’ position in this index, is the high level of inequality. In the United States, “wealth at the top of the income distribution is skyrocketing, leading to growing inequality” (Semuels, 2016). Estimates show that the share of wealth owned

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<sup>18</sup> The index comes from the World Economic Forum

<sup>19</sup> See “Selected Country Summaries”, World Economic Forum: <http://reports.weforum.org/the-inclusive-development-index-2018/selected-country-summaries/>

by the top 1% families has “regularly grown since the late 1970s and reached 42% in 2012” (Saez and Zucman 520). By contrast, the wealth share of the bottom 90% has gradually been declining since the mid-1980s (Saez and Zucman 523). The economic system that is sustaining this inequality is neoliberalism.

What is neoliberalism? In the first place, neoliberalism is a revived version of classical *laissez-faire* economic liberalism<sup>20</sup>. Though it “embodies a number of internal doctrinal differences”, the basic tenet of neoliberalism is to “identify the unregulated free-market capitalist order as the crucial ground for all efficient resource allocation” (Vincent 337). According to Klein, neoliberalism is an “extreme form of capitalism that started to become dominant in the 1980s” during the so-called ‘free market revolution’ under Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher (79). Since the 1990s it has become the dominant ideology of the world’s elites “regardless of partisan affiliation. Still, its strictest and most dogmatic adherents remain where the movement started: on the US Right” (Klein 79).

The neoliberal worldview holds that “governments exist in order to create the optimal conditions for private interests to maximize their profits and wealth” (Klein 80). The tools of the neoliberal worldview are a privatization of the public sphere, a deregulation of the corporate sphere and low taxes paid for by cuts to public services. Neoliberalism is a very profitable set of ideas; the suggestion is that wealth generated like this will trickle-down from the top and will therefore benefit everybody eventually. If inequality remains, neoliberalism suggests that it must be “the personal failing of the individuals and communities that are suffering” (Klein 80). However, as the data shows, the neoliberal system has actually been driving up inequality by making the rich more rich and the poor more poor; “what it really is, at its core, is a rationale for greed” (81). Kuttner affirms this, by stating that neoliberalism mistakenly assumes “the efficiency of unregulated and self-correcting markets” (xxi)

What about the relationship between neoliberalism and identity politics? Duggan writes that “neoliberalism was constructed in and through cultural and identity politics” (qtd. in Chatman 929). The essential connection between neoliberalism and identity politics is that neoliberalism has always been a project of inequality. Klein states that neoliberalism is “based on the theory that the profits and economic growth that follow [ from neoliberalism ] will benefit everyone” (80). However, the neoliberal project appears to be in crisis. It has not created “the best of all worlds, it has created a system of winners and losers” (49). The issue is not that

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<sup>20</sup> Economic doctrine in which private parties are free from intervention. The father of this doctrine is Adam Smith who first analyzed economic liberalism in his book *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations* (1776).

neoliberalism has not generated any wealth. The issue is that wealth is not distributed equally. The sentiment and fear that there is not enough to go around, has resulted in the idea of economics as a zero-sum game. As Klein writes, “so many of us function within systems that are constantly telling us there are not enough resources for everyone to thrive” (Klein 260). This fuels identity politics; “Every group feels attacked, pitted against other groups (...). In these conditions, democracy devolves into zero-sum group competition—pure political tribalism” (Chua 79). Neoliberalism, then, to a large extent has been driving an *antagonistic* element into tribalism. This is very relevant with regard to the research question: neoliberalism puts democracy strongly under pressure, and antagonistic tribalism can clearly be viewed as a symptom of this development. The next paragraphs will contextualize this in more detail.

The idea that the relationship between democracy and capitalism—and in extension neoliberalism—is tense, is not new. As Streeck writes, “From the nineteenth century and well into the twentieth, the bourgeoisie and the political Right expressed fears that majority rule, inevitably implying the rule of the poor over the rich, would ultimately do away with private property and free markets” (6). On the other side, the political Left warned that capitalists might abolish democracy in order to protect themselves from being governed by a majority dedicated to economic and social redistribution (Streeck 6).

The central point of friction in a capitalist economy is that such a system is ruled by two conflicting principles for resource allocation: the principle of *capitalism*, which operates according to the marginal productivity of the free market, and the principle of *democracy*, which is based on social need as certified by the collective choices of democratic politics. Mouffe affirms this, stating that “the history of liberal democracy has been driven by the tension between claims for liberty and claims for equality” (193). She argues that under neoliberalism, democratic values have been eviscerated (193).

In his book *Can Democracy Survive Global Capitalism?* Robert Kuttner argues that it is no coincidence that in present time, far-right backlash is occurring in liberal democracies at the same time (xvii). He writes that “Far-right sentiments are always lurking around the fringes of society, but when democracy does a good job of managing capitalism, they remain at the fringe” (xvii). However, when capitalism begins to overwhelm democratic systems, the resulting sentiments produce “a politics that is sullen, resentful, and perverse, further undermining democracy” (Kuttner xvii).

Neoliberalism has caused a large part of society to feel abandoned; as will become clear in the next section, this sense of abandonment has particularly manifested itself among the

white, American working class<sup>21</sup>. When it comes to affective polarization and the democratic deficit, this sense of abandonment shows the weakening of democracy. The fourth chapter of this thesis will further elaborate on this.

When it comes to Donald Trump, Klein argues that Trump's political career is the direct product of the neoliberal system; his rise to presidency, "would have been impossible without the degradation of the whole idea of the public sphere, which has been unfolding over decades" (41). Kuttner states that Trump's campaign resonated with so many voters because "the economy of recent decades, supercharged by the new rules of globalization, had left too many working people behind" (1). The question, then, where did this sense of abandonment come from? The next section will look at how the cumulative effects of identity politics and neoliberalism brought together a very large segment of the group of people who would eventually vote Trump into power: the white, American working class.<sup>22</sup>

### *White Identity Politics*

In his key text "White Backlash and the Politics of Multiculturalism", Roger Hewitt defines 'white backlash' as:

Negative reactions within white communities to (1) the proximity of black communities following migration, or (2) the potential acquisition of new power and/or status by blacks, or (3) the fashioning of policies or legislation to bring about greater equality between "racial"/ethnic groups, or (4) the enforcing of such policies or legislation (Hewitt 5).

The concept of white backlash is not a new one. As Hughey illustrates, historically, white backlash has also been visible, for example, in the "white disapproval of newly elected black congressmen during Reconstruction or whites' resistance towards the civil rights

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<sup>21</sup> Ta-nehisi Coates, rightfully, critiques the argument made that this sense of abandonment is merely the result of economics; black people who have been victimized by the same economy, and having faced cultural condescension and economic anxiety for decades did not join the Trump revolution, after all. This analysis will be further developed and examined in the third chapter of this thesis.

<sup>22</sup> Taking a closer look at Trump's voter base, it needs to be noted that 8% of African-Americans, 28% of Hispanic Americans and 27% of Asian Americans voted for Trump. His voter base is more fractured than generally discussed. Still, 57% of white Americans voted for Trump, and, as will become clear in the next section, *whiteness* is a clear constituent of Trump's political support.

See: <https://edition.cnn.com/election/2016/results/exit-polls>

movement” (721). However, the *politicizing* of white identity — so-called ‘white identity politics’ — has particularly increased in the last decade (Bartels, 2014). This rise in white identity politics can be attributed to the fear some white Americans have of becoming a minority group that is ‘pushed back’ as a result of increased demographic diversity. Bartels writes that such shifts have driven many conservatives to affiliate with causes of white identity politics since increasing ethnic diversity magnifies the political import of *white* identity (2014).

Cabrera writes that after the election of president Obama in 2008, there was an upsurge of white people believing they were racially victimized (768). While legal challenges concerning so-called ‘reverse racism’ date back as far as the 1970s (Norton and Sommers 215), the idea of anti-white bias as a pertinent social issue that is a bigger social problem than anti-black bias has become so pervasive that Norton and Sommers recognize it as a “general mindset gaining traction among Whites in contemporary America”<sup>23</sup> (215). Cabrera also states that insistent denial of racism has been relatively consistent throughout U.S. history, but the current manifestations of white victimization have become much more pronounced (768). He argues that “the power of this myth lies in the fact that it does not require a rational foundation” (781). The argument that follows from this is that this assumption is instead predicated on a shared *feeling* amongst many whites that racism against black people is largely over but racism against their own group, whites, is on the rise (Norton and Sommers 215). A key question to ask here, then, is to what extent the position of white people in the United States is actually in decline?

In the last two decades, there has been a rise in deaths among white, middle-aged Americans without college degrees, mostly as a result of suicide, prescription drug overdoses, and alcoholism (Klein, 89). In contrast, the mortality rates for black and Hispanic Americans in similar demographic brackets have been falling. This trend has first been marked by Anne Case and Angus Deaton in a paper that refers to this development as an increase in so-called “deaths of despair”. From 1999 to 2014, the mortality rate for whites in the age range 45 – 54 years old with no more than a high school education has increased by 143 deaths per 100,000, while mortality rates among blacks and Hispanics in the same category continue to fall (Case and Deaton 2). The study argues that this discrepancy between the different demographic

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<sup>23</sup> To test the hypothesis, the authors asked a “large national sample of Black and White Americans (N = 417; Mage = 50.3, SD = 13.6; 57% Female; 209 White, 208 Black) to use a 10-point scale (1=not at all; 10=very much) to indicate the extent to which they felt both Blacks and Whites were the target of discrimination in each decade from the 1950s to the 2000s. The results indicate that, in particular in recent years, white respondents perceived anti-black bias as declining quickly and anti-white bias as increasing sharply. Additionally, the analysis suggests that there is no comparable significant reversal when examining these ratings across different respondent age brackets or education levels.

Details can be found here: <https://journals-sagepub-com.ru.idm.oclc.org/doi/pdf/10.1177/1745691611406922>



groups comes down to different prior experiences or “the failure of life to turn out as expected” (34).

This “decline” of the white American working class has also been discussed by other authors. Chua writes that in 1965, whites were still a majority in the United States at 84 percent of the total population (165). But over the last fifty years nearly 59 million immigrants have come to the United States in what has been the largest wave of immigration in American history (165). Many white Americans feel like “they’ve lost their cultural primacy” (Chua 19). In turn, it is this white anxiety—“about being displaced, being outnumbered, being discriminated against”—which has “fueled recent conservative populist politics in America” (Chua 76). Ryan argues that Donald Trump’s victory in the 2016 elections can be seen as a white backlash, also called “whitelash”: an upsurge in white nationalism (2016). This is an active response against the rise of diverse social and economic movements that demand a more equal world and is fueled by “the resentment felt by a large segment of white America about the changing face of their country, about positions of power and privilege increasingly being held by people who do not look like them” (Klein 84).

Again, many look towards economics to explain this development. Kuttner states that the increased mortality reflects “the collapse of stable economic life” (2). Ever since the financial crisis, “everyone apart from the one percent has been losing job security as well as whatever feeble safety net used to exist” (Klein 88). However, Klein argues that in addition to economic anxiety, another important factor is driving up white identity politics, namely the fact that white men are losing their economic security *and* “their sense of a superior status” simultaneously (89). This, perhaps, is even more insightful. Trump’s white voters are not the demographic who have been hit the hardest by neoliberal politics nor are they mostly poor<sup>24</sup>. Yet, importantly, a CNN analysis of exit polls shows that Trump won 77 percent of his votes among those who felt their financial situation was ‘worse today’ than it had been four years earlier<sup>25</sup>. The polls do not show a class division, but the percentage compares to 19 per cent of Clinton voters reporting the same, and 4 per cent who did not answer.

