

# Book Reviews

## Review 1

**Title:** 'Why We're Polarized' (2020), Ezra Klein, New York: Avid Reader Press.  
EAN: 9781476700328, 336 pages. 23,99 euro.

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This is an interesting book for anyone who wants to know more about polarization in America. Klein covers various important polarizing theories with a focus on identity politics. He presents understandable theories, fascinating data in clear analyses and his personal view on how to move forward in a polarized political landscape. The book starts with a historical overview on how Democrats became Liberals and Republicans became Conservatives. In the following chapter, Klein devotes time to the Dixiecrat dilemma and political dividers after the Civil War. In chapter three group-thinking and out-group discrimination is discussed. Next up is an overview of group identity after which we continue with demographic threats to democracy in chapter five. Chapter six goes into the media divide and media consumption of Democrats and Republicans. Next, the question is raised if floating voters still exist and if campaigning polarizes America. The last chapters focus on structural effects of polarization on effective governing in parties, the House, Senate and Supreme Court. Klein ends his book with a chapter about his own recommendations for de-polarizing America. Klein's book is written from the heart but stooled on research and theory.

In this review I try to give an overview of the main concepts and conclusions of the book. If you are interested in polarization from an identity and group point of view, I highly recommend Klein's book.

In the first chapter Klein introduces the political playing field of America. Since 1864 Republicans and Democrats dominate elections. During this time, the now rival parties were more alike than they were different. Politicians were associated with a party because they ran under that party name, not because their ideology or policy reflected it. Democratic partisans could be more conservative than Republicans were and vice versa. As a result of party similarities, voters used to split their vote between parties for different political roles. They had no real party identity. In 1950 researchers suggested political parties should be more different from each other. According to them, democracy can only work when people have something to choose. Politicians did not support this idea. They believed national unity would weaken if political differences were sharpened. Clinton Rossiter even wrote in his 1960 book *Parties and Politics* in

America: “*There is and can be no real difference between the Democrats and the Republicans, because the unwritten laws of American politics demand that the parties overlap substantially in principle, policy, character, appeal, and purpose—or cease to be parties with any hope of winning a national election.*”. But the party agendas did grow apart and their respect for each declined. Current voters can name more differences between the Democratic and the Republican party than partisans could in 1980. Because choosing ‘your political side’ is easier, Americans vote more consistently. Not because they like their party better, but because they dislike or even fear the other party more. The differences between Democrats and Republicans stir our vote. We do not vote out of trust, but out of distrust for the other side.

In the second chapter are named the five big personality traits, open to experience, conscientiousness, introversion, agreeableness and neuroticism, the decisive factor for where we live, what we like and what party we vote for. Politics can be a big part of someone’s personality and image. This has been the case for a long time. After the Civil War the Southern Democratic part of America still saw black people as less worthy. They ruled the South with force. Republicans and black Americans were not allowed to vote. This sentiment was carried into the national Democratic party who needed the Southern Democratic votes for a majority. It might sound strange in today’s world: The Southern part of America was Democratic? Yes, until the 20th century when Southern Democrats became Republicans. When wealth redistributing from the North to the South would also benefit black Americans the Southern Democratic beliefs did no longer match with the national Democratic beliefs. National Democrats had attracted more black supporters in the North and did no longer need the Southern votes to get a majority. The Southern Democrats turned on their party and joined the Republicans who saw a chance to extend their supporters base by declining the Civil Rights Bill. This also meant that split ticket voting was over. The Democratic and Republican party had significant differences and thus polarizing began. Since this time, political parties and states are divided by race, religion and politics. The place you live and the people around you, are very much connected to your political preference.

The previous chapter already gave an example of group-thinking and dividing the world into groups. Chapter three goes deeper into this behavior. It is natural, evolutionary behavior. Belonging to a group is good for our health. We need our groups to survive. The related work: *The living and dying through one’s allegiance* from Blythe goes into detail about this phenomenon. We create groups for everything: sports, hobbies, politics is no exception. During political campaigns ‘being better than the other group’ is used to win votes. People like to win. Especially when there is a common enemy and negative feelings towards the other group. Being part of a group means adopting feelings and behavior to fit into this group. This means that our political beliefs become part of our bigger identity. Our identity is influenced by where we live, where we shop and work. When one part of our group identity is activated, our political identity is also activated. Politics becomes self-expression. That is one of the biggest changes in American politics, according to Klein. Our party identity is reinforced by everything that the other party does. It strengthens your feelings towards our group and maximizes the chance of discrimination towards the out-group.

Chapter four focusses on groups and how we process arguments and facts. As stated in the previous chapter: what we believe, tells us who we are. Because we live in areas with like-minded people it often means voting the same way and being part of the same group. People reason in these groups and communities. Klein gives the well-known example of group conformity with the Ash experiment where individuals who have a different opinion change their

answers because groupmates disagree with them. People follow the beliefs of their group because it provides them with acceptance and power. This is called motivational reasoning. Once a person is part of a group, they believe what they have to believe, regardless of counterarguments. Klein ends the chapter with the interesting conclusion that politically knowledgeable choose to believe what is profitable for their group more often than people who do not have a lot of political knowledge do. You could say that minimal politically interested people are less polarized.

