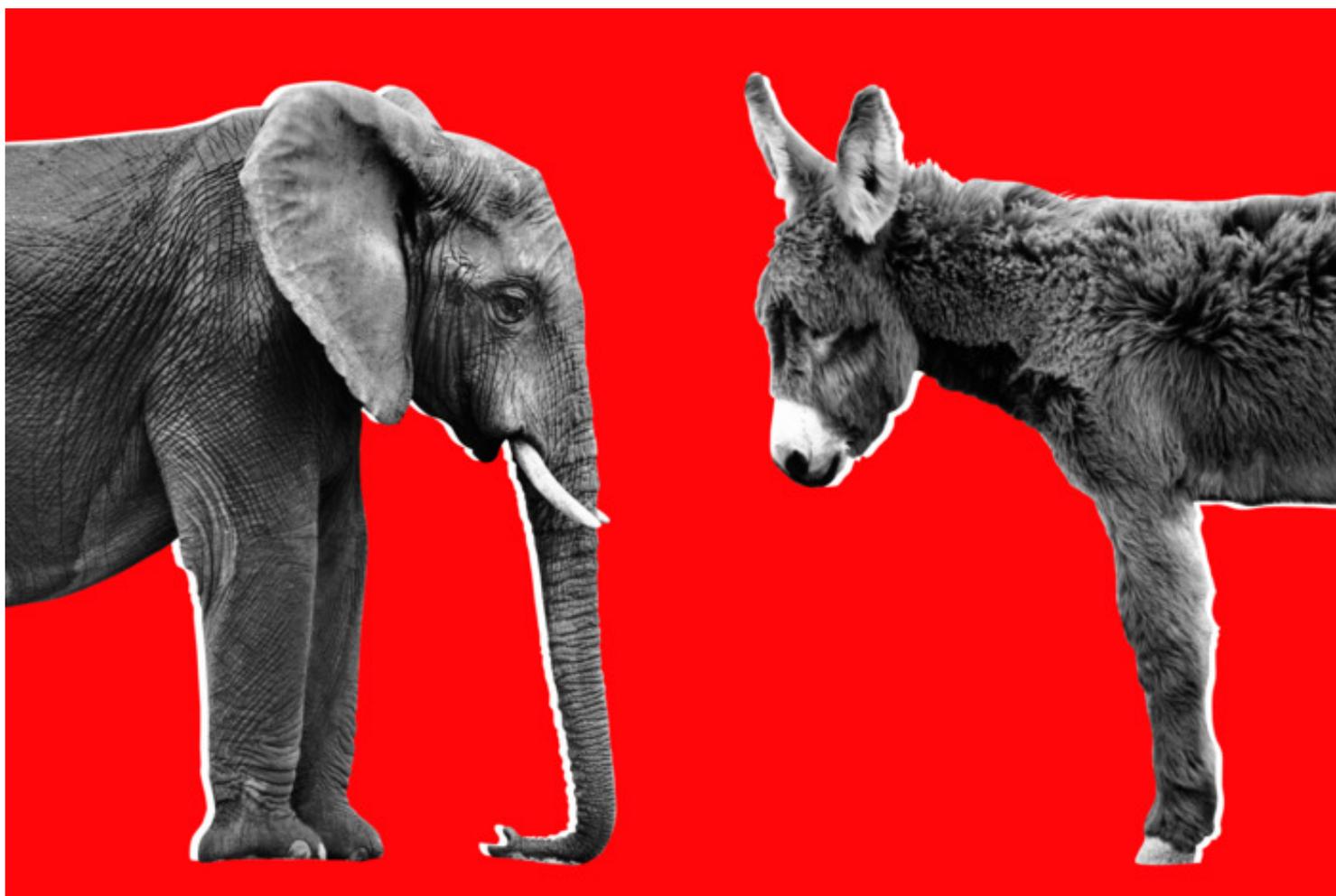


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# Voters, Not Just Politicians, Polarized by Party and Ideology

*By Ed Kilgore*

New Pew study finds that regular Americans are divided as never before by both party and ideology.