Obviously, white Americans are not the only demographic in American society that feel threatened and discriminated against. In fact, as Chua writes, “for many minorities the very idea that whites could feel threatened is disingenuous and infuriating” considering the general privilege they enjoy (77). The striking fact, however, is that many whites do *feel* like they are

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<sup>24</sup> “... most of his voters [ earn ] between \$50,000 and \$200,000 a year (though with a concentration at the lower end of that range)” (Klein 88)

<sup>25</sup> See: <https://edition.cnn.com/election/2016/results/exit-polls>

rightfully standing up for themselves. It is this *felt* experience in particular that has proven so strong in driving affective polarization. The reason for this, is that emotions often act as filters and screens that distort objective reality; moreover, as Mouffe has argued, these emotions are key in antagonistic politics. The third chapter of this thesis will elaborate on this in more detail. First, when examining affective polarization as a symptom of a democratic deficit, the following case study provides relevant insight: Arlie Hochschild's exposé on the Right Wing South.

## 2.2 The Right Wing South

While polarization is generally seen as a bipartisan issue, Hochschild states that most scholars agree that the split in the American society has primarily widened because “the Right has moved right” (Hochschild 7). As mentioned before, it is the *felt* experience of white, middle-class men, in particular, that is driving the deepening polarization. For her book *Strangers In Their Own Land* (2016), Arlie Hochschild travelled into the heart of the American South with a keen interest in “how life *feels* to people on the Right—that is, in the emotion that underlies politics” (ix). Over the course of five years she accumulated 4,690 pages of transcripts based on interviews with Tea Party advocates in the state of Louisiana. The following section will use her work to provide deeper insight into *how* exactly polarization has been deepening, and in particular, the different ways that emotions are fueling the division and preventing people from reaching across political divides. If we want to understand the extent to which affective polarization is a symptom of a democratic deficit, it is essential to better understand the role of *emotion* in politics, since these are very closely related to the strong sense of abandonment felt by a large segment of the American population.

According to the *New Yorker* we live in a so-called “Tea Party era”; “some 350,000 people are active members, but, according to [ a ] Pew poll, some 20 percent of Americans—45 million people—support it” (Hochschild 7). The political right has been growing steadily and nearly all of its recent expansion has occurred below the Mason-Dixon line<sup>26</sup>. With the election of Donald Trump, interest in this expansion of the American Right increased, particularly because of a trend that Hochschild refers to as the “Great Paradox”—the suggestion

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<sup>26</sup> Originally the boundary between Maryland and Pennsylvania, as well as the dividing line between slave states to the south of the boundary and free-soil states to the north of it during the pre-Civil War period. Nowadays, the Mason-Dixon line is generally used in a figuratively manner to describe the political and social dividing line between the North and the South (*Encyclopaedia Britannica*)

that voters on the Right are deliberately voting against their own self-interest. The paradox is this: across the United States, red states are poorer, have “more teen mothers, more divorce, worse health, more obesity, more trauma-related deaths, more low-birth-weight babies, and lower school enrollment” (Hochschild 8). According to *The Measure of America*, a report from the Social Science Research Council, the state of Louisiana ranks 49<sup>th</sup> out of the fifty states when it comes to its “human development” and last in “overall health” (Hochschild 9). These measurements are based on a ranking of life expectancy, school enrollment, educational degree attainment, and median personal earnings. Given such a reality, one might expect people to be in favor of federal help, but the paradox is that those who could benefit most from it consistently vote against government support. A very large segment of the American far-right is strongly distrustful of government. As one of the people interviewed in Hochschild’s book states, “Our government is way too big, too greedy, too incompetent, too bought, and it’s not ours anymore” (6).

Klein states that, “there is a staggering level of disengagement in democracy right now”, resulting from people believing the government is rigged (114). In addition to this, politics these days is often seen as “macabre entertainment” (42). The 2016 elections were primarily covered through an infotainment model which endlessly played up the interpersonal dramas between the candidates rather than delving into policy specifics (Klein 51). If politics has reached such a state, why would one still take it seriously? This, too, fuels the sense of disengagement.

However, for people who live in states like Louisiana, the stakes are high. Many far-right voters work in or run small businesses, yet they support politicians that back laws which “consolidate the monopoly power of the very largest companies that are poised to swallow up smaller ones” (Hochschild 12). Another issue—the main issue that Hochschild focuses on in her book—is environmentalism; in Louisiana great pollution exists next to a great resistance to regulating the polluters (Hochschild, 12). In addition to this, it appears that attitudes towards legislation in Louisiana are ambivalent; when it comes to “white masculine pursuits”, such as liquor and guns, voters oppose legislation. However for women and black men, regulation is much greater (Hochschild 68). For example, the prison population in Louisiana—with the highest incarceration rate of all states in the union—is disproportionately black. Similarly, the ‘don’t-fence-me-in’ attitude towards freedom does not extend to female reproduction rights. There is a great amount of talk about *freedom to* things—to own guns, drink alcohol wherever you please etc.—but “no talk about *freedom from* such things as gun violence, car accidents, or toxic pollution” (Hochschild 71).

Why is this paradox occurring? In his essay ‘Who Turned My Blue State Red’, MacGillis suggests that it is not about voting for or against self-interest but rather about voting or not voting; he argues that people in red states who *do* need federal help welcome it but don’t vote, and people “who are a notch or two up in the economic ladder” do vote but against the growing dependency of those below them on the ladder. This provides part of the answer, but not most. Hochschild’s study shows that those who vote against government safety nets often use them anyway, but they are *ashamed* to do so (11). Clearly something else is going on, too.

In his book *What’s The Matter With Kansas* (2004), Thomas Frank argues that people on the far-right are being misled and persuaded to embrace economic policies that hurt them through politicians’ appeals to value issues such as abortion bans, gun rights, and school prayer. While politicians’ may certainly play into cultural values, it would be too short-sighted to imply that those on the far-right are simply not well-informed enough. In addition to this, as Hochschild argues, cultural values could be held calmly and without the state of fury that she encountered amongst those she interviewed. What, then, is causing this anger? Hochschild argues that the key aspect missing in most analyses was “a full understanding of emotion in politics” (15).

According to Hochschild, the Tea Party is “not so much an official political group as a culture, a way of seeing and feeling about a place and its people” (Hochschild 19). In *Strangers In Their Own Land*, Hochschild has developed what she calls a “deep story” of the Right Wing South, as a means to examine this way of seeing and feeling in more detail. She states that a “deep story is a *feels-as-if* story—it’s the story feelings tell”, removed from judgement, removed from fact; it allows “those on both sides of the political spectrum to stand back and explore the *subjective prism* through which the party on the other side sees the world” (135). As will become clear, this subjective prism is essential in the formation of collective identity. The deep story “unfolds like a play, in scenes” (135). It is written in a second-person perspective to pull the story closer to the reader and create empathy.

The next section describes the felt experience of many (white, middle-aged men) in the Right Wing South<sup>27</sup>.

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<sup>27</sup> To stay as true as possible to the original source, the paraphrased version of the deep story in the following section is also written in second person. Page numbers are included for reference.

## *The Deep Story of the Right Wing South*

You are waiting in a line of people that leads up a hill along with others who are like you: “white, older, Christian, and predominantly male” (136). Over the hill is what everyone is waiting for: the American Dream. In your life, you have worked hard. You have waited a long time, and still the line is barely moving forward. In fact, in a way it seems like maybe the line is moving backward because it appears your hard work is never paying off; “if you are short a high school diploma, or even a BA, your income has dropped over the last twenty years. That has happened to your buddies too” (136). Generally, you are a positive person. You don’t like to complain. “You count your blessings” (136). There are many things in your life you feel proud of—your values and your morals, your Christian faith. It’s not been easy to stand up for these ideals because often, “liberals are saying your ideas are outmoded, sexist, homophobic” even though it is “not clear what *their* values are” (137).

Now, you see people cutting in line ahead of you, inevitably moving you backwards. Strangers who aren’t following the rules—women, immigrants, refugees—are suddenly being given preference from the federal government for places in colleges, jobs, welfare etc. The president, president Obama, is helping the line cutters, too. You didn’t see it coming when he became president but you knew you couldn’t trust him, or the rest of the government for that matter. After all, did he “get there *fairly*?” (137). Like the other line cutters, he must have been helped by the federal government. And the line cutters are out to get “their hands on your tax money”, aren’t they? (138). It’s people like *you* who made America great, but now everyone but you is getting ahead. You feel anxious. You feel uneasy. On TV, “Fox commentators reflect your feelings” (139). And still, the government is on the side of the line cutters. President Obama is saying that “these line cutters *deserve* special treatment, that they’ve had a harder time than you’ve had” (139). He is their president, not yours. People who you have never met are criticizing America. They are criticizing *you*. The government feels far away; to people locally rooted like you and your friends, Washington D.C., is a very distant place. You want to feel proud to be an American, you want to *feel* like an American again, and not like a stranger in your own land, so you try your best to bond with others who are close, who feel the same way.

Now, someone in front of you is turning around in the line. Someone who is ahead of you on their way to the American Dream begins to insult you: “crazy redneck”, “white trash”, “ignorant Southern Bible-thumper” (144). You feel extremely angry and resentful. You really hate these complainers who claim to be victims but refuse to see *your* struggles. You want to

say that you're part of a minority, too, but you hate playing the "poor me" card. There is no honor in that. You seek honor in other ways because you're losing ground economically, culturally, demographically and politically. Then, it turns out "there is a political movement made up of people such as yourself who share your deep story. It's called the Tea Party" (145).

A deep story resonates with many because 'feeling rules' are at play, on both the Left and the Right side of the political spectrum. "The Right seeks release from liberal notions of what they *should feel*—happy for the gay newlywed, sad at the plight of the Syrian refugee, unresentful about paying taxes. The Left sees prejudice" (Hochschild 15). At the core of the deep story of the Right Wing South is the aspect of deservingness. Many far-right voters believe that the American Dream is fair game; that anyone can get ahead as long as they work hard and live their lives as good, Christian Americans. Blue-state catcalls are taunting red state residents on the aspects of their lives they feel most proud of. It feels like what is "being given away" is "tax money to non-working, non-deserving people—and not just tax money but honor too" (Hochschild 61). In order to understand how these feelings are set in place, it is necessary to take a closer look at history.

### *Behind the Deep Story: History*

Hochschild argues that behind the disorientation, fear and resentment of the deep story, lies a historic "series of emotional groves" that are carved into the minds and hearts of Southern people through the lives of their ancestors (207). As she writes, "the past fixes patterns of class identification in our minds that we impose on the present" (208).