Chapter five zooms in on two of the most important divides in America: race and religion. America is becoming less white and less Christian. This means that traditional Republican supporters are becoming a minority. Good news for the Democrats who have a more diverse support group. But it also pushes Republicans into the defensive and stronger identity groups. Losing power is a threat to Republican beliefs. Barack Obama being elected president proves the existence of a diversifying America. Back in the day when Republicans were Southern Democrats, this would not have happened. Obama becoming president was indeed extraordinary. Klein describes elections as a time machine. They run ten years behind the demographic numbers. Even if America has diversified, it takes years for political representation to follow suit. Klein dedicates Obama's presidency for a big part to popular culture. Media has embraced America's multiculturalism and makes diversity the norm. This new image threatens the identity of Republicans. And it is a real threat. Not because Democrats are better than Republicans, but because giving a group power you once had, costs you. This is a real loss for Republicans. Robert Jones writes all about this in *The End of White Christian America*. This Republican loss helped Trump become president in 2016. Trump said about race what other Republicans did not say. He took away the fear of Republicans to become a minority and shared their anger against multiculturalism. Trump presented himself as the savior of white, Christian Republicans.

Chapter six goes into detail on the different media consumption of Democrats and Republicans. A first important statement Klein makes, is that more media options and exposure does not mean more political knowledge. People need to be interested in politics to follow it in the media. People often watch political news to root for their party. Because of the media explosion, channels have to compete for an audience. Polarized media doesn't emphasize political commonalities, it weaponizes differences and creates a shared enemy. This not only divides the media landscape, but also deepens political cloves. Klein refers to research that shows the more media you consume, the more warped your perspective of the other political side becomes. Social media also plays a role here. Echo chambers make people more politically extreme. Not that people would become more moderate if they saw news from the other side. Contrary news triggers anger and polarization, not acceptance and moderation. Klein describes media as one of the most powerful actors in politics. They select our news and the frame we see it in. But what exactly is news? There is no real logic to newsworthiness. In practice, newsworthiness is a combination of important, new, outrageous, conflict-oriented, secret or interesting events. Republicans often say that the media is biased. But according to Klein the media is not biased towards the left or the right, but towards loud, outrageous, colorful, inspirational and confrontational politicians who active our political identity with their stories.

In chapter seven Klein makes the argument that there are little floating voters left. Instead of appealing to this small section, parties should focus on mobilizing their own stable supporters by activating their political identity. A political identity can be mobilized in different ways. But one of the strongest ways is to activate fear and shared anger towards the other side. Political

parties have lost power to voters since primaries elect their nominee and not the parties themselves. It has put more power in the hands of primary voters. Because primary elections do not get as much media attention as national presidential elections, people who vote in primaries are generally more interested in politics and thus more polarized. By result, so are the elected candidates. People, parties and nominees are all becoming more polarized because they want their party to win over the other party. I would like to put a personal nuance here. Extreme candidates can also tear a party apart. If Donald Trump would not have been elected president, the Republican party would have dismissed his campaigning style and blamed losing a winnable election on his polarization. However, I do agree with Klein when he goes into detail about the effects of campaign donations on polarization. Klein refers to research that shows that state donation regulations invoke polarization. If candidates have to raise their own money, they have to be more extreme to appeal to the beliefs of primary voters. Since voters are more polarized, so will the candidate's campaign.

Chapter eight and nine talk about the effects of polarization on effective governing. Where chapter eight has to do with the different branches of government, the ninth chapter does into the differences the Democratic and Republican party have gone through. The American political system is unique in the way that different parties can have legitimate control over the house, the senate and the supreme court at the same time. This can lead to difficulties a parliamentary system does not have. Power can change hands very quickly. Because of this instability, the minority party can actively not cooperate with the majority party to get American dissatisfied with this party and vote differently next elections. This could deliver them a win, but also make the country ungovernable. In the earlier days of America's democracy, the Democrats and Republicans negotiated cooperation by earmarking. This meant an opposing party member supported an initiative if their home state benefited from it. During these days, geographical identity was very important. Today this is no longer the case. Voters and politicians are too polarized and disgusted with the other party to cooperate. In the last year of Obama's presidency, the Republican party, who held a majority in the Senate, refused to appoint a new Supreme Court Judge. They actively stopped the president from appointing a new Democratic judge because they did not want to give the Democrats a majority in the Supreme Court. Even if Obama chose an ideologically neutral judge, they rather waited for after the elections to get the chance to, maybe, appoint a Republican judge themselves. This was the first time this happened, but in polarized America it is not too surprising. The Republican party did exactly what their voters would want them to; not give the other side an advantage. It shows to unfavorable effects of a polarized political system with multiple levels of legitimate power.

Chapter nine focusses on the effect polarization has on the structure of the Democratic and Republican party. The chapter on demographic threats already showed that the Democratic party has a more diverse supporters' group than the Republican party. Because of this diversity, the Democratic party needs to appeal to more different people than the Republican party. This means that the Republican party can really enhance and play into the homogenous identity of their supporters. Recent years show that Republicans have elected more extreme and polarizing politicians than the Democratic party has. I believe this is a direct result of the different party identities. Klein refers to research that concluded that Republicans prefer a politician that sticks to their position and Democrats want a compromising politician. The diversity difference between parties does not only reflect their supporters. Democrats use more mixed media whiles the Republican mainly follow FOX and local news. Republicans distrust media much more.

They value information not based on a mutual understanding of the world, but on whether it supports their political identity.

The last chapter is an overview of possible solutions for a polarized America given by the author. Polarization is here to stay, so says Klein. He provides different ideas for de-polarizing. I would like to discuss one of his ideas. Voting in America is not easy. To be able to cast your vote, you have to register for every single election. In my personal opinion, Klein makes a great point here. For a democracy to work, people need to be able to make a choice. We started with this wisdom in the first chapter. If people are not able to voice their choice, is America even democratic? Klein describes his ideas in small and clear steps. This chapter feels like a good end to all the theory he discusses in earlier chapters. Klein writes with a clear vision and light-hearted self-reflection and humor towards both the Democratic and Republican party. There is no best way for the American political system to work. We can only do what is best for now. And, if we do a good enough job, we will see today's successes ossify into tomorrow's frustrations.