

The political divide essay sample

Politics



Divided Government, Divided People

The American population is divided. While some may find this surprising and others may deny that the division even exists, current evidence suggests that it does and that it is a situation that has been coming since the founding fathers first set pen to paper and created the American constitution.

The divided nature of the political system, which casually enough is defined as a “division of powers” may have worked in harmony with the American public for the greater part of its existence but with the changes in political parties, interest group activity and the media in the past forty years we are seeing the American system and its political parties becoming more and more divided and its government becoming less able to manage the division due to congressional gridlock.

Part 1: America Divided

Whether or not America is in reality divided has been the topic of investigation in previous years, most specifically since the 2004 election. In fact, in the past decade neither party has been able to obtain a majority of electoral votes. Many say that this is the result of a culture war and a political division that is partitioning the country into two camps. The more the parties strive to achieve the majority they so desperately seek, the more divided the country and its citizens seems to become, with the end result that American citizens feel the need to choose between two contending cultures.

Fiorini, in change, claims that the division within American society does not exist to the degree that many are claiming it does. Although he does not

deny that political parties are divided he believes that a great portion of the American public actually swings towards the center on many issues, proving that it is not them, but the parties and interest groups that represent Americans that are forcing the idea of a division for their own purposes. Fiorini also claims that the media are part of the political divide. He believes that the media fall into the elite political group that is propagating the idea of a division on issues to further their own initiatives.

The purists that lie in either camp are the greatest to blame according to Fiorini. The purists are those that have very strong political views on particular subjects such as abortion, welfare and gun control. According to Fiorini, they provide the greatest incentive for the myth of the American divide. It is most often these people that bring the hot issues to the forefront and he claims that in actuality the general public is tired of a “ political order dominated by activists and elected officials who behave like squabbling children in a crowded sandbox” (pg 102). The end result is a general public disenchanted with the current state of politics and the pressure they feel to take sides.

Fiorini’s analysis of political parties, the media and interest groups provides interesting insight on the origins of the divide but his assumption that the American public has not already been affected by these factors and divided themselves is faulty. While political parties and interest groups invite divisions, and the media feeds these them with exciting news propaganda, it would be difficult to claim that a large percentage of American voters has not been affected to a significant level by these factors. That a great percentage of the population feels ambivalent to the highly charged issues of abortion

<https://assignbuster.com/the-political-divide-essay-sample/>

and gay marriage could be taking the argument to an extreme that is easily refuted by other analysts in the field.

Abramowitz and Saunders provide a critique of Fiorini's arguments also founded on public opinion polls and other investigation. While Fiorini claims that the great percentage of Americans are moderate, these authors claim that is not the case. While Americans may not be in all out warfare over highly public debates they do claim that, " there are deep divisions between Democrats and Republicans, between red state voters and blue state voters, and between religious voters and secular voters" (p. 1) They add that, " These divisions are not confined to a small minority of elected officials and activists—they involve a large segment of the public and they are likely to increase in the future as a result of long-term trends affecting American society" (p. 1).

Abramowitz and Saunders delved into the issue by researching ideological orientations on the 16 most important issues of the 2004 national election. They covered such issues as jobs, living standards, public health issues, abortion, defense spending and gun control. Their findings, although they do marginally support one of Fiorini's claims on the whole they refute the idea that Americans are on a whole not divided into parties, states and issues.

Research done by Abramowitz and Saunders does show that most Americans are ideological moderates. They claim that, " Only a tiny percentage of respondents in the 2004 NES survey were consistent liberals or consistent conservatives. Almost half were clustered within one unit of the scale's mid-

point, meaning that they took about as many conservative positions as liberal positions” (p. 3). What they did find is that while moderation can be shown in the American public on ideological preferences, the people surveyed were far from moderate when it came to their choice of political parties.

