

BILL BISHOP

From The Big Sort

Although Americans are not aware of it, we are "forming tribes," observes Bill Bishop. If he were writing about people getting their news from cable television or the Internet, he'd call it narrowcasting. If Bishop's topic involved political parties, he'd use the term party polarization. But the author is commenting about a "sort" that's much more measurable and spatial. Americans choose to move to states, cities, towns, neighborhoods that contain people who are similar to them in attitudes. Aided by the demographic analysis of Robert Cushing, Bishop finds that places differ in their likes and dislikes. Maybe it's not a 100% conscious choice when loading the moving van to head out to a new locale. But for many folks, moving to another part of the nation—even to a particular neighborhood—is not heading out to parts unknown. Perhaps the U.S. embraces diversity in a broad way, but in individuals' own lives, likeness is sought. How do people know where to find those who share their norms and values? Bishop says that people just know: "... you get a vibe." The implications of this "big sort" are, well, big for politics, with many fewer competitive congressional districts now than in the past. For example, in mid-2015, The Cook Political Report found that only 56 out of 435 House of Representatives seats could be termed competitive for 2016, with Larry Sabato's Crystal Ball citing a similar number of seats that are up for grabs. Returning to the demographic facts, you can test Bishop's thesis by looking at the university you chose to attend, the city you moved to, and the neighborhood in which you settled. Is it a good fit for your attitudes and beliefs? Cats and dogs figure into the statistics, too.

THE "RED" AND "BLUE" STATES shown on television maps during the past several national elections depict a country in a static standoff. On this scale, politics is a game of Risk. What will it take for Republicans to capture Michigan? For Democrats to regain Ohio? But people don't live in states. They live in communities. And those communities are not close to being in equipoise, even within solidly blue or red states. They are, most of them, becoming even more Democratic or Republican. As Americans have moved over the past three decades, they have clustered in communities of sameness, among people with similar ways of life, beliefs, and, in the end, politics. Little, if any, of this political migration was by

design, a conscious effort by people to live among like-voting neighbors. When my wife and I moved to Austin, we didn't go hunting for the most Democratic neighborhood in town. But the result was the same: moving to Travis Heights, we took a side and fell into a stark geographic pattern of political belief, one that has grown more distinct in presidential elections since 1976.

Over the past thirty years, the United States has been sorting itself, sifting at the most microscopic levels of society, as people have packed children, CDs, and the family hound and moved. Between 4 and 5 percent of the population moves each year from one county to another—100 million Americans in the past decade. They are moving to take jobs, to be close to family, or to follow the sun. When they look for a place to live, they run through a checklist of amenities: Is there the right kind of church nearby? The right kind of coffee shop? How close is the neighborhood to the center of the city? What are the rents? Is the place safe? When people move, they also make choices about who their neighbors will be and who will share their new lives. Those are now political decisions, and they are having a profound effect on the nation's public life. It wasn't just my neighborhood that had tipped to become politically monogamous. In 1976, less than a quarter of Americans lived in places where the presidential election was a landslide. By 2004, nearly half of all voters lived in landslide counties.

In 2004, the press was buzzing about polarization, the inability of the leaders of the two political parties to find even a patch of common ground. All the measures of political ideology showed widening divisions between Democratic and Republican political leaders, and unbridled partisanship in national politics became a topic for Sunday news shows and newspaper columnists. Meanwhile, unnoticed, people had been reshaping the way they lived. Americans were forming tribes, not only in their neighborhoods but also in churches and volunteer groups. That's not the way people would describe what they were doing, but in every corner of society, people were creating new, more homogeneous relations. Churches were filled with people who looked alike and, more important, thought alike. So were clubs, civic organizations, and volunteer groups. Social psychologists had studied like-minded groups and could predict how people living and worshiping in homogeneous groups would react: as people heard their beliefs reflected and amplified, they would become more extreme in their thinking. What had happened over three decades wasn't a simple increase in political partisanship, but a more fundamental kind of self-perpetuating, self-reinforcing social division. The like-minded neigh-

borhood supported the like-minded church, and both confirmed the image and beliefs of the tribe that lived and worshiped there. Americans were busy creating social resonators, and the hum that filled the air was the reverberated and amplified sound of their own voices and beliefs.