During the 1860s, the plantation system in the U.S. naturally deeply affected the lives of both black slaves and well-to-do white planters. However, the group that is often neglected in discussion about this period, consists of the people in between; the "poor white sharecroppers, small farmers, and tenant farmers" (Hochschild 208). The 1860s were a period in which the cultural imagination was entirely focused on the dichotomy of the dominant and the dominated, the very rich and the very poor, the free and the bound. For many of the poor white workers this created a picture in their minds of the "best and worst fates in life" (Hochschild 208). When the South was devastated by the North during the Civil War, Southern state governments were replaced with Northern hand-picked governors; they were in charge, they would tell the South what to do. Then, a century later, in the 1960s the moralizing North came in again, this time "sending Freedom Riders and civil rights activists, pressing for new

federal laws to dismantle Jim Crow” (Hochschild 209). The metaphorical line of those waiting for the American Dream was shuffled; the federal government was advancing different social movements and “left one group standing in line; the older, white male” (Hochschild 212). This laid the foundation for resentment that would become the Tea Party years later. Hochschild writes that, “putting the 1860s and the 1960s together, white men of the South seemed to have lived through one long deep story — a felt experience — of being shoved back in line” (215).

The deep story shows how collective identity among white, middle aged men takes shape and what this collective identity is based on. As stated before, the rise of identity politics created an increased amount of sub-divisions in the United States. However, for whites, identity expression quickly became an issue. White men, in particular, who were describing themselves as ‘white’ in the same manner of Native Americans or blacks, risked being seen as racist. And if they exclaimed their pride about being male, they were seen as sexist chauvinists (Hochschild 215). If these men wanted to find honor, it turned out there weren’t many places left.

Work was becoming less and less secure, wages were going down and “the federal government was giving money to people who did no work, undercutting the honor accorded to work itself” (Hochschild 216). Finding pride in region and state disproved successful because red states were seen as backward, and on top of this, it became difficult to live by codes of strong family honor, which were seen in a similar way. Even the *self* of the deep story—the optimistic, hopeful and good Southern man who identifies ‘up’ with the 1 percent—became difficult to find pride in, because “such a self was less and less a source of honor, it seemed” (Hochschild 218). The political far-right was the only place that seemed to offer them firstly, the financial freedom from taxes that would go to the undeserving, and secondly, the emotional freedom from all liberal philosophy and its rules of feeling (Hochschild 219).

And, then, along came Donald Trump.





## Chapter 3: The Middle

The previous chapter has shown the multiplicity of factors that structure the answer to the question of affective polarization as a symptom of a democratic deficit. Different historic developments are simultaneously influencing and being influenced by one another. After this historic exploration, it is essential to turn to the present for a clearer understanding of Trump's America, in order to effectively analyze the functioning of American democracy. The aim of this chapter is to look at *politicized group-making* processes; how white identity has been mobilized under Trump, which, besides the developments previously identified, has also led to the sort of antagonistic tribalism that we are currently seeing in the United States.

In recent years, the tone of politics—and like-wise the political engagement of U.S. citizens—has turned increasingly hostile. The President himself has not shied away from incivility. Continuously, he has fueled up emotional fury in his support-base and aimed his anger at all sorts of ethnic and social groups, claiming, amongst other things, that Mexicans “are rapists”<sup>28</sup>, while also calling for “a total and complete shutdown of Muslims entering the United States” (Berenson 2015). However, the use of such hostile language has not been exclusive to the political Right. In similar manners, Trump's election contestant, Hillary Clinton, lashed out by referring to Trump voters as a “basket of deplorables”, and calling them, “racist, sexist, homophobic, xenophobic and Islamophobic” (Chozick 2016).

Van Boven et al. claim that anger is often used a tool to get a population involved in politics. The relationship between polarization and incivility, then, seems cyclical to a certain extent; “Anger causes people to be more polarized, to see more polarization, and, because they see more polarization, to take more political action” (Van Boven et al., 2016). In other words, anger increases political engagement which is why candidates like Trump and Clinton are incentivized to actively make voters feel angry.

### 3.1 Politicized Group-Making

Trump is an “emotions candidate” (Hochschild, 225). With his flaming rhetoric, he “focuses on eliciting and praising emotional responses (...) rather than on detailed policy prescriptions” (225). In addition to this, Klein argues that Trump “entered politics by playing a

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<sup>28</sup> See “‘Drug Dealers, Criminals, Rapists’: What Trump Thinks of Mexicans”, BBC <https://www.bbc.com/news/av/world-us-canada-37230916/drug-dealers-criminals-rapists-what-trump-thinks-of-mexicans>

completely different set of rules—the rules of branding” (33). His brand is being above any conventions, being the ultimate boss, a real “winner” who can say whatever he wants, whenever he wants, and to whomever he wants (Klein 33). Similarly, Robert Kagan states that what Trump offers his followers is less about ideas and more about attitude; “an aura of crude strength and machismo, a boasting disrespect for the niceties of the democratic culture that (...) has produced national weakness and incompetence” (2016). As we have seen, Trump’s rhetoric, then, has been particularly inviting for those who have been upset by changing face of “their” country, those who were feeling left out by Hillary Clinton’s appeal to minorities. Rather than adhering to the “imposed” identity politics of the Left, if they wanted to, they could now choose to “live inside” the Trump brand instead (Klein 29). He spoke directly to their anxieties and then sold them the promise that “you too could be Donald Trump” (Klein 50).

This sense of unity amongst Trump’s voters can be identified as what the French sociologist Emile Durkheim called *collective effervescence*. It is a “state of emotional excitation felt by those who join with others they take to be fellow members of a moral or biological tribe” (Hochschild, 225). This collective effervescence can for a large part be attributed to Trump’s dismissal of politically correct attitudes and what they stand for. As Hochschild writes, Trump throws off “not only a set of ‘politically correct’ attitudes, but a set of *feeling* rules” (227). His speech is hateful and generalizing, which plays into “feelings of resentment and disdain, intermingled with bits of fear, hatred and anger” (Kagan, 2016). For many on the far-right, his clear dismissal of political correctness allowed them to both “feel like a good moral American and to feel superior to those they considered ‘other’ or beneath them” (Hochschild 228). Trump plays into their lost sense of superiority to tell them, as Klein suggests, “I’ll return your power to you. I’ll make you a real man again. Free to grab women without asking all those boring questions. (...) I will take away the competition from brown people, who will be deported or banned, and black people, who will be locked up if they fight for their rights” (90). His rhetoric puts white men safely back on top again. As Hochschild states, “while economic self-interest is never entirely absent” what has been particularly striking is “the profound importance of *emotional* self-interest” (228). And what we are seeing now under Trump, is that this emotional self-interest is *politicized* in a process of deliberate group-making.

In his book *Ethnicity Without Groups* (2004), Rogers Brubaker argues that few social concepts would “seem as basic, even indispensable, as that of the group” (2004, 7). We tend to view the concept ‘group’ as an unproblematic, taken-for-granted concept that is “apparently in no need of particular scrutiny or explication” (2004, 7). Brubaker, however, argues for a more nuanced understanding of the concept that goes against the predominant ‘groupist’ approach

that currently dominates in social sciences. With ‘groupism’, Brubaker refers to the “tendency to take discrete, bounded groups as basic constituents of social life, chief protagonists of social conflicts, and fundamental units of social analysis” (2004, 8). In other words, groupism is the tendency to view groups as fixed entities that are internally homogeneous, externally bounded, “collective actors with common purposes” (Brubaker 2004, 8). Brubaker states that, instead of resorting to groupism, ‘groupness’ should be treated as variable and contingent, rather than as fixed and given. Groupness “cannot be presupposed” (Brubaker 2004, 4). This view “allows us to take account of—and potentially, to account for—phases of extraordinary cohesion and moments of intensely felt collective solidarity, without implicitly treating high levels of groupness as constant, enduring, or definitionally present” (Brubaker 2004, 12). This is of particular relevance with regard to the construction of collective identity, and in turn, the role of collective identity in the rise of affective polarization and antagonistic tribalism; the last decade has seen such an increase in “moments of intensely felt collective identity”.

Brubaker argues that, therefore, groupness should be treated as an *event*, as something that ‘happens’ (Brubaker 2004, 12). He stresses that groups are “not things *in* the world, but perspectives *on* the world; [ they are ] ways of perceiving, interpreting, and representing social conflict” (2004, 17). They constitute a particular filter or screen through which the world is perceived. Like Mouffe’s interpretation of groups, her understanding of ‘collective identity’ and the role of ‘affects’, this is at the core of affective polarization. Political actors such as Trump appeal directly to these perspectives and politicize them. In examining polarization, the ‘groupness’ approach allows for a deeper understanding of how deliberate group-making strategies by politicians are driving the division further apart. As Bourdieu has argued, by invoking groups and representing them as always already there, political entrepreneurs can “contribute to producing what they apparently describe or designate” (222). Brubaker writes that “if we take groupness as a variable (...), we can attend to the dynamics of *group-making* as a social, cultural and political project, aimed at transforming categories into groups or increasing levels of groupness” (2004, 13).

In addition to this, it turns out that in the process of such deliberate group-making, very often “certain dramatic events, in particular, can galvanize group feeling, and ratchet up pre-existing levels of groupness” (Brubaker 2004, 171). What is often applied then is a so-called *politique du pire*, “a politics of seeking the worst outcome in the short run so as to bolster their legitimacy or improve their prospects in the longer run” (171). Framing, herein, is a key mechanism through which groupness is constructed (Brubaker 173). In the process of this, two factors can be distinguished; politics of resentment and politics of fear.

## *Politics of Resentment*

In her 2016 book titled after the concept, *The Politics of Resentment*, Katherine Cramer argues that “political understanding is not about facts [ but ] about how [ people ] see those facts” (210). Essential to this study is the way emotions create filters and screens through which reality is perceived. The perspectives that result from this determine how people “conceive of possible solutions” (145). Important to note, is the fact that groups often create these opinions together. By focusing on opinions created in and by groups, Cramer illustrates how “[ social groups ] blame each other” for the perceived threats to their own identity that they experience (7).

Cramer’s research project is located in Wisconsin. Over the course of her research, she interviewed a wide variety of people, and, as such, “opted for many occasional visits to many places rather than extended visits to just a few communities” (44). She divided Wisconsin’s 72 counties into 8 distinct regions, and subsequently chose 27 communities for her study (Cramer, 29). Her findings, in a way, can be seen as another deep story; one that focuses on the resentment of a liberal elite amongst rural folks living in the state of Wisconsin. Here, the deep story—the frame through which these folks see the world—is what Cramer refers to as *rural consciousness*. Her purpose was to “examine what this particular rural consciousness is and what it does; how it helps organize and integrate thoughts about distribution of resources, decision-making authority, and values, into a coherent narrative that people use to make sense of the world” (21).

Like the Tea Party adherents in Louisiana, Cramer found that rural folks in Wisconsin feel “systematically left out” of the centers of power (120), as well as “disrespected, ignored, and left to fend for themselves” (203). In addition to this, many feel that their taxes are not reinvested in their own communities, but went instead to “bloated government programs and overpaid [ yet ] underworked public employees” (148). Government is seen as “not functioning on behalf of people like them” (160). Additionally, “their views on abortion, gay marriage, gender roles, race, guns, and the Confederate flag were held up to ridicule in the national media as backward” (221). This sense of abandonment directly relates to the democratic deficit; the American government not being able to effectively engage a large segment of citizens, causing them to feel alienated from the democratic process. The fourth chapter of this thesis will reflect on this in more detail.

