Why such an imperfect union?

US political dysfunctionality is often put down to partisanship and polarisation. But that ignores the actual issues at stake

The 2020 election was the most traumatic and dangerous in modern American history. Its legitimacy was indefensibly questioned by Republican elites and voters, helping to motivate an insurrection designed to block its outcome.

What explains the diametrically opposed narratives of the 2020 election advanced by Republicans and Democrats and the broader democratic dysfunction of which this is a manifestation? One common explanation focuses on 'hyper-partisanship' and polarisation.

In the decades following World War II in the United States, party identification and voter loyalty were relatively weak, Democratic and Republican voters and elites relatively ideologically heterogenous, and vote-switching or split-ticket voting (choosing different parties in national and state-level elections) relatively common. By the early 21st century, however, the situation had changed dramatically: partisan identities had become deeply felt and entrenched, Democratic and Republican elites and voters had become more ideologically homogenous and distinct from each other, and vote-switching and split-ticketing voting had become relatively uncommon.

Scholars and commentators argue these trends have led Democratic and Republican partisans to view each other as dangerous or threatening, rather than simply people with different political views and preferences, caused anger and resentment to become the dominant features of political discourse and interactions, and turned politics into a zero-sum game where compromise is anathema. In such hyper-partisan, polarised contexts extremism can thrive and anti-democratic moves against opponents seem acceptable or even necessary.

While there is no doubt that partisanship and polarisation have grown at the same time as American democracy has run into increasing difficulties, correlation does not equal causality. Indeed, as Hans Kundnani and I

argue in a recent article, a comparison with western Europe makes clear that partisanship and polarisation *alone* are not necessarily a threat to democracy. We need to go beyond these trends if we want to understand democratic dysfunction in the US and elsewhere today.

'Strongly aligned'

During the post-war decades, west-European party systems were dominated by social-democratic, socialist or labour parties on the left and Christian-democratic or conservative parties on the right. These parties offered voters relatively clear, consistent and distinct policy profiles. In addition, both mainstream parties of the left and right were organisationally strong and had extensive ties to civil-society associations and interest groups (most notably unions for the left and business organisations on the right). These bonds helped mobilise voters at election time and maintained their loyalty between elections.

Partisanship in post-war western Europe was accordingly high. Voters were, as scholars put it, 'strongly aligned' with their respective parties. Indeed it was not uncommon, particularly on the left, for party membership to be viewed as part of one's personal identity — as many observers bemoan has become the case in the US today.

Paradoxically then, many things which observers of the US case view as dangerous today — strong, clearly differentiated parties, intense partisanship (even to the point of an identity rather than a mere affiliation) and low vote-switching — were not dangerous to democracy in western Europe.

Also, as in contemporary America, the combination of relatively clear party profiles, strong party organisations and high political partisanship made post-war west-European voting patterns quite stable: the mainstream parties consistently garnered the votes of the vast majority of voters and electoral volatility — party-switching by voters from one election to the next — was comparatively low.

As one representative study of the post-war decades noted, 'the electoral strength of most parties ... since the war has changed very little from election to election'. Indeed, west-European party systems and the voting patterns of various groups were so stable that in their 1967 classic, *Party Systems and Voter Alignments*, Stein Rokkan and Seymour Martin Lipset

famously called them ‘frozen’.

Paradoxically then, many things which observers of the US case view as dangerous today — strong, clearly differentiated parties, intense partisanship (even to the point of an identity rather than a mere affiliation) and low vote-switching — were not dangerous to democracy in western Europe. Indeed, scholars of west-European politics view post-war party systems as a crucial *contributor* to the reconstruction and stabilisation of democracy there after 1945. Reflecting this, as these features of west-European party systems began to *decline* during the late 20th century — with partisanship decreasing, mainstream parties of the left and right converging and electoral volatility increasing — many such democracies ran into increasing problems.

Different trends, similar outcomes

Over past decades, in other words, the US and western Europe have experienced very different political trends, with increasing partisanship and polarisation in the former and diminishing partisanship and polarisation between mainstream left and right parties in the latter. Yet the contemporary political outcomes — rising populism and growing democratic dissatisfaction — have been similar.

If the extent of partisanship and polarisation *alone* cannot explain democracy’s problems, what can? One obvious potential candidate is the nature of the issues around which political competition pivots.

During the post-war period, political competition between parties of the left and right in western Europe focused primarily on the economy. Mainstream left and right parties accepted the capitalist rules of the game but within these parameters offered relatively clear and distinct policy profiles — the former favouring a larger, more active state, higher social spending and the public provision of key goods, such as education and healthcare, the latter supporting freer markets, a smaller state and a greater role for families, as well as religious and private charitable organisations, in social provision.

Partisanship rooted in such issues and polarisation around them were not problematic for democracy. The questions at stake were of a ‘more or less’ or ‘sooner or later’ nature and could be handled via compromise and bargaining — in some countries with the additional stabiliser of ‘social dialogue’ between trade unions and employers’ organisations.

In short, although one can

Political competition which focuses on cultural issues, on the other hand, may be more

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problematic for democracy. Such issues touch directly on questions of morality and identity and have a 'binary' or zero-sum quality, which makes compromise and bargaining difficult. For a variety of reasons, including a convergence in the economic-policy profiles of mainstream parties of the left and right, during the late 20th century political competition in Europe shifted from primarily focusing on economic concerns, increasingly foregrounding cultural issues such as national identity and immigration.

In the US, of course, a growing emphasis on cultural issues was even clearer. Indeed, today the Democratic and Republican parties offer voters dramatically different views of what it means to be American (and 'un-American'), of what their nation's history represents and what its core values should be. Partisanship rooted in such issues and polarisation around them makes it easy to demonise opponents and justify illiberal and even anti-democratic actions against them.

Recipe for breakdown

In short, although one can understand why so many observers bemoan the partisanship and polarisation characterising US politics today, focusing on them alone can lead us astray. Comparison with western Europe's experience indicates we should look past the extent or *quantity* of partisanship and polarisation to consider its nature or *quality*.

When political competition focuses primarily on issues over which bargaining and compromise are possible, strong party loyalties and clearly differentiated parties are compatible with — indeed can strengthen — democracy, motivating citizens to vote and making it easier for them to hold politicians and parties accountable. But when politics becomes dominated by issues of a moral or zero-sum nature, opponents can easily appear threatening and the loss of elections dangerous.

In such a context, profoundly held political loyalties and deeply differentiated parties can be a recipe for democratic dysfunction and even breakdown.

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