This was not an area of concern for most of those who wrote about politics. Migration wasn't thought to be much of a factor in politics. People moved, sure, and some states gained votes while others lost. But the effects were thought to be essentially a wash. Frankly, I only stumbled upon this trend in American politics—and that was only after I stumbled upon Robert Cushing.

I had previously worked for a small paper in the coalfields of Eastern Kentucky, and my wife and I had owned a weekly newspaper in rural Texas. From my experience living in small towns, I had become interested in why some communities develop vibrant economies while others stagnate, and I had written about this question as a newspaper columnist in Kentucky and then a reporter in Austin. Cushing was a sociologist and statistician who had recently retired from the University of Texas. My parents were friends with a cousin of Bob's wife, Frances. Through that tenuous connection, we met for breakfast one morning.

I remember telling Bob I had some data about Austin's economy but didn't know quite what to do with it. "I do," Bob responded. That was typical Bob, a guy who had paid his way through graduate school by working summers fighting forest fires as a Smokejumper in Montana. He did know what to do with the pile of data I had collected, and we began collaborating on projects for the *Austin American-Statesman*. We would decide on a question we wanted to answer, and Bob would begin clicking, programming, and calculating. Often in the middle of the night, a new set of charts and Excel files would arrive in my e-mail inbox, and I'd see that Bob had made another remarkable discovery. . . .

People don't check voting records before deciding where to live. Why would anyone bother? In a time of political segregation, it's simple enough to tell a place's politics just by looking. Before the 2006 midterm elections, marketing firms held focus groups and fielded polls, scouring the countryside to find the giveaway to a person's political inclination. Using the most sophisticated techniques of market profiling, these firms compiled a rather unsurprising list of attributes.

Democrats want to live by their own rules. They hang out with friends at parks or other public places. They think that religion and politics shouldn't mix. Democrats watch Sunday morning news shows and late-night television. They listen to morning radio, read weekly newsmagazines,

watch network television, read music and lifestyle publications, and are inclined to belong to a DVD rental service. Democrats are more likely than Republicans to own cats.

Republicans go to church. They spend more time with family, get their news from Fox News or the radio, and own guns. Republicans read sports and home magazines, attend Bible study, frequently visit relatives, and talk about politics with people at church. They believe that people should take more responsibility for their lives, and they think that overwhelming force is the best way to defeat terrorists. Republicans are more likely than Democrats to own dogs.

None of this is particularly shocking. We've all learned by now that Republicans watch Fox News and Democrats are less likely to attend church. Okay, the DVD rental clue is a surprise, and Democrats in my part of town own plenty of dogs, but basically we all know these differences. What is new is that some of us appear to be *acting* on this knowledge. An Episcopal priest told me he had moved from the reliably Republican Louisville, Kentucky, suburbs to an older city neighborhood so that he could be within walking distance of produce stands, restaurants, and coffee shops—and to be among other Democrats. A journalism professor at the University of North Carolina told me that when he retired, he moved to a more urban part of Chapel Hill to escape Republican neighbors. A new resident of a Dallas exurb told a *New York Times* reporter that she stayed away from liberal Austin when considering a move from Wisconsin, choosing the Dallas suburb of Frisco instead. "Politically, I feel a lot more at home here," she explained. People don't need to check voting records to know the political flavor of a community. They can smell it. . . .

To explain how people choose which political party to join, Donald Green, a Yale political scientist, described two social events. Imagine that you are walking down a hall, Green said. Through one door is a cocktail party filled with Democrats. Through another is a party of Republicans. You look in at both, and then you ask yourself some questions: "Which one is filled with people that you most closely identify with? Not necessarily the people who would agree were you to talk policy with them. Which group most closely reflects your own sense of group self-conception? Which ones would you like to have your sons and daughters marry?" You don't compare party platforms. You size up the groups, and you get a vibe. And then you pick a door and join a party. Party attachments are uniquely strong in the United States. People rarely change their affiliation once they decide they are Democrats or Republicans. No wonder. Parties represent ways of life. How do you know which party to join?