Cramer describes the frame of rural consciousness as a set of filters that highlights certain elements and disregards others (22). In other words, rural consciousness “screens out

certain considerations and makes others obvious and commonplace” (22). It structures how people think about politics. In Wisconsin, Cramer found the most significant filter to be the way people “understand their circumstances as the fault of guilty and less deserving social groups, [ rather than ] as the product of broad social, economic, and political forces” (9). Other social groups are *screened out* to be people like themselves. Racism underlies much of these perceptions. Attitudes about redistribution of government spending are based on a long history of racial discrimination and the belief that “some racial groups are lazier than others” (166). In this sense, support for limited government is often driven more strongly by certain attitudes towards recipients of government spending rather than by ideological principle; as Cramer argues, “what gets sold as support for small government is often something quite different” (220). Cramer argues that frames like the blame-frame show the way Americans “treat differences in political points of view as fundamental differences in who [ they ] are as human beings” (211).

The rural consciousness is a frame that particularly influenced the increase in affective polarization and antagonistic tribalism; the resentment Cramer identified in Wisconsin, directly relates to issues in American democracy at large. As a constituent of affective polarization and antagonistic tribalism, it is frames like the rural consciousness frame that easily get politicized by people like Donald Trump, through group-making practices. Next to resentment, however, another emotion is deliberately politicized: fear.

### *Politics of Fear*

Dan Gardner, in his book *Risk: The Science and Politics of Fear* (2009), writes that fear can very often be a constructive emotion; “Fear keeps us alive and thriving” (11). Unreasoning fear, however, is another matter. In the field of sociology, there is a broad consensus that “those of us living in modern countries worry more than previous generations” (Gardner 11). The idea of a “culture of fear” was suggested as early as the 1980s by Ulrich Beck and Anthony Giddens. In a 1986 book of the same title, translated to English in 1992, Beck coined the term ‘risk society’ to refer to a society in which there is a heightened concern about risk—particularly risk caused by modern technology—and where people “are frightened like never before” (Gardner 12). In Giddens’ opinion, the risk society is “a society increasingly preoccupied with the future (and also with safety), which generates the notion of risk” (Giddens and Pierson 209). Central to these definitions, is the idea that manufactured risks—which are considered to be the side

effects of modernization and industrialization—are, at least in the West, eclipsing natural risks (Beck 41). This has resulted in a “social production” of risks (Curran 47).

In the social production of risk, the media play a crucial role. Media are the site of the social construction, contestation and criticism of risks (Cottle 7). They are, what Cottle calls, the “prime site for the social definition of risks” (8). In the context of polarization, media play a very important role in shaping people’s perceptions of the world. When it comes to issues of fear and risk, Dowler et al. argue that media often construct a non-realistic representation of reality (838). Indeed, news media are far from passive conveyors of information (Sacco 146). With the increased privatization of the media, limited reportage time and competition for the most interesting stories have led to news reporting often being dramatized (Sacco 146). As Gardner writes, “Fear sells. Fear makes money. (...) Fear is a fantastic marketing tool, which is why we can’t turn on the television or open a newspaper without seeing it at work” (16). In addition to this, the line between information and entertainment has been blurring in the past years, leading to a new type of media called ‘infotainment’ (Surette 17). This type of news reporting has a strong emphasis on sensationalism and plays into the fears of its viewers (Dowler et al. 839).

This is essential in the creation of filters and screens through which people perceive reality. Gardner argues that cultural values are central to “whether we fear this risk or that—or dismiss another as no cause for concern” (16). If cultural values are held by social groups, what is known in psychology as ‘confirmation bias’ can be the result; “once a belief is in place, we screen what we see and hear in a biased way that ensures our believes are ‘proven’ correct” (Gardner 17). This, like politics of resentment, shows the relevance of frames in the creation and sustaining of collective identity.

The phrase ‘politics of fear’ refers to “the marketing of fear for political advantage” (Gardner 93). The role of the media herein, is crucial. Gentzkow writes that when it comes to polarization, the “growth of partisan cable news” (20) but also digital technology, in particular, is “widely perceived to be a big part of the cause” (2). Sunstein argues that the internet is a place of “echo chambers” where partisans will hear their own opinions endlessly reinforced; “liberals watching and reading mostly or only liberals; moderates, moderates; conservatives, conservatives; Neo-Nazis, Neo-Nazis” (6). Like Bishop previously identified increased division with regard to where Americans live, media seem to see the same development of increased segregation. Hochschild argues that, “compared to the past, each side increasingly gets its news from its own television channel—the Right from Fox News, the Left from MSNBC. And so the

divide widens” (7). In this sense, polarization is only deepening through the strengthening of frames and filters.

Emotions such as resentment are fear and deliberately exploited by political actors to create a stronger collective identity. This is what Brubaker calls politicized group-making. As Brubaker has argued, groups are not static things that exist *in* the world, they are perspectives *on* the world. Politicians appeal to these filters to politicize these groups. Politics of resentment and politics of fear can therefore be viewed as group-making processes that have driven up antagonistic tribalism and affective polarization. The next section will examine how this is done in more detail.

### 3.2 Tribalism

As mentioned before, affective polarization holds that people on both sides of the American political spectrum seem unable and unwilling to understand one another’s perspectives, and, in fact, believe that the other party is actively destroying the country. Where does such an unwillingness or inability come from? Hochschild uses in the first place, the concept of ‘empathy walls’ to explain this. As she writes, “an empathy wall is an obstacle to deep understanding of another person, one that can make us feel indifferent or even hostile to those who hold different beliefs or whose childhood is rooted in different circumstances” (5). The issue with empathy walls, Hochschild argues, is that someone can easily see what *others* can’t see, but not what *he*, himself, can’t see (82). This is a reflection of increased tribalism. The next section will take a close look at this trend, in order to explain the development of its antagonistic element.

In his book *Negotiating the Nonnegotiable: How to Resolve Your Most Emotionally Charged Conflicts* (2016), Daniel Shapiro writes that our world “is becoming more and more of a tribal world” (14). He argues that with the increased global interdependence and advances in technology, people now have more opportunities to connect with more people (14). A *tribe*, then, is “any group to which we see ourselves as similar in kind whether based on religion or ethnicity or even our place of work” (Shapiro 14). The essential element of tribes is that people feel a *kinlike* connection to their tribes; they *emotionally* invest in them (Shapiro 14). This reflects the collective identities that result from the aforementioned politicizing processes that Brubaker refers to.

With the establishing of a tribe, there is always an “outside” and an “inside” to the tribe, similar to Mouffe’s us-versus-them distinction. In her book *Political Tribes: Group Instinct*

*and the Fate of Nations* (2018), Amy Chua writes that “the tribal instinct is not just an instinct to belong. It is also an instinct to exclude” (7). She argues that any time a group feels threatened, they naturally retreat into tribalism by becoming “more insular, more defensive, more punitive, more us-versus-them” (10). This same behavior is what Shapiro calls the “Tribes Effect”. He argues that it is “fundamentally an adversarial, self-righteous, closed mindset” that keep people hostage to polarized feelings for hours, days, years (27). Through learning, modeling, and storytelling, the Tribes Effect can easily be cross-generational, causing views to be relentlessly resistant to change. This, then, further fuels and sustains antagonism.

Chua writes that, “the impulse to form group identities and favor ingroup members has a neurological basis” (23). The human brain is hardwired to identify, value and individualize members of the same group, while simultaneously processing members of ‘outgroups’ as interchangeable members of a general social category (Chua 23). The mere sorting of people into groups can already create a preference for ‘ingroup’ members, as was shown in a famous 1973 study by social psychologist Henri Tajfel. Tajfel demonstrated the autonomous significance of categorization in his ‘minimal group’ experiments which constructed groups along purely arbitrary lines. For example, subjects were assigned to artificial categories of ‘reds’ and ‘blues’ through random experimental assignment. This study shows that the mere perception of belonging to two distinct groups – that is, social categorization per se – is sufficient to trigger intergroup discrimination favoring the ingroup.

In terms of affective polarization, American partisans see those on the other side in a very negative light. Shapiro argues that the Tribes Effect causes one to view their relationship with the other side through an *adversarial* lens, thereby magnifying differences and minimizing similarities through the process of what he calls “a kind of relational amnesia” (27). Philosopher Martin Buber has also written on this subject, stating that such a process is a transformation from an ‘I-thou’ relationship to an ‘I-it’ relationship, whereby the other is no longer viewed as a fellow human, but a savage *it*” (qtd in Shapiro, 27). In line with this, Robertson, writes that the oxytocin levels that arise through group bonding spur “a greater tendency to demonize and de-humanize the outgroup” (qtd. in Chua 49); this *anaesthetizes* any kind of empathy one might otherwise feel, which explains why the empathy walls between different groups in the United States are so high and prevalent. Outgroup members in the United States are seen as ‘all alike’, characterized with negative traits or dangerous proclivities, and viewed as “less than human” (Chua 49). Again, this strengthens antagonism and puts strain on the democratic system.

When it comes to the politicizing of group identity, it is essential to note that tribalism distorts perception of objective facts. This happens through the pressure to conform, which



affects people's judgement. Willer points out that "through a cascade of self-reinforcing social pressure" false realities can be accepted as true (qtd in Chua 48). Chua argues that, strikingly enough, when it comes to factual issues that are considered to be politically controversial, the better informed people are, the *more* likely they are to manipulate evidence to conform to their group's core beliefs (48). And because people are more conforming to members of an ingroup, and much less with outgroup members, these ideas then get reinforced. Ingroup judgement is always viewed as the better answer, regardless of objective facts. This is what Shapiro calls the self-righteous aspect of tribalism; the "self-serving conviction that our perspective is not only right but also morally superior" (27).

With regard to the group-making processes, Shapiro writes that "people may cling to a *negative identity*; a definition of oneself *against* the other side" (88). Political actors, then, "impose an identity narrative on the masses to gain support" (88). They seek to mold the dominant narrative in their political campaigns by declaring "that 'we' must now come together to fight 'them' on whatever critical issues are in question" (Shapiro 82). In doing so, they press the masses into a singular identity by any means they can in demand for loyalty.

This seems to be exactly what has happened under Donald Trump; he has politicized his voter base by pressing them into a singular identity. And overwhelmingly, this identity is defined by one characteristic: whiteness.

### **3.3 The White Tribe**

Chua writes that "one of the most powerful forms of group-identity—and the focal point of political tribalism and violence all over the world today—is ethnicity" (23). When it comes to Trump, white identity is often considered a driving factor in his rise to power. As Hochschild states, "Trump was the identity politics candidate for white men" (230). However, writing for *The Atlantic*, Ta-nehisi Coates argues that the extent to which whiteness constitutes the blatant incivility is not addressed enough, in particular when it comes to the less obvious implications of whiteness on the Left side of the political spectrum. As Coates writes, "It is often said that Trump has no real ideology, which is not true—his ideology is white supremacy, in all its truculent and sanctimonious power" (2017). He has brought together a nation-wide white tribe. This is a very relevant argument, and while whiteness has already been explored to a certain extent in this thesis, Coates takes the argument further in ways that are essential for an ever better understanding. Therefore, it is useful to examine just how strongly *whiteness* functions as a factor in the question of affective polarization and the democratic deficit.