While Fiorini argues that polarization of political parties is something that only exists within the party itself Abramowitz and Saunders show this is not the case. They claim that the evidence from the 2004 NES survey, “ shows that partisan polarization is not confined to a small group of leaders and activists. The ideological preferences of rank-and file Democratic and Republican voters actually differed rather sharply” (p, 4).

They conclude that while Democratic voters were shown to be quite liberal, Republican voters had a tendency to be quite conservative. According to their research sixty-three percent of the Democratic voters choose issues that placed them on the left side of the scale, while seventy-eight percent of Republican voters showed a clear preference for the right side of the scale (p. 4). In conclusion Abramowitz and Saunders also claim that the evidence points to the increased nature of partisan polarization (p. 5).

In addition, the study shows that there is increased division between geographical regions and religious and non-religious groups. In the 2000 and 2004 elections there were far fewer contentious states to battle over. The Red states seem to be getting redder and the blue states bluer (p. 11). The polarization of states is also connected to religious divisions. Abramowitz and Saunders claim that their study shows a direct correlation between

state voting results and religious preferences. Yet they also state that, “ the most important religious divide in American politics today is not between Protestants and Catholics, but between religious voters and secular voters” (p. 12).

While Abramowitz and Saunders do provide a convincing argument against Fiorini’s assumption that the American divide is a myth created by political interests and exaggerated by the media, they do not place enough emphasis on the influence these groups have on the electorate. Instead they blame the American divide on social factors. They conclude that, “ Internal migration, immigration, and ideological realignment within the electorate are producing a nation that is increasingly divided along partisan, ideological, and religious lines” (p. 19).

Part 2: Divided and Dangerous

The American divide does exist but it has evolved from more than a mix of social issues, although they most certainly were a part of its growth. The roots of the American divide can be found in three areas: the nature of the political system, the growth of the media and interest groups and a change in a large percentage of the population’s opinion on key issues.

The founding fathers created a system of separation of powers meant to put an end to the tyranny of the majority, or government in the hands of a majority. Yet, historically, the system has best functioned when there is a single strong party to create popular programs and push them through with sustained majorities over several years. Even the founders quickly divided

into Adams-Hamilton Federalists and Jefferson Democratic-Republicans. For almost 160 years single-party government was the norm.

The last forty years has presented a different picture. Presidents are constrained by majorities of the opposing party in Congress and Congress is often in deadlock over important issues. As a result political parties are aligning themselves further from the center in the hopes that they will grab the necessary majority need to push through their policies.

The end result is that the strength of political parties is further diminished by a highly active ticket-splitting voters. The partisan nature of the two parties is resulting in the lack of the strong majorities needed in Congress to make the system work. Yet, this is not a deviation of constitutional origins. The people are as fragmented and separated as Madison may have wished but it then he could not have predicted the turn the political climate would take nor the technological advances that would appear in the last century.

The growth of interest group activity has only worsened the situation of political parties. They are valuable contributors to election campaigns and can exert a great deal of influence over politicians. Interest groups seek to call more and more attention to the issues that interest them. One of the ways with which they do that is to go through various media outlets.

The impact in the growth and importance of media, especially television, over the last thirty years has been essential in the importance of high emotion issues. High voltage topics such as abortion, gay marriage, health insurance, abortion, defense spending, and gun control are highlighted by

the media. In addition, the use of the media by the president in the past forty years has only augmented its importance in politics.

Conclusion

In conclusion, changes in political parties, interest group activity and the media have drastically altered the political environment that the American political system must function in. These changes added to the traditional setup of American government have resulted in the division we see within the American electorate today. We are in a vicious circle where as the government and political parties become more divided, the people become more divided. High voltage issues are heightened even more by interest groups and the media and the result is the growing division in American society, or the American divide, as some like to call it.

Works Cited

Abramowitz, Alan and Saunders, Kyle. “ Why Can’t We All Just Get Along? The Reality of a Polarized America.” The Forum 1076 (2006): 1-22.

Fiorina, Morris P. Culture War? The Myth of a Polarized America. New York: Pearson Education, Inc, 2005.