Well, Green says, it *feels* right. The party is filled with your kind of people.*

How do you know which neighborhood to live in? The same way: because it feels right. It looks like the kind of place with boys and girls you'd like your children to marry. You just know when a place is filled with your kind. That's where you mentally draw a little smiley face of approval, just as my wife did as we moved from Kentucky to Austin in 1999.

Texas voted in 2005 on whether to make marriage between people of the same sex unconstitutional. Statewide, the anti-gay marriage amendment passed with ease. More than seven out of ten Texans voted for it. In my section of South Austin, however, the precincts voted more than nine to one *against* the measure. The difference between my neighborhood and Texas as a whole amounted to more than 60 percentage points. It's not coincidence that in our narrow slice of Austin, a metropolitan area of more than 1.4 million people filling five counties, the liberal writer Molly Ivins lived just five blocks from the liberal writer Jim Hightower—and at one time we lived five blocks from both of them.

During the same years that Americans were slowly sorting themselves into more ideologically homogeneous communities, elected officials polarized nationally. To measure partisan polarization among members of Congress, political scientists Howard Rosenthal, Nolan McCarty, and Keith Poole track votes of individual members, who are then placed on an ideological scale from liberal to conservative. In the 1970s, the scatter plot of the 435 members of the House of Representatives was decidedly mixed. Democrats tended toward the left and Republicans drifted right, but there was a lot of mingling. Members from the two parties overlapped on many issues. When the scholars fast-forward through the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s, however, the votes of the 435 representatives begin to split left and right and then coalesce. The scatter plot forms two swarms on either side of the graph's moderate middle. By 2002, Democratic members of Congress were buzzing together on the left, quite apart from a tight hive of Republicans on the right. In the mid-1970s, moderates filled 37 percent of the seats in the House of Representatives. By 2005, only 8 percent of the House could be found in the moderate middle.

*Sociologist Paul Lazarsfeld, working in the 1940s, saw the same kind of policy-free connection between parties and people. In his book *Voting: A Study of Opinion Formation in a Presidential Campaign* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1954), Lazarsfeld wrote: "The preference for one party rather than another must be highly similar to the preference for one kind of literature or music rather than another, and the choice of the same political party every four years may be parallel to the choice of the same old standards of conduct in new social situations. In short, it appears that a sense of fitness is a more striking feature of political preference than reason and calculation" (p. 311).

Members from the two parties used to mingle, trade votes, and swap confidences and allegiances. (In 1965, half the Republicans in the Senate voted for President Lyndon Johnson's Medicare bill.) That kind of congressional compromise and cross-pollination is now rare. More common is discord. The *Washington Post's* Dana Milbank and David Broder reported in early 2004 that "partisans on both sides say the tone of political discourse is as bad as ever—if not worse." Former Oklahoma congressman Mickey Edwards said that on a visit to Washington, D.C., he stopped at the barbershop in the Rayburn House Office Building. "And the barber told me, he said, 'It's so different, it's so different. People don't like each other; they don't talk to each other,'" Edwards recalled. "Now, when the barber in the Rayburn Building sees this, it's very, very real." . . .

Is the United States polarized? Maybe that's the wrong term. What's happening runs deeper than quantifiable differences in a grocery list of values. Despite the undeniable sameness of places across America—is a PetSmart in a Democratic county different from a PetSmart in a Republican county?—communities vary widely in how residents think, look, and live. And many of those differences are increasing. There are even increasing differences in the way we speak.* Over the past thirty years, communities have been busy creating new and different societies, almost in the way isolated islands foster distinct forms of life, but without a plan or an understanding of the consequences.