The Charlottesville march on May 13<sup>th</sup>, 2016 made very clear how deeply rooted white nationalism and white supremacy are. Trump himself responded very tepidly to the violence and showed clear sympathy with the pro-Confederate monument demonstrators (Mindock 2017). Coates argues that whiteness constitutes everything Trump does, which has become primarily visible in his negation of Obama's legacy. Coates writes that Trump "must be called by his rightful honorific—America's first white president"; he is "something new—the first president whose entire political existence hinges on the fact of a black president" who preceded him. Trump's commitment to whiteness is unprecedented, and "matched only by the depth of popular disbelief in the power of whiteness" (2017).

This is a strong criticism of the way scholars and journalists have explained the rise of Donald Trump. Coates explicitly criticizes those analysts who explain the rise of Trump by only looking at class and economics. He writes that "The collective verdict holds that the Democratic Party lost its way when it abandoned everyday economic issues like job creation for the softer fare of social justice". In this, the denial of whiteness as a driving factor is problematic, according to Coates. He argues that the fact that black people—victimized by the same economy, and having faced cultural condescension and economic anxiety for decades—did not join the Trump revolution cannot be explained away by looking only at the working class. This is a very convincing argument. It calls for seeing the creation of the Trump tribe as being constituted by something that extends beyond economic despair; whiteness.

The problem, Coates argues, lies in the fact that Trump's racism and the racism of his supporters is seen by many as something *incidental* to his rise rather than as something entirely constructive. Voting data clearly shows Trump's dominance among whites across class lines. However, his dominance across nearly every white demographic is larger. According to Edison Research, Trump won white women (+9) and white men (+31). He won white people with college degrees (+3) and white people without college degrees (+37). He won whites in ages 18-29 (+4), 30-44 (+17), 45-64 (+28), and 65 and older (+19). Coates states that "In no state that Edison polled did Trump's white support dip below 40 percent".

In analysis, however, it appears that whiteness as the prime driving factor of the Trump tribe is met with resistance. Coates states that, "To accept that whiteness brought us Donald Trump is to accept whiteness as an existential danger to the country and the world". He argues that the dismissal is very visible in the sudden interest in the decline of the white working class in comparison to black Americans: "Sympathetic op-ed columns and articles are devoted to the plight of working-class whites when their life expectancy plummets to levels that, for blacks,

society has simply accepted as normal”. He goes on to state that, “Toiling blacks are in their proper state; toiling whites raise the specter of white slavery”.

When it comes to the distinction between working people and *white* working people, Coates makes a very important observation. In response to a claim made by George Packer that “Democrats can no longer claim to be the party of the working people—not white ones, anyway”<sup>29</sup>, Coates states that the real problem is that “Democrats aren’t the party of white people—working or otherwise. White workers are not divided by the fact of labor from other white demographics; they are divided from all other laborers by the fact of their whiteness.” Furthermore, Coates criticizes Packer for concluding that Obama left the United States angrier than “most Americans” can remember, which according to Coates is “likely true only because most Americans identify as white.”

While the scope of this thesis does not allow for an in depth analysis, this claim raises extremely relevant question to which the answers might very well provide better insight in the rise of Trumpism. When it comes to whiteness, its driving force in creating division, hostility and incivility cannot be underestimated. It must be stated that not every Trump voter is a white supremacist. But as Coates writes, “every Trump voter felt it acceptable to hand the fate of the country over to one.” As this thesis has previously shown, race is certainly not the only constituent of Trumpism. But it certainly is a strong factor in the multiplicity of the issue that cannot be neglected. As Coates’ article shows us: Trump is a white man who would not be president were it not for this fact.

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<sup>29</sup> See Packer, George, “Hillary Clinton and The Populist Revolt” *The New Yorker*, October 31, 2016: <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2016/10/31/hillary-clinton-and-the-populist-revolt>



## **Chapter 4: The End?**

This thesis has sought to examine how affective polarization can be viewed as a symptom of a democratic deficit. Before this question could be answered in earnest, contextual factors needed to be addressed in order to show the multiplicity of the question. The aim of this chapter, however, is to specifically focus on the ways in which all these different trends and factors can be traced back to the workings of American democracy. Taking incivility as a starting point, it will be argued that focusing on this particular crisis only obscures more structural issues. Rather, it needs to be examined where American democracy is lacking, for it to produce such outcomes. As mentioned before, part of the answer lies in the inherent tension between capitalist systems and liberal democracies, which will be addressed through close analysis of Peter Mair's and Robert Kuttner's research into this topic. Additionally, this chapter will show how the American Left has been struggling to function within this very system of capitalist democracy, which will also be examined in more detail.

### **4.1 Democratic Breakdown**

Mickey et al. write that it may be “tempting to assume that the United States’ centuries-old democracy is impervious to democratic erosion, but such confidence is misplaced” (23). The authors argue that while the traditional system may look like it was built to safeguard democracy in all possible ways, the type of democracy we have in the United States by contemporary standard—a liberal democracy with full adult suffrage and broad protection of civil and political liberties—is actually a relatively recent development, and therefore not entirely failproof. They argue that it was “only in the early 1970s—once the civil rights movement and the federal government managed to stamp out authoritarianism in southern states—that the country truly became democratic” (20). A critical note to this, is that in terms of representation, the system is obviously not yet “truly democratic”—power imbalances still hold strongly in the United States, as in many other liberal democracies. However, in a systemic sense, there is something to say for the authors’ argument. With the 1944 Supreme Court’s decision to struck down the white-only Democratic primaries that were common practice in the South, and the subsequent decades of activism, disenfranchisement, segregation and state repression got dismantled. However, Mickey et al. rightfully remind us that ex-felons, who are disproportionately black, are often prohibited from voting and many states are experimenting with new voting restrictions. As stated, this raises valid questions about how representative U.S.

democracy truly is. Mickey et al. argue that “Still, the United States has been a bona fide multiracial democracy for almost half a century” (25). With the 2018 midterm elections, Congress has certainly become more representative; as Edmondson and Lee write, “the congressional freshman class of 2019 is perhaps best described in superlatives” (2019). It is the most female and racially diverse group of representatives that has ever been elected, and includes an “avalanche of firsts” from the first Native American congresswomen to the first Muslim congresswomen (Edmondson and Lee, 2019). But notably, this wave of diversity has been hardly bipartisan. There are, for example, only four newly elected Republican women and all of them are white.

What does this say about the functioning of democracy? Mickey et al. argue that under Donald Trump, the foundations of the democratic promise have been weakening. In the first place, they state that the established news media, a “critical component of democratic accountability” has been weakened, and is subsequently reinforcing polarization (27). They state that until the 1990s, most Americans “got their news from a handful of trusted television networks”, on which politicians themselves also heavily relied (27). Over the last 20 years, however, media have become increasingly polarized, too, which has made it much easier for people to seek out news that only confirms their existing beliefs. Mickey et al. argue that this can be seen as an element of democratic erosion. In addition to this, they argue that the “growing gap between the richest Americans and the rest of the country” has also accentuated polarization and can be identified as a symptom of democratic erosion because of the increased importance of money in wielding politics. As with the diversity developments in Congress, there are those who are putting pressure on this, such as Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez—whose policies will be discussed in more detail further on—but in general the influence of capitalism on democracy is very strong, as will become clear in the next sections.

This thesis started out with questioning incivility as a symptom of a crises at large. Giroux states that ever since Trump’s election cycle and subsequent presidential victory, “many commentators are quick to argue that Americans have fallen prey to a culture of incivility” (2018). This discourse of “bad manners”, according to Giroux, is presented as insight. However, in effect, it actually hides “the effects of power, politics, racial injustice and other forms of oppression”. Like Goldberg who stated that what is actually going on in present-day America is a *crisis of democracy*, Giroux affirms the argument that incivility is not the problem; it is merely a symptom of the problem.

In a similar article, Jones argues that “The call for civility, which by implication indicts incivility as a real problem plaguing American politics, elides the real nature of our ongoing

political conflict” (2018). She writes that the term ‘civility’ has become one link in a chain of euphemisms. Let aside the fact that ‘civility’ is a very ill-defined word, according to Jones, using the term suggests that problems can be solved with better etiquette. She states that “viewed through the lens of euphemism, problems don’t look like structural injustice, but like impolite language” (2018).

Additionally, Giroux states that “removed from the injuries of class, racism, and sexism, among other issues, the discourse of incivility reduces politics to the realm of the personal and affective, while canceling out broader political issues such as the *underlying conditions* that might produce anger, or the dire effects of misguided resentment, or a passion grounded in the capacity to reason” (2018). In other words, politics have shifted from focusing on style rather than on substance, while neglecting deeper dimensions<sup>30</sup>. Giroux re-affirms Goldberg’s argument that the real crisis is not “the breakdown of civility in American politics or the bemoaned growth of incivility” (2018). The crisis is the way American society has been inundated by “a toxic, racist ideology that oppresses and marginalizes black people, indigenous people and immigrants of color”, and how “joined with “a market-driven ideology that has enshrined greed and self-interest, there is now an extreme-right movement waging a sustained attack on public values and the common good fueled by policies favoring a financial elite” (2018).

Clearly, incivility itself is not the problem, but an outcome of the problem. However, if we are talking about a crisis of democracy, it is necessary to ask what *type* of crisis this is. Recent debate has formulated this as a question: do we have too much or too little democracy in the United States?

## 4.2 Too Much or Too Little Democracy?

In a widely-circulating cover story for *New York*, political commentator Andrew Sullivan argues that the rise of Donald Trump shows that the United States is suffering from *too much* democracy. He starts his argument by referring back to Plato’s *Republic*, in particular to a dialogue between Socrates and his friends where Socrates states that “tyranny is probably established out of no other regime than democracy” (Sullivan, 2016). The reasoning for this argument goes as follows: democracy, for Plato, is a “political system of maximal freedom and

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<sup>30</sup> This thesis has primary focused on politics at the national level. Further research could examine whether this occurs at other levels of government, too.

equality, where every lifestyle is allowed and public offices are filled by a lottery” and “the longer a democracy lasted, Plato argued, the more democratic it would become” (Sullivan, 2016). However, the freedom in this democracy is inherently unstable; over time, the authority of the elites will fade, “as the Establishment values cede to popular ones”, and as a result, all barriers to equality will have been removed and there is “no kowtowing to authority here, let alone to political experience or expertise” (Sullivan, 2016). It is here—where “the rich mingle freely with the poor, (...) the foreigner is equal to the citizen—when, according to Plato, the democracy has ripened for tyranny.

Sullivan goes on to apply this argument to present-day America. He states that the United States’ democratic culture is driven by what would be the “Founding Fathers’ worst nightmare”, namely by “feeling, emotion, and narcissism, rather than reason, empiricism, and public-spiritedness” (2016). According to Sullivan, the internet, in particular, is to blame for this. If it were not for “the power of the web”, Obama would never have been nominated for presidency, according to Sullivan. Here, we “lucked out” because Obama was “a very elite figure, a former state and U.S. Senator, a product of Harvard Law School” (Sullivan, 2016). However, when it comes to Trump, Sullivan is less enthusiastic about the “mass movement” that elected him. He refers to Eric Hoffer’s *The True Believer* (1951) to remind us of the dynamics of mass movement; how these arise from acute frustration, how they are “distinguished by a ‘facility for make-believe’” (Sullivan, 2016). And, what, Sullivan asks, could be more make-believe than a wall stretching across the entire Mexican border, paid for by the Mexican government? Or vetting every single visitor to the U.S. for traces of Islamic belief? Following from this, Sullivan’s final argument is that the only path away from this is to reign in “democracy from its own destabilizing excesses” by re-installing elites as “the critical ingredient to save democracy from itself” (2016).

