

Episode 260: Why we're polarized (Ezra Klein)

Julia: Welcome to Rationally Speaking, the podcast where we explore the borderlands between reason and nonsense. I'm your host, Julia Galef, and my guest for this episode is Ezra Klein. He's the co-founder of Vox, a columnist for the New York Times and the host of the Ezra Klein show -- and the author of, most recently, *Why We're Polarized*, a fascinating and ambitious book explaining how the Republican and Democrat parties in the US became so different from each other, ideologically and demographically, and the effect that's had on our political institutions. That's what our conversation's about today. Here is Ezra Klein.

[interlude]

Julia: Ezra, great to have you on Rationally Speaking! It's long overdue.

Ezra: I'm thrilled to be here. Finally got the golden invite.

Julia: Ha. Well, I'm excited to talk to you about *Why We're Polarized*, which as I mentioned I really enjoyed. I thought it was such an interesting model of what's been happening, and well-researched and well-written and all that good stuff.

So, let's start by having you clarify what you mean by "polarization," because I think it's probably somewhat different from what a lot of people take that word to mean.

Ezra: Well, first, thank you. It really means a lot to me enjoyed the book, so I'm thrilled to hear that. When you write a book called *Why We're Polarized*, you get always the question, what is polarization?

And it's hard. On one level, polarization is very simple. It is simply the fact of something — opinions, party affiliation, behavior — clustering around two poles. That's it. It's an analogy from magnets.

The problem with the way we use the term polarized in American politics is we almost never define what we are saying we are polarized over. So you might be polarized on policy opinions, but not on party affiliation. You might be polarized in terms of voting behavior, but actually, there's a lot of agreement on underlying policy views. You might be polarized in terms of race, but not on income.

And so when people talk about polarization, they routinely use it as a synonym, or at least a signifier, of disagreement, of enmity, of bad feelings in a political system. But that is manifestly not what it is. I'm sure we'll talk about this, but a lot of the book is not just making the argument, but I think establishing the historical fact, that in periods when we had very low levels of technical party polarization, we had very high levels of political and civil and civic discord.

And so it's very important to separate the idea of a system that is polarized on some or multiple dimensions from a system that is contentious, controversial, angry, even at risk of rupture.

Julia: You made a distinction in the book that I really appreciated, between polarization and sorting. Could you explain the difference between those two things?

Ezra: This sorting polarization distinction drives political scientists wild. I have a view that sorting is a subgenre of polarization, but I'll get to that in a second.

So let's imagine a political system of 100 people. And within that 100 person political system, you have views on cannabis policy. 40 people are full on supportive of legalization, 40 people believe it should be prohibited in all contexts all the time, and 20 people, let's say, believe it should be legal for medical usage.

So a couple things can happen in this system. One is that you can take the attitudes and they can sort better across the two parties. So maybe you have a period of time where you have an equal number of legalizers and an equal number of prohibitionists in the Democratic and Republican parties. Now, if things change, let's say the Democrats run a political candidate and he runs on legalizing marijuana. And so now the people who love marijuana all move into the Democratic party, and the people who want it prohibited, they all move into the Republican party. So here, zero opinions have changed, but now the opinions have sorted. All of the legalizers are on one side, all of the prohibitionists are on the other.

Another thing that can happen is opinion polarization. So maybe that Democrat runs, and that forces some people to get off the fence. So now, of those 20 people who are for medical marijuana, maybe 10 of them become legalizers and 10 of them become prohibitionists. You would call that polarization. So the actual opinions have become more clustered around the two poles of the issue, with what you might call that "moderate middle" disappearing, weakening.

And of course, you can have both things happening at the same time and both things being drivers of the other one. This is, to me, a very, very, very important dynamic, that sorting often leads to polarization and polarization often leads to sorting.

A great example of this is the politics of abortion in this country. If you go back to the '70s, it's very mixed up between the parties. Joe Biden himself is against the Roe V. Wade decision during that period. He's a Catholic Democrat who is pro-life. But what happens over time is both that the Democratic party becomes more clearly the party of choice, the Republican party becomes more clearly the pro-life party. That creates sorting.