The political landscape in America is itself evidence of the reality and extent of partisan and ideological polarization. But there is an abiding belief among some academics and professional centrists that the warring tribes of Washington are fundamentally misrepresenting Americans who pretty much agree on the important things and wonder why we can't just all get along.

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government, race, immigration, national security, environmental protection and other areas – reached record levels during Barack Obama’s presidency. In Donald Trump’s first year as president, these gaps have grown even larger.

And the magnitude of these differences dwarfs other divisions in society, along such lines as gender, race and ethnicity, religious observance or education.

Much of the Pew data reinforces the hypothesis that we are experiencing the tail end of what one influential analyst called “The Partisan Sort,” the drift of liberals toward the Democratic Party and conservatives toward the Republican Party, severing ancient partisan ties based on ethnic loyalties and events as remote as the Great Depression or even the U.S. Civil War. Here’s one particularly rich finding:

[I]n 1994 there was substantially more overlap between the two partisan groups than there is today: Just 64% of Republicans were to the right of the median Democrat, while 70% of Democrats were to the left of the median Republican. Put differently, in 1994 23% of Republicans were *more liberal* than the median Democrat; while 17% of Democrats were *more conservative* than the median Republican. Today, those numbers are just 1% and 3%, respectively.

In other words, rank-and-file voters are separating into their “natural” parties just as much as are their representatives in Congress.

The murkier question about polarization is whether voters are becoming more extreme in their ideological leanings, not just following them into one party or the other. But Pew suggests our more consistently conservative and liberal party groupings are also becoming more liberal and conservative as they sort.

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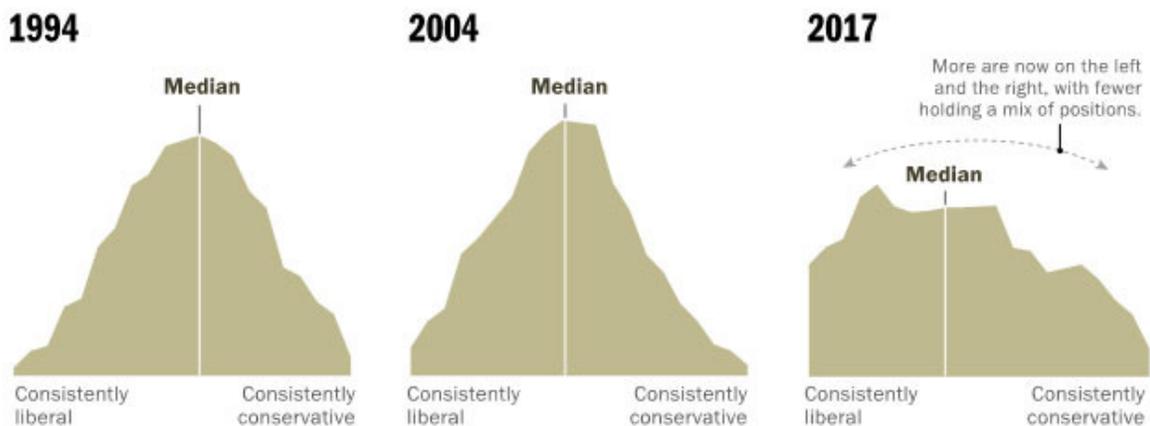
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### A declining share of Americans holds a mix of liberal and conservative views

*Distribution of the public on a 10-item scale of political values*



Notes: Ideological consistency based on a scale of 10 political values questions (see methodology).  
Source: Survey conducted June 8-18, 2017.

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There are obviously multiple ways to look at these phenomena. The most common is to wring hands and deplore both partisan and ideological polarization as preventing things from

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Still another approach is to examine the structural impediments to “getting things done” that don’t depend on a return to a lost, bipartisan “paradise,” whether it’s the filibuster, the creaky procedures for enacting legislation, or the dependence of the federal government on states and localities to implement national policies. Perhaps Democrats are presently rejoicing at the trouble Republicans are having in implementing a party agenda while controlling Congress and the presidency, but this ongoing fiasco also illustrates that “polarization” is not the only problem bedeviling democracy.

Love it or hate it, though, polarization is real, it isn’t a purely Washington phenomenon, and there’s no reason to think it’s going away any time soon.

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