This is a very strong claim to make. While certain aspects of Sullivan’s article are thought-provoking — i.e. the way he puts the construction of democracy to the test, and his use of Hoffer’s insights in the creation of mass movements — it is also arrogant and neglectful in certain aspects. In fact, at a closer look, one could argue that his entire line of argumentation is flawed; we should not speak of a democratic excess, but rather of a democratic deficit. Filmmaker and writer Astra Taylor critiques Sullivan’s argument by stating that in this age of populism, it has been fashionable for elites to bash the masses, but “we need more democracy, not less.”

Taylor states that Trump’s nomination as presidential candidate has “caused an increasing number of people—Left, Right, and center—to question the decision making



capacities of the masses”. In this regard, the crowd is being reconfigured back into its historical double: the mob (Taylor, 2016). This is not just happening in the United States. With Brexit, a single referendum managed to cast the United Kingdom out of the European Union, which was subsequently explained away as an electorate behaving “rashly ignorantly” (Taylor, 2016). Taylor refers to a *Foreign Policy* article by James Traub titled “It’s Time for the Elitists to Rise Up Against Ignorant Masses”. Traub, like Sullivan, argues that “it is necessary to say that people are deluded and that the task of leadership is to un-delude them” (2016).

The dismissal of millions of people as idiots, according to Taylor, is “not just overwrought but dangerous”. She states that the real problem facing democracy is not an excess of popular power but a strong lack of it. Popular political movements, she states, are not signs that people have successfully hijacked the system; rather, they are “signs that people have been locked out of structures of government” (2016). Moreover, the response by authors such as Traub and Sullivan shows “the contempt some elites feel at the prospect of sharing power with regular people” (Taylor, 2016). Taylor quotes author Jonathan Rauch who, writing for *The Atlantic*, states that mass discontent is a “virus” that must be quarantined<sup>31</sup>; but mass discontent, Taylor argues, has already been quarantined, which is why “voters on both the Right and Left are so pissed off” (2016). She argues that in present-day America, there is a near-absence in civic life of democratic channels that “run deeper than a sporadic visit to the voting booth, or the fleeing euphoria of a street protest” (2016).

This has caused the strong sense of disengagement that has been identified in the previous chapters as being at the root of antagonistic tribalism. In the past 40 years, a variety of democratic mechanisms and institutions have been eliminated; “we’ve seen unions crushed, welfare gutted, higher education defunded, prisons packed to overflowing, voting rights curbed, and the rich made steadily richer while wages stagnated” (Taylor, 2016). The system has not become more democratic, it has become less. Therefore, it is not mass discontent itself that should be criticized, but rather the legitimate sources of frustration, which have long gone unaddressed (Taylor, 2016). Michael Lind shares Taylor’s sentiment. He, too, writes that the problem is not an excess of democracy, but “a democratic deficit that has provoked a demagogic backlash” (2016). He states that there is a sense of powerlessness among voters, one that causes people to feel locked out of the system. If we want to avert this, the “answer is not less democracy in America, but more” (2016).

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<sup>31</sup> See Rauch, Jonathan, “How American Politics Went Insane” *The Atlantic*, July/August 2016 issue: <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2016/07/how-american-politics-went-insane/485570/>

It the light of the previous findings from this thesis, it seems indeed short-sighted and neglectful to explain away what is happening in the United States as simply an “ignorant” mass movement. The historic, economic, cultural and political patterns that have been identified in the previous chapters of this thesis show a political logic that is much stronger and relevant than authors such as Rauch make it out to be. As we have seen before, the developments that have given rise to affective polarization, the deliberate practices of group-making, and antagonistic tribalism can’t simply be diffused or ignored. Therefore, it is essential to examine *where* American democracy is currently lacking and *how* it is shutting people out of the system. This is essential to examine, because the United States is not the only liberal democracy currently under pressure. Other nations seem to follow similar developments.

### **4.3 The Democratic Deficit**

As stated before, the relationship between democracy and capitalism is a tense one. As Reich states, “conventional wisdom holds that where either capitalism or democracy flourishes, the other must soon follow” (2009). However, under neoliberalism, the fortunes of democracy and capitalism have begun to diverge. Whereas capitalism is thriving, democracy is “struggling to keep up” (Reich, 2009). This idea has been heavily explored in two significant books that will be discussed in this section; *Ruling The Void – The Hollowing of Western Democracy* (2013) by Peter Mair, and *Can Democracy Survive Global Capitalism?* (2018) by Robert Kuttner. The argument will be made that neoliberalism has weakened democracy, creating a democratic deficit that has provoked a two-folded response: a backlash against this system on the political Right, and an inability to function within this system on the political Left.

#### *Ruling The Void – The Hollowing of Western Democracy*

Peter Mair begins his book by noting that a strange “renewal of interest in democracy coexists with indications of an opposite kind” in which political indifference to conventional politics is clearly and consistently increasing (19). How do we square these developments? On the one hand, Mair argues that the growing intellectual interest in democracy can, in fact, be seen as a response to this very expansion of popular indifference (19). On the other hand, however, Mair argues that the “renewal of interest in democracy and its meanings at the intellectual and institutional levels is not intended to open up or reinvigorate democracy” but rather the aim is

“to redefine democracy in such a way that it can more easily cope with, and adapt to, the decline of popular interest and engagement” (20).

This is a relevant statement to unpack. Mair argues that this development is fueled by the way institutional reform and democracy theorists deliberately seem to favor options that actually *discourage* mass engagement” (20). This is the very approach that authors such as Sullivan, Traub and Rauch take in their dismissal of ordinary people’s participation in democracy as “ignorant mass movement”. As Mair states, “what we see here is a wide-ranging attempt to define democracy in a way that does not require any substantial emphasis on popular sovereignty—at the extreme, the projection of a kind of democracy without the *demos* at its center” (20).

A democracy without the *demos* at its center. This is where the democratic deficit begins. Mair distinguishes between what has been called ‘constitutional democracy’ on the one hand, and ‘popular democracy’ on the other hand. He states that, “On the one hand, there is democracy’s constitutional component—the component that emphasizes the need for checks and balances across institutions and entails government *for* the people. On the other hand, there is the popular component—which emphasizes the role of the ordinary citizen and popular participation, and which entails government *by* the people” (23). These functions are meant to coexist and complement one another. However, at present, they are becoming increasingly disaggregated. Mair states that, now, democracy is “being redefined to downgrade its popular component” (23). The analysis of his book focuses on the failings of political parties and is applied to a European context. Nevertheless, this conclusion is very relevant for what is currently happening in the United States. Mair argues that politics is failing in its “capacity to engage ordinary citizens” (26). As a result, the zone of engagement, where citizens interact with and feel a sense of attachment to their political leaders, is being evacuated (Mair 27).

A note to make to this is that Trump, in his political campaign, obviously managed to engage the “ordinary citizens”. However, as has been stated before, this primarily happened through an approach that appealed directly to sentiments of resentment and fear, resulting in the aforementioned group-making processes; the strengthening of the filters and screens of these particular collective identities. Anger motivates political will. Moreover, the wave of support Trump received can easily be seen as a *result* of the disengagement previously felt by these same supporters. The only place left for them to “go” was the populist Right of Donald Trump. The political Left has been unable to offer them any real alternative, which precisely reflects the democratic deficit. Therefore, disengagement is one of the central points of focus in Kuttner’s book.

## *Can Democracy Survive Global Capitalism?*

Kuttner states that in “some idealized world, capitalism may enhance democracy”, based on the assumption that the common norms of transparency, rule of law and free competition will promote democracy, but “in the history of the West, democracy has expanded by *limiting* the power of capitalists” (xix). When push comes to shove, Kuttner argues, it is a myth that capitalism and democracy are natural complements. In fact, Kuttner’s argument is that capitalism—and neoliberalism in an extension of capitalism—weakens democracy, and that, in particular, democracy becomes more fragile “when the economy deserts the common people” (258). This is echoed by Hedges who compares capitalism to a parasite, stating that it ravages the social fabric of, and ultimately damages, “the host that allows it to exist” (2018). This, of course, is a very strongly-worded statement, but one that does provide relevant insight.

Kuttner begins his argument by reminding us that, for centuries, the spread of democracy has accompanied the rise of liberal values. However, two ideals of liberal democracy—namely, liberty and equality—are in necessary tension with one another; “liberty presumably includes the freedom to get rich, but at some point economic inequality undercuts political equality” (258). The problem with liberal democracies, Kuttner argues, is that “democracy thrives to the extent that the raw power of money is contained” (284). With neoliberalism, the rules of the game became rigged; “against ordinary workers, consumers, and even potential rivals” (Kuttner 284). And now, the public systems of regulations and transparency that are supposed to keep the game honest are “increasingly corrupted” (284).

As mentioned previously, a central component to Kuttner’s theory is disengagement. He states that on any given day in Washington D.C., the city’s “luxury hotels are teeming with civic activity”, representing, at first glance, an Alexis de Tocqueville envisioning of democracy<sup>32</sup> (16). However, there is one notable difference, as Kuttner stresses: “nearly everyone in this associational paradise is in the top 1 or 2 percent of the income distribution” (16). What this shows, according to Kuttner, is that civic and political association have “all but collapsed for the bottom half, dwindled for the bottom three-quarters, and intensified for the elite” (17). Voter turnout in the United States has been on a steady decline for the last forty years (Kuttner, 14). This has directly resulted from the increased influence of capitalism on politics. As an example, Kuttner discusses campaign money, stating that it has “increasingly

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<sup>32</sup> In his influential 1835 work “Democracy in America”, Alexis de Tocqueville famously identified ‘the art of association’ as an essential complement to American constitutional democracy (Kuttner, 16).

crowded out civic participation” in a “vicious cycle” that grants the wealthy increasing influence and energy while ordinary voters are left cynical and feeling disconnected” (14). Only very few politicians—Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, to give an example—speak out against this and disassociate with the corporatist element of American politics.

Kuttner quotes a survey that shows that one of the main reasons for such strong disengagement is that, to many people, politics feels irrelevant. This, according to Kuttner, is largely related to social class; “Nobody in large corporations believes that politics is irrelevant” (18). The disengagement also becomes visible in the lack of trust in government, which has been falling for half a century. In 1958, 73 percent of Americans said “they trusted the federal government to do the right thing ‘just about always’ or ‘most of the time’” (Kuttner, 18). After a peak of trust in 1964, the rate has been steadily dropping, down to only 19 percent in 2015.

The increased disengagement perfectly aligns with the increase in neoliberalist policies, which were never required by the economic circumstances of the 1980s, neither was “the full deregulation of finance, nor the enforcement of austerity, nor the use of trade rules to further undermine domestic managed capitalism, nor the indulgence of globalized and systematic tax evasion” (Kuttner, 72). The only thing these developments did, was shift incomes to the top and disengage the non-elites, which makes sense considering how the policy preferences of the rich are “fifteen times more likely to become policy as those of non-elites” (Kuttner, 19). Mouffe argues that, “the unchallenged hegemony of neoliberalism deprives democratic citizens of an agonistic debate where they can make their voices heard and choose between real alternatives” (186). This is why agonism can quickly turn to antagonism, if neoliberalism keeps exercising its dominance over democracies.