And then over time, I would say that sorting created polarization on this. People's opinions got, not dramatically so, but a little bit more pushed to the edges, because there was a pressure to differentiate. And of course, there's opinion change.

But so this sorting / polarization thing, a lot of people want to make it as a distinction. I tend to look at it as a dynamic. You rarely have one that does not lead to the other.

Julia: Okay, so polarization and sorting tend to lead to each other, but do you think one of those phenomena is more harmful than the other?

Ezra: Ooh, that's a very, very hard question. So let me continue to complicate it. I'm here on Rationally Speaking, right? I can complicate things as much as I want?

Julia: Yeah, no, you have an unlimited number of available caveats, parentheticals, qualifiers, footnotes...

Ezra: So a few things here. A very, very big thing I'm trying to establish in this book is that polarization is neither good or bad. It is how it interacts with the institutional dynamics of a system.

The non-polarized systems can be terrible. And in fact, and I go through this in detail, there is a long period where the belief about American politics in mid-20th century American politics is that it is insufficiently polarized. There is too little differentiation between the two parties in terms of the agenda they represent. And because there's too little differentiation, when people make the single most central political choice they make, which is which party to vote for, they are not being able to exercise the power of that choice because they're not being given a clear choice to make.

And similarly, I don't even love the term extremism because of the question of what is a middle? Is it where the political system is? Is it just between the two poles? Is it what most people believe? But it can often be the case that pushing positions towards what one might call a pole leads to a better outcome. Which is all to say that we have a language around polarization. The reason I bring all this up is that we have a language around polarization that implies that it is always and everywhere a bad thing. And that actually makes it very hard for us, I think, to analyze it correctly.

So in my view, the thing I probably worry about more in our system is sorting, not polarization. And the reason I worry more about sorting is that it tends to then overlay on strange institutional dynamics of the American political system. So particularly geographic sorting, which has a lot of causal drivers. It isn't just people moving to be near other liberals or other conservatives, because liberalism and conservatism are correlated with so many other things people like or care about. It's correlated with do you enjoy urban areas or rural ones? Do you want to live in a community more like the one you grew up in? Do you like spicy food? Do you like to travel? There's a lot going on there, of which our politics are often downstream of other temperamental and personal preferences, and to be fair, interests that we actually have, material interests.

And so when you sort — there are good reasons people sort, but you will often create dynamics that make it hard for a political system like ours that is built for consensus, or at least very high levels of compromise, to function.

So for instance, an urban-rural sort, which we're having at a very high level in this country... if you go back to 1916, there was not really a relationship between density and vote share for Democrats. Now, you don't have a single dense city in this country, not one, that votes Republican. And rural areas are overwhelmingly Republican. And so because our system gives more political weight to rural areas, that begins to imbalance it, at least from a small-d democratic perspective.

So the sorting tends to worry me a little bit more than the polarization because the polarization, I think, is more neutral. You really have to look at that case by case. I don't think a highly sorted system in our polity is a good thing.

Julia: So the thing that I had been thinking of as polarization was not so much “The two parties have different platforms,” which, yes, seems fine to me. I had been thinking of it as the phenomenon where voters aren’t really evaluating the two different platforms, they’re just supporting their party. Because you know, “I’m a Democrat and the most important thing is to beat the Republicans,” or vice versa.

That seems like the harmful thing. Because it just incentivizes the parties to fight each other, rather than incentivizing them to adopt good positions and accomplish things, so that they can attract more voters.

Whereas, yeah, it seems fine and good to have the parties have different bundles of policy views from each other. As long as voters are thinking for themselves about, “Well, which bundle do I think is better for the country?” And casting their vote based on that. Rather than just supporting whatever bundle their party stands for, because that's their tribe. Does that make sense?

Ezra: So I think the problem there is actually in the conception of the voter, which is: It is of course, true that voters have weaker views on policy than New York Times columnists like me. But it is not true they have none, and it's not true that they always reshape their policy to follow their party.

