

Stone Soup Forum ... February 29th, 2020 ... With a lead-in presentation by William Young

The book that will be introduced and discussed on February 29th 2020 is entitled, Why We're Polarized, by Ezra Klein. It is published by Avid Reader Press, copyright 2020. It is available through Amazon, if you wish to order a copy.

The book introduction will be about 15 minutes, after which aspects of the book will be open for discussion. The discussion will range both tightly over topics covered in the book, as well as broadly over tangentially-related topics that come up as perspectives about the book are shared. Participants are encouraged to read the book, or in lieu of that, to read the following summary. Neither is really needed to enjoy the lively discussion that will evolve over soup, bread/butter in the enjoyable company of others.

So ... The following is the verbatim summary of the first half of the book by the author from pages 135-137 of the book.

“What I’ve tried to do in the first half of this book is build a model of what’s driven American politics into its current place of bitter polarization. Let’s take a moment to put it all together.

The human mind is exquisitely tuned to group affiliation and group difference. It takes almost nothing for us to form a group identity, and once it happens, we naturally assume ourselves in competition with other groups. The deeper our commitment to our group becomes, the more determined we become to make sure our group wins. Making matters worse, winning is positional, not material; we often prefer outcomes that are worse for everyone so long as they maximize our group’s advantage over other groups.

The parties used to be scrambled, both ideologically and demographically, in ways that curbed their power as identities and lowered the partisan stakes of politics. But these ideologically mixed parties were an unstable equilibrium reflecting America’s peculiar, and often abhorrent, racial politics. The success of the civil rights movement, and its alliance with the national Democratic Party, broke that equilibrium, destroyed the Dixiecrat wing of the Democratic Party, and triggered an era of partisan **sorting**.

That sorting has been ideological. Democrat now means liberal and Republican now means conservative in a way that wasn’t true in, say, 1955. The rise in partisanship is, in part, a rational response to the rise in party difference – if the two sides hated and feared each other less fifty years ago, well, they makes sense; they were more similar fifty years ago.

But that sorting has also been demographic. Today, the parties are sharply split across racial, religious, geographic, cultural, and psychological lines. There are many, many powerful identities lurking in that list, and they are fusing together, stacking atop one another, so a conflict or threat that activates one activates all. And since these mega-identities stretch across so many aspects of our society, they are constantly being activated, and that means they are constantly being reinforced.

All this is happening in an era of profound, powerful social change. A majority of infants born today are nonwhite. The fastest –growing religious identity is no religious identity at all. Women make up majorities on college campuses. Soon, a record proportion of America’s population will be foreign born. Groups that are rising in power want their needs reflected in politics and culture, groups that feel themselves losing power want to protect the status and privileges they’ve had, and this conflict is sorting itself neatly into two parties. Obama’s presidency was an example of the younger, more diverse coalition taking power; Trump’s presidency represented the older, whiter coalition taking it back.

The second half of the book is about the relationship between a more polarized public and more polarized political institutions. In particular, I want to show the feedback loop of polarization: institutions polarize to appeal to a more polarized public, which further polarizes the public, which forces the institutions to polarize further, and so on.

Polarization isn't something that happened to American politics. It's something that's happening to American politics. And it's getting worse."