What we are seeing right now is that on both sides of the political spectrum, the neoliberalist policies have created a democratic deficit that has disconnected a large portion of American society. This has been termed *the politics of excluded alternatives* by political scientist Walter Dean Burnham. Whether people vote for Clinton, Bush, Obama, or Trump, they “somehow get Goldman Sachs” (Kuttner, 19).

It must be emphasized, that neoliberalism is as much an issue on the political Left, as it is on the Right. As Kuttner emphasizes, “Democratic fund-raising operations have often sacrificed progressive politics in order to enlist big donors” (15). This speaks volumes about where the real power in America lies; “Democrats found it easier to move to the Left on an array of identity issues [ rather ] than move left on pocketbook issues and challenge the dominance of finance” (Kuttner, 8). The neoliberal shift on the Left occurred mainly under Bill Clinton, who “believed that Democrats needed to reposition themselves as friendlier to business

and tougher on crime and defense” (Kuttner, 150). To be modern, was to embrace the market (Kuttner, 151). This brings us to the issue at hand; a central part of the democratic deficit, is the American Left’s inability to provide any sort of alternative in response to the disengagement felt by those who feel excluded from the system.

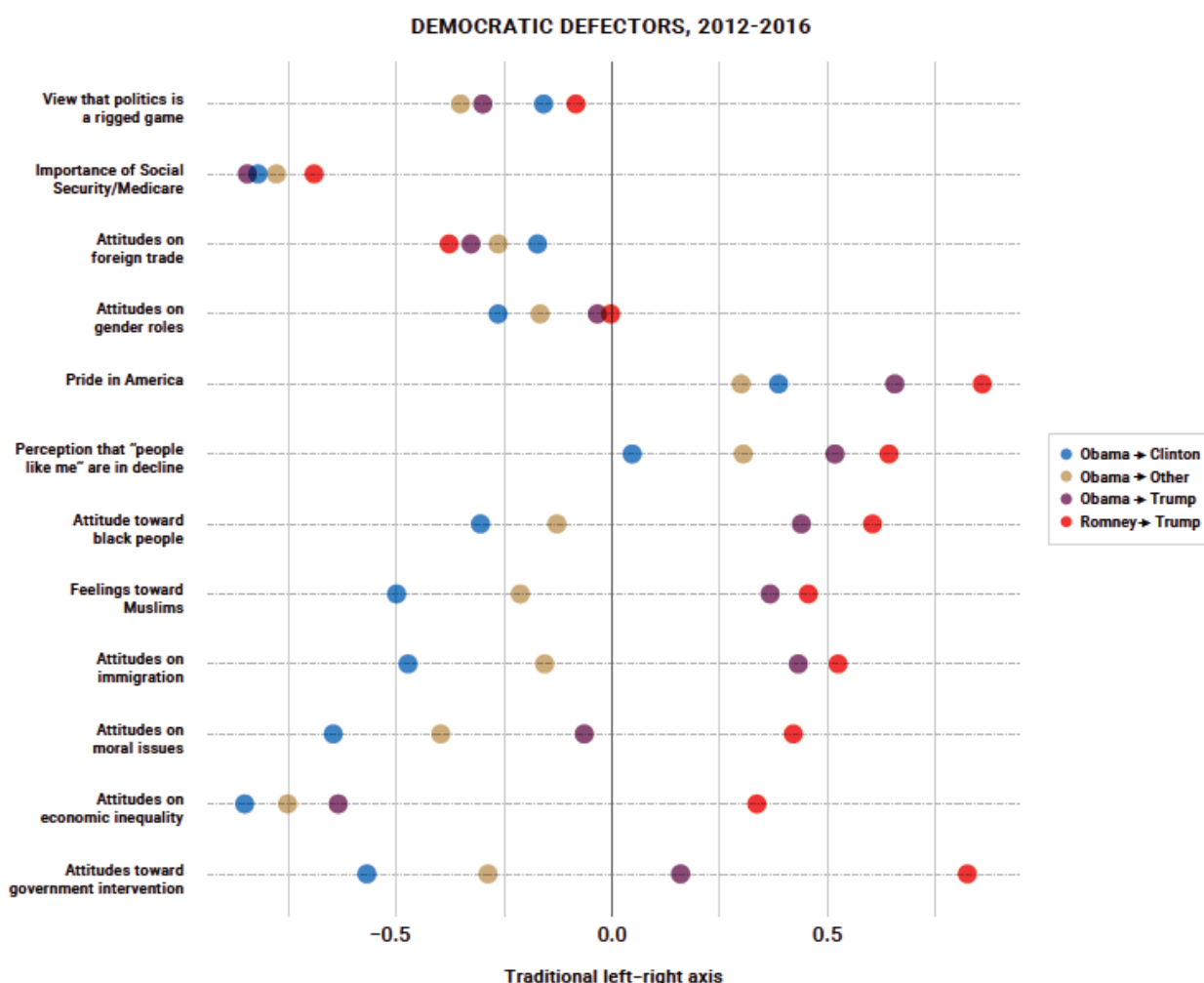
#### **4.4 Towards the Future**

The place where we might see most clearly what this democratic deficit looks like, is the group of voters who voted for Obama in 2012 and for Trump in 2016. When looking at 2012 and 2016, A Voter Study Group study by political scientist John Sides shows that “approximately 83 percent of voters were ‘consistent’ partisans—that is, they voted for the same major party’s candidate in both years” (9). But about 9 percent of the people who voted for Obama in 2012 did not vote for Clinton in 2016 and chose to back Trump instead (Sides 9). In a similar Voter Study Group on Obama-to-Trump voters, political scientist Lee Drutman plots the electorate across two axes: one that measures economic views and the other measuring views on identity. He argues that “the Obama to Trump voter was overwhelmingly a populist—liberal on economic issues, conservative on race issues” (13).

Figure 8, on the next page, provides interesting implications: the Obama to Trump voters looks a lot like the Romney to Trump supporter when it comes to attitudes toward black people, feelings on immigration, and attitudes toward Muslims (Drutman 15). However, Drutman’s graph also shows how the Obama to Trump voter is not very conservative on moral issues and looks like a Clinton voter when it comes to issues on inequality. The determining factors in the shift, then, were race and the role of government in the economy (Drutman, 15).

Bouie suggests that Drutman’s data show a portrait of the most common Obama-to-Trump voter as “a white American who wants government intervention in the economy but holds negative, even prejudiced views toward racial, ethnic and religious minorities” (2017). When these voters backed Obama in 2012, they valued economic liberalism over a Romney-promoted white, Christian identity. In 2016, the tables turned: identity became more valued over economic assistance. Hillary Clinton “failed to articulate an economic message strong enough to keep those populists in the fold and left them vulnerable to Trump’s identity appeal” (Bouie 2017)

In his analysis of Howard County, Iowa—the only county in the United States that voted by more than 20 percentage points for Obama in 2012 and for Trump in 2016<sup>33</sup>—David Wasserman writes that “the common thread of support for Obama and for Trump was resounding: anti-elitism” (2017).



*Figure 8*

This strongly supports Kuttner’s claims about disengagement. For those who did not vote for Hillary Clinton, Wasserman states that “Clinton came to be seen as establishment and dishonest in a year when a plurality of voters wanted change” (2017). Naomi Klein addresses this issue, too, stating that Clinton failed to be credible to those white workers who voted Obama and now voted Trump because she failed to acknowledge the neoliberal system she is a part of

<sup>33</sup> See “The One County in America That voted in A Landslide for Both Trump and Obama” <https://fivethirtyeight.com/features/the-one-county-in-america-that-voted-in-a-landslide-for-both-trump-and-obama/>

(92). She argues that Clinton's brand of identity politics does not challenge the system that produced and entrenched inequalities, "but seeks only to make that system more inclusive" (92). During the election campaign, Clinton may have mocked her opponent's "Trumped-up trickle-down economics", but Klein argues that it is Clinton's own identity politics philosophy that we might call "trickle-down identity politics" (92). She aims to change the system to the extent that the top of it becomes more diverse, so the justice will then trickle down to everyone else. But, as Klein states, "that trickle-down works about as well in the identity sphere as it does in the economic one" (92). Top-down approaches won't tackle any real inequality if they are not met with bottom-up policies that "address systemic issues such as crumbling schools and lack of access to decent housing" (Klein 93).

These are the ways in which the political Left keeps missing the mark. The financial crises of 2008 showed, more than ever before, how destructive the neoliberal system can be. However, when the chance came to make structural changes—take big money out of politics, increase regulation of the financial sphere—generations of people who had grown up under neoliberalism struggled to imagine anything new, anything "other than what they had always known" (Klein 219). Klein argues that since 2008, it has been "imaginative capacity, the ability to envision a world radically different from the present" that has largely been missing (220).

Kuttner and Mouffe come to similar conclusions. Mouffe states that "the most urgent struggle for the Left today is to envisage an alternative to neoliberalism" (220). Existing representative institutions need to be transformed and new ones need to be established, "so as to create the conditions for an agonistic confrontations where citizens would be offered real alternatives" (220). Such a confrontation, according to Mouffe, requires the emergence of "a truly Gramscian 'intellectual and moral reform'" on the Left. This is the only way to satisfy the "desire for a 'voice' for those who feel excluded and disengaged from the political sphere. Kuttner also argues that "stronger democratic institutions and a radical transformation of capitalism into a far more social economy" are necessary for democracy to survive (283). The credibility of public institutions needs to be restored, according to Kuttner. However, creating such a reality will prove to be challenging with the way capitalists will strenuously resist such a reform since it will "require them to give up too much power and wealth" (Kuttner, 283).

So how realistic is such a vision? Where might such a reform of the system come from? Writing for *The New York Times*, Leonhardt states that Massachusetts Senator Elizabeth Warren might provide an answer to this question. He states that "Warren wants an economy in which companies again invest in their workers and communities" (2018). Kuttner, too, is pointing to



Warren to kickstart the type of “progressive populism” that is needed. He praises the way she critiques, “in accurate, well-informed detail”, how corporatism abuses ordinary people (288).

Another politician many refer to in discussion about reform of the system, is Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, U.S. Representative for New York’s 14<sup>th</sup> congressional district. According to Barkan, Ocasio-Cortez’s victory over Joseph Crowley, the 4<sup>th</sup>-highest ranked Democrat in Congress, “doesn’t only represent the downfall of a political dynasty but a return of a certain type of local politician that had appeared to have gone all but extinct: the unabashed leftist” (2018). Her race to Congress, from the beginning has been about “people versus money”<sup>34</sup>. Ocasio-Cortez has rejected corporate donations for her campaign, and has instead relied on small donors (Wang, 2018). Most recently, Ocasio-Cortez is advocating a tax right of 70-80 percent on very high incomes, echoing Peter Diamond, Nobel laureate in economics, and referring back to the most successful period of economic growth in the United States, namely the post-World War II decades before the rise of neoliberalism (Krugman, 2019).