In the book, I talk a lot about the situations in which that does happen and the ways in which we reason behind our party. But one of the reasons that that happens at the level it does today is that it's a pretty big psychological gulf to cross to the other party because the other party is very, very distinct. I have a lot of data in the book about how much more common swing voting, ticket splitting, different things like that were in, say, 1970s, 1980s America. But one of the reasons was that it wasn't that big of a gulf. I think the line I used there is it's easier to switch between a donkey and a mule than a donkey and an elephant.

The Republican abortion politics is a very good example of this. If you're a pro-life voter who is pressured because perhaps you agree on the margin a little bit more with Democrats on economic policy, back when the parties were not as distinct on abortion, maybe you'd switch between them more often. But now that they are very distinct, very often you won't.

Something that is important about this is that voters who have strong views on issues, they change party as the parties become a clearer vehicle for those views. It really is true that Barack Obama and Donald Trump changed the composition of the electorate. Not overwhelmingly, but in significant ways on the margin. Barack Obama did lead to a number of white people who had more conservative, resentful, whatever you want to call it, views on race. He did lead them to become Republicans. And by the way, vice versa. He did poll some Republicans who had more liberal views on race. Donald Trump did the same thing on immigration, and he really cemented what had begun under Obama on race.

So there was this movement — as it became clearer, under Obama that Democrats were the party of this changing racial coalition and Republicans were not — it really did lead to people moving around, not just reshaping their racial views, to align with Democrats.

Now, the people who didn't move did reshape their views. So Democrats during this period, if you remained a Democrat, particularly if you were a white liberal

Democrat, you became much more liberal on race. My old colleague and my friend at Vox, Matt Yglesias, calls the great awakening. But people do shift back and forth when the parties begin to polarize around new issues, and so that ends up being a real issue.

David Shor, who I believe you've had on the show, talks about how... I might get this a little bit wrong from memory, but I think I basically have it right. That an important distinction between how Barack Obama performed in elections and how Hillary Clinton performed against Donald Trump is that when you looked at voters who are conservative on immigration but liberal on healthcare, Barack Obama won those voters, but Hillary Clinton lost them. And that's in part because Trump heavily polarized the election around immigration, making immigration more salient, and leading those voters to actually switch parties, which provided an important margin for his electoral college victory.

Julia: Okay. So to go back to what you were saying earlier about how you worry more about sorting than about polarization per se — would you say that the main harm you're pointing at with sorting is the kind of political gridlock that results from it? Where like, everyone in the city is a Democrat and everyone in the countryside is a Republican, and people are sorted by race and religion, et cetera. And so those demographic differences between the parties make them much less willing to compromise with each other enough to get things done for the country. Is that the main harm?

Ezra: I think that's probably the way I'd put it. I don't know that I'd use the language of the “main harm,” because I just think this stuff is... There's a lot going on in it.

But what I will say is that the distinctive problem in our political system compared to other political systems is that we cannot operate effectively, at least if you believe effectively means being able to legislate routinely on big issues in conditions of polarization. We have more veto points than any other advanced political democracy. We have the filibuster. We have the unbelievably disproportionate composition of the US Senate. We have the electoral college. There is no one else who runs a system the way we do. And so what that means is that in order to get things done, you need to have very high levels of compromise.

Famously, and I talk about this in the book, but other people have brought this up too, there's a guy named Juan Linz. He died a couple years ago. But he was a great political theorist, I believe, at Yale. And he wrote this book called *The Perils of Presidentialism*. And one of the things he's getting at in that book is that America often does invade and then try to help rebuild other people's political systems — but we never give them our own. And in fact, there's no political system like America's that has a very long history of constitutional continuity. And that is because our system is understood, on a structural level, to be unstable.

Even putting aside some of the things I just mentioned — these layered on problems of the filibuster or the electoral college — we have the problem that the president does not necessarily have a working majority in Congress. In other countries, to be the prime minister means you have a governing coalition in the Legislature. That is not how it works here. You can be Barack Obama and Mitch McConnell can be the Senate majority leader, and we have no way to resolve those conflicts when they occur.