The first half of the twentieth century was an experiment in economic specialization, as craft production gave way to assembly lines; cabinetmakers became lathe operators or door assemblers. The second half of the century brought social specialization, the displacement of mass culture by media, organizations, and associations that were both more segmented and more homogeneous. We now worship in churches among like-minded parishioners, or we change churches, maybe even denominations, to find such persons. We join volunteer groups with like-minded companions. We read and watch news that confirms our existing opinions. Politics, markets, economies, culture, and religion have all moved along the same trajectory, from fragmentation in the nineteenth century to conglomeration in the twentieth century to segmentation today. Just as coun-

*Linguist William Labov of the University of Pennsylvania, one of the authors of *The Atlas of North American English*, told National Public Radio in February 2006 that "the regional dialects of this country are getting more and more different. So that people in Buffalo, St. Louis and Los Angeles are now speaking much more differently from each other than they ever did" (Interview, *All Things Considered*, National Public Radio, February 16, 2006, <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=5220090>).

ties have grown more distant from one another politically, regional economies are also separating—some booming and vibrant, others weak and dissipating. Mainline religious denominations gained parishioners through the first half of the twentieth century, the age of mass markets, but lost members beginning in the mid-1960s to independent churches designed for homogeneous communities. Media, advertising, city economies—they've all segmented, specialized, and segregated. . . .

The tale we've been told and have come to tell ourselves is that society cracked in 1968 as a result of protests, assassinations, and the melee in the streets of Chicago. Informed by the Big Sort, we can now see 1968 more as a consequence of gradual change than as a cause of the changes that followed. Old political, social, religious, and cultural relationships had begun to crumble years earlier. American culture had slowly shifted as people simultaneously grew richer and lost faith in the old institutions that had helped create that wealth: the Democratic Party, the Elks, the daily newspaper, the federal government, the institution of marriage, the Presbyterian Church. Party membership, newspaper circulation, trust in government, and the number of people in the pews of mainline churches all declined at the same time.

The old systems of order—around land, family, class, tradition, and religious denomination—gave way. They were replaced over the next thirty years with a new order based on individual choice. Today we seek our own kind in like-minded churches, like-minded neighborhoods, and like-minded sources of news and entertainment. As we will see later in this book, like-minded, homogeneous groups squelch dissent, grow more extreme in their thinking, and ignore evidence that their positions are wrong. As a result, we now live in a giant feedback loop, hearing our own thoughts about what's right and wrong bounced back to us by the television shows we watch, the newspapers and books we read, the blogs we visit online, the sermons we hear, and the neighborhoods we live in.

Politicians and parties have exploited this social evolution, and in doing so, they have exacerbated partisanship and division. Elites have always been more partisan, more extreme, and more ideological than regular voters. But today moderates on all sides are rebuffed, and those who seek consensus or compromise are squeezed out. Paul Maslin, Democratic presidential hopeful Howard Dean's pollster in 2004, explained it this way:

If I had to say one true statement about the entire process you are describing, I think that at the national or state level, it's making life increasingly difficult for people who are trying to thread the needle, to find the swing voter. In a way Karl Rove and Howard Dean and [Dean campaign manager] Joe Trippi were all right here. It's probably one of the things that's driving our politics into a more polar-

ized situation. While the swing vote and the classic vote in the middle still matter, you are much more willing to say now that you ignore at your peril your own base. Because as everything spreads apart, the base becomes more important because they are demographically more together. You don't have a whole bunch of 51-49 communities out there. You have more and more 60-40, 65-35, 70-30 places. Well, you better damn well be sure you maximize your 70-30 votes, whether it's inner-city African Americans or liberal, educated Democrats or whether it's suburban, conservative Republicans or small-town, main-street, or Evangelical Republicans. We have to maximize our base, and they have to maximize their base. Ergo, polarization.

The country may be more diverse than ever coast to coast. But look around: our own streets are filled with people who live alike, think alike, and vote alike. This social transformation didn't happen by accident. We have built a country where everyone can choose the neighborhood (and church and news shows) most compatible with his or her lifestyle and beliefs. And we are living with the consequences of this segregation by way of life: pockets of like-minded citizens that have become so ideologically inbred that we don't know, can't understand, and can barely conceive of "those people" who live just a few miles away.