While the real consequences of such reform plans remain to be seen, Taylor is right to argue that “the only way out is the hard way—building democratic outlets for change patiently, on the ground” (2018). Unless American democracy truly becomes *more* democratic—through the strengthening of its institutions and a thorough dismantling of corporatism—the system might very well be in danger of collapsing in on itself.

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<sup>34</sup> See Annie Tritt for *The New York Times*: <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/06/27/nyregion/alexandria-ocasio-cortez.html>



## Conclusion

At the time of writing — January, 2019 — the United States government is in shutdown. The shutdown began on December 22<sup>nd</sup>, 2018, and became the longest shutdown in U.S. history on January 12, 2019 (*The Balance*, 2019). It is the result of an impasse between the United States Congress and president Donald Trump, who are unable to agree on an appropriation of funds for the 2019 fiscal year. A key issue in the negotiations is the funding of Trump's U.S.-Mexico border wall. On December 11, 2018, Trump threatened to shut down the government if the Democrats refused to include 5 billion dollars for the construction of the wall (*The Balancebar*, 2019). Trump has stated that he will veto any bill that does not provide his demanded funds; as a result, Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell has blocked the Republican-controlled Senate from considering further appropriations (Foren and Barrett, 2019). The shutdown has surpassed the 21-day shutdown of 1995-1996 under president Bill Clinton (Zaveri et al., 2019). Lu and Singhvi state that “the shutdown is affecting about 800,000 federal employees—many of whom live paycheck-to-paycheck—and services for millions of people in the public” (2019).

The current reality of the U.S. government shutdown affirms the implications brought forward in this thesis. The issue of the U.S.-Mexico border wall is very much a polarized issue, both politically and in public response; polling results by ABC show a 54% opposed response to the construction of the wall, against a 45% supportive response (Sinozich, 2019). Notably, Republicans are more strongly blamed for the shutdown than Democrats: in the national survey, 53% reported that Trump and the GOP are mainly responsible for the shutdown, against 29% who blamed the Congressional Democrats. This is nearly a 2-1 margin against the president and his party. At the moment, effective government is severely under strain, which affirms the argument made by Mansbridge and Martin that “the larger the ideological schism, the smaller the zone of possible agreement”, which discourages bipartisan negotiation (68).

Kuttner has suggested that deadlock often results from Republicans refusing to compromise with Democrats in order to strengthen their story that “government is a hopeless mess” (23). In the past, the “perceived failures of government served to recruit aggrieved working people first to the Republican Party, then to the Tea Party, and then to Trump” (25). With the public currently putting the blame on the Republican party, however, it remains to be seen whether these implications will hold true. Regardless, the shutdown provides a relevant starting point from where to begin to conclude the main findings of this thesis.

This thesis has sought to examine whether or not there is a crisis of democracy in the United States at present. It has done so by asking: how can affective polarization in the United

States be viewed as a symptom of a democratic deficit? The multiplicity of the issue has called for identification of various trends and developments that provide clarity and nuance in answering this question, rather than a singular, uncontested answer. The following section aims to summarize the main findings, conclude them, and provide suggestions for further research.

Center to the findings of this thesis has been the idea that, currently, in the United States, a “crisis of democracy” is being obscured by a “crisis of civility”. Taking this suggestion as a starting point, the main research question has been to identify how affective polarization can be viewed as a symptom of a democratic deficit. Historically, polarization in the United States has been nothing new. Yet, there appears to be something distinctive about the type of polarization that currently exists in the United States. Republicans and Democrats increasingly view themselves as part of cultural groups that are distinctly different. Moreover, American partisans increasingly regard their co-partisans in a positive manner and those on the other side of the political spectrum in a highly negative manner. Polarization is accompanied by an unprecedented degree of hostility. Negative associations with regard to partyism are significantly stronger than negative associations with race. This is why we speak of *affective polarization*. Additionally, collective identity has become increasingly relevant in politics. Over the course of the past decades, the accumulation of various intersecting historic, political, cultural, and economic developments has caused Americans to increasingly associate with people that are very similar to themselves. This trend is generally referred to as *tribalism*.

In what way do these developments inform us about the functioning of American democracy? In the first place, polarization causes concerns about negotiation and the risk of the American government becoming stuck in gridlock. However, on a deeper level, affective polarization can be viewed as a symptom of the weakening of American democracy. This is largely the result of the inherent tension between capitalism and liberal democracy. In the past decades, the overwhelming influence of neoliberalism on American politics has driven up inequality, tribalism and polarization, which has resulted in a two-fold response; a backlash on the political Right, which has become visible in the rise of Donald Trump, and a democratic deficit on the political Left, which shows the inability of the Democratic party to function within this neoliberal system as well as the inability to offer a real alternative. The intersection of the various systemic trends and developments that have led to this reality have been examined in this thesis. They bring forward the following implications.

The first chapter examined Gentzkow’s analysis of polarization in the United States. Polarization is not directly visible when looking at party-identification and self-described ideology. However, when examining voting patterns, polarization does become visible. The

share of Americans living in a landslide county has increased substantially since 1976. Furthermore, while self-identification may have remained stable, party medians are actually shifting apart. Parties have become more *ideologically homogenous* and more *ideologically consistent*. People tend to hold *either* liberal *or* conservative views. These results clearly show the increased relevance of collective identity, which is recognized by Mouffe in her framework of agonism and antagonism. In agonist conflict, the ‘other’ is mainly considered an adversary, whereas in antagonistic conflict, the ‘other’ is considered an enemy. The construction of a *we* is central to agonism and antagonism; without an us/them distinction, the ‘other’ does not exist. In addition to this, passions—what Mouffe calls ‘affects’—need to be considered as a driving force in the political field. Mouffe refers to Freud when arguing that affects can construct collective identity both on the manifestation of love as well as on the manifestation of aggressiveness.

Agonism turns to antagonism when one societal group is perceived to pose an existential threat to another societal group, and when resistances against the hegemonic order cannot find legitimate forms of expression. These two developments provide relevant insights into the present functioning of American democracy. Today, there is a strong sense among, particularly, white Americans, that their position in society is under threat from a variety of ‘others’. Moreover, government failed to adequately engage them in civic participation. Up until the election of Donald Trump there was nowhere to “go”—no legitimate form of expression on either the political Right or political Left, which can be traced back to the increased influence of neoliberalism. Trump, who is also distrustful of government and likes to believe himself above it, managed to appeal directly to this sentiment.

How did we get there? The second chapter identified several historic and structural patterns; the emergence of identity politics, the rise of neoliberalism, and the rise of white identity politics, in particular. Identity politics generally refers to the political arguments emanating from the self-interested perspectives of self-identified societal interest groups. In the 1960s, identity, and in particular *collective* identity began to take an increasingly important role in politics. The Democratic Party was the first to recognize the potential political power of using identity and politicizing it. Now, the GOP has begun catching up.

Simultaneously, neoliberalism was constructed in and through cultural and identity politics. It is a very profitable set of ideas, one that is generally expected to generate wealth for everybody in the end. This is the promise of neoliberalism. However, the neoliberal system has actually been driving inequality; the rich have grown richer and the poor have grown poorer. The essential connection between neoliberalism and identity politics is that neoliberalism has

always been a project of inequality. In a capitalist economy like the United States, the system is ruled by two conflicting principles for resource allocation: the principle of *capitalism*, which operates according to the marginal productivity of the free market, and the principle of *democracy*, which is based on social need as certified by the collective choices of democratic politics. Instead of generating more profit for everybody, neoliberalism has begun to overwhelm the democracy, causing a large part of society to feel resentful and abandoned. This sense of abandonment has strongly driven up antagonistic tribalism, and has particularly manifested themselves in the white, American working class. Hochschild's deep story illustrates this felt experience. A deep story can be viewed as a type of filter through which the world is perceived.

The third chapter examines this in more detail. Brubaker argues that groupness can never be presupposed, because groupness is variable and contingent, rather than fixed and given. Groups are not things *in* the world, but perspectives *on* the world. They are ways of perceiving, interpreting, and representing social conflict. The deliberate shaping of such perspectives can be seen as a political group-making process. Trump's appeal to *emotional* self-interest has, to a large extent, fueled the type of antagonistic tribalism we are currently witnessing in the United States. It is not about rationale; it is about the narrative. Politics of resentment feed into the sense of abandonment, while politics of fear feed polarization and disengagement. Moreover, tribalism distorts perception of objective facts; and, in particular, the construction of a *negative* identity—a definition of oneself against the other side—has proved to be a successful approach by political actors. For Trump, overwhelmingly, this identity narrative is defined by one characteristic: whiteness. Coates argues that the constitutive of the Trump tribe is not as much about being victimized by the economy, as it is about race. After all, black people have faced economic anxiety and cultural condescension for decades, yet did not join the 'Trump revolution'.

What does all of this tell us about the functioning of American democracy? The fourth chapter of this thesis shows that, in the first place, affective polarization needs to be understood, not as the problem itself, but as a symptom of the problem—and this problem is the weakening of American democracy. The crisis of incivility only obscures the bigger crisis. Rather than focusing on the style of expression, we need to examine where American democracy is lacking, for it to produce such outcomes. Recent debate has wondered whether we have too much or too little democracy in the United States. Sullivan argues that we have *too much* democracy; a suggestion that is largely based on the characterization of mass movements as groups of "ignorant idiots" that need to be curtailed by the elites. This is a very problematic argument,

not in the first place because it completely neglects the political logic to such groups which this thesis has attempted to illustrate, but also because, rather than a democratic excess, discontent to such a degree actually signals a democratic deficit: people have been locked out of structures of governments to the extent of a near-absence in civic life of democratic channels that run deeper than sporadic protests or visits to voting booths. Mair emphasizes that what we are witnessing in many liberal democracies, is a democratic system without its *demos* at the center. Democracy is being redefined to downgrade its popular component, resulting in a failing of politics to engage ordinary citizens. Kuttner affirms this, by arguing that the neoliberal turn has increasingly crowded out civic participation, with the exception of the elites. Neoliberalism has deprived democratic citizens of an agonistic debate, because the Left has been unable to provide any sort of real alternative to respond to the disengagement felt by those who experience themselves to be excluded from the system.

Looking towards the future, it seems that American democracy, in order to survive, needs to become *more* democratic—through the strengthening of its institutions and dismantling of corporatism. However, this will prove to be very challenging because capitalists will strenuously resist such reforms. Therefore, a critique of neoliberalism cannot be effective if it remains at a purely deconstructive level. True alternatives need to be envisioned, which requires a clear mapping of a reality that is radically different from the present.

One potential, radically different, step to take, is to adopt a more flexible perspective on democracy. French philosopher Frédéric Worms argues that democracy should be viewed as a process, a mechanism, rather than a goal. Systems evolve. Democracies are not static. Worms argues that rather than casting democracy aside as having failed, it is the very mechanisms of democracy that can be applied to fix the problems. In order to do this effectively, Worms argues that independent institutions need to be developed in innovative ways. Further research should be done with regard to how this can be achieved. Many people seem to have lost faith in democracy; however, the very failings of democracy also show its elasticity. The fact that liberal democracies are under pressure and in need of strengthening might warrant concern and fear on the one hand, but simultaneously invites imagination and vision on the other hand. Perhaps, this too, is just a matter of perspective.





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