His argument in the '90s is that, okay, but look, America's done pretty damn well. So why? And the answer he comes to is that America has these very unusual aberrant non-polarized parties. Or at least has for much of our post Civil War, I should say, history.

And we have these depolarized aberrant parties because of race, very specifically because of race. If you look at measures of polarization, they actually have to include this racial dimension in order to make sense of them in the 20th century. That's what keeps the parties from sorting on other issues too, because race is so deforming to mid-20th century American politics. Primarily because of the Dixiecrats, who are not liberal on a lot of issues, but are with the Democrats because, well, Republicans invaded the South and occupied it and didn't let them have slavery anymore.

I bring all this up to say that there might be problems of polarization, and there are, but I think of the central one as: We have a political system in which governing cannot happen in a reasonable way, at least in my view, in conditions of high party polarization.

And importantly, this is not the system we have had in the past. It looks like it, because we had Republicans and we had Democrats, but they were not ideologically and demographically polarized in the way they are now. So the level of partisan fighting, the level of often irresolvable conflict, the threat of some of the kinds of conflict we're seeing, like what could have happened if, let's call it a more plausible case of election fraud had been brought forward after the 2020 election... That is a reflection of a system in which we actually do not have methods for resolving partisan disputes, because the two parties can maintain simultaneous democratically legitimate power bases. So that is really quite dangerous.

But I would always say that's a problem of our political system, not a problem of polarization. I think a lot of people look at this and they say, well, we just shouldn't be so polarized. And my argument is we don't really have a lever through which we can make people less polarized at scale. What we do have is a capacity to structurally change how American politics works in order to update it to the current situation we actually face.

Julia: You know, it's possible that when people say we should have less polarization, that they're thinking of a different kind of polarization, which you also talk about in the book. Which is affective polarization. Basically, how much do people in each party hate and fear the people in the other party. Or like, how warmly do they feel about their own party, compared to how warmly they feel about the other party.

Would you say that that — affective polarization — just naturally follows as a consequence of the basic kind of polarization you were talking about in the book? Or could you have a country, or a period of time, in which people in the two parties have very different views from each other, but don't feel so negatively towards each other?

Ezra: It's such a good and important question. And I'll be honest that I'm not sure I know.

I suspect that a lot of affective polarization is being driven by other parts of the political marketplace than simply opinion dispersion.

Julia: What do you mean by the political marketplace?

Ezra: So Fox News, or the way Twitter works. A lot of things in our culture currently make a fair amount of money by showing you the worst of the other side, and demonizing the other side to you and scaring you about them. And I'll go one step further because it isn't... Because sometimes I think you can hear that, and it just sounds like what I'm saying is that these business models are distorting reality. But one real fear I have about them is they create reality.

So Donald Trump, to me, is a media creation coming out of this incentive set. I think that in ways that it is still not thought through clearly or reckoned with, the centrism to left of center media's obsession with Trump in 2015 and 2016, because he was so outrageous and they wanted to cover him so negatively, strengthened him dramatically. That was a big part of why the other candidates, and I give some evidence for this in the book, the other Republican candidates couldn't get any oxygen in the Republican primary. And so Donald Trump came through.

There was a good tweet, I think it was from Liv Boeree, the other day that I saw, which was something like, I'm paraphrasing, but "It doesn't work to rage against a machine when the machine feeds on rage."

Julia: Mm, that's a good line.

Ezra: It's a very good line. And that, I think, is a big piece of this. And I don't think the "machine" should just be understood as an inevitable effect of polarization. There are businesses here, there are market incentives here, there's a lot of other stuff going on.

So that said, can you have a highly ideologically polarized system without an endless ratcheting up in partisan stakes? I suspect you can. I think we've seen this in other countries. There are big differences and disagreements in other countries.

This is speculative, but it is an argument I make on behalf of a more effective political system, which is: I think one reason our political divides are so deep and so irresolvable and so angry is precisely because our parties cannot get more done when they're elected.

One way that you might begin to resolve political disputes and also change people's minds is to govern in a way where either they see that they don't like what happened and they punish you, or they do like what happened and they reward you, and maybe come further onto your side. And we've seen that at other points in American politics. The New Deal Coalition, which dominates American politics for decades, emerges out of successful governance during a financial crisis and during a global economic crisis. We've seen that in other countries too.

But because we have less and less capacity to make good on the campaign promises that get people elected in this country, we also have less and less capacity to transform the way people feel in the political system towards one of the two parties. And so I think we actually have so little true and decisive

accountability, positive or negative, which is downstream of the party's inability to do what they promise and actually take their agenda out for a test drive, such that the American people can see and judge it. I think it then focuses America on symbolic and irresolvable issues.

Let me give one very specific example of this, because it can sound very abstract if I don't. I covered the Affordable Care Act from its inception through implementation through the Republican efforts to repeal. And one thing you really see in that is that it was never more controversial than before it was real.

So Obamacare was the molten core of politics starting in 2009 going into 2010. There are all these Supreme Court cases then. Republicans run every election heavily on Obamacare.

And then the Affordable Care Act actually becomes real. It begins delivering its benefits primarily in 2014. And there's a last gasp of trying to repeal it. And it fails, because it's become popular. Because now, instead of it being this thing people are fighting over that may fail or may succeed, it's actually just out there. And maybe you know somebody on Medicaid or maybe you know somebody getting insurance through the exchanges. And it's not that it's a 70-30 issue, but it's a 50 something to 60 something issue.

And now Republicans just don't talk about it anymore because they tried and they failed. And so the level of "Obamacare is going to end this country" is just gone. All that heat, all the stuff about death panels, and all of the kind of wild overheated rhetoric is just gone. People have just moved on to other things.

Conversely, you really can't settle some of these cultural fights we're having, because they're not legislatable. They're not something that you can pass a bill on, but if you can't pass bills, then that's going to be what politics fills up with. And so I really do think it is healthier for a political system to have parties passing the bills they promise, and then implementing them. And then having that implementation be judged. Because I think it gets you through what you might call the "valley of maximum controversy," and then gets you to some outcome.

And maybe the outcome is repeal, right? We have seen big bills repealed in this country. Obamacare could have been repealed. Although I think that would've been a political disaster for Republicans. But there was a big Medicare reform that was repealed in 1989. I mean, this kind of thing does happen.

But we do not legislate freely, often or, in my view, ambitiously enough for people to really feel the stakes of the two parties beyond a lot of the representational cultural fights. And I think that keeps politics stuck in an endless argument because the argument never resolves into, "Yeah, I don't know that I like everything those Democrats say, but I do like the pre-K they gave me and my family" or conversely, "Republicans have a lot of wacky views on things, but I'm so glad they repealed the Affordable Care Act and made American healthcare so much better." It's hard to resolve a conflict when most things don't pass and the ones that do are compromised down to like 35% of their original vision.

Julia: Right. Okay, so to sum up, the problem is not polarization in the sense of the parties having strong ideological disagreements with each other. The problem is the American political system that makes it really hard for political parties, *given*

polarization, to actually govern and produce a track record that the public can judge them by.

And I guess affective polarization fits in... well, it sounds like that does make things worse but it's not central to your model?

Ezra:

Yeah. Affective polarization is bad on the margin at high levels. Again, I always want to be a little careful. I think it's reasonable to have views that the other party is bad if you think they're bad. But putting that aside, the problem is not polarization full stop. The problem is we have a political system that does not work under conditions of party polarization. And conditions of party polarization are natural and normal, and nobody has a fix for them. I mean, we can talk about that, actually. You could do multi-party systems. I mean, there's a lot of things you could do to ease this, but they're all some version of radically changing the structure of the American political system. And that's a big deal.

I really appreciate where this conversation is, Julia, because if you read the book, it basically operates in two halves. The first half is trying to clarify what polarization is and how it works and tell the story of it over the last century in American politics, more or less. And the second half, I thought of as more of my contribution that I was making in the book, more the thing that was distinctive to this book. The second half is about the interplay between polarization and the institutions of American politics, of the media, of money, of Congress, of the presidency, of the party system. And that, to me, is the thing that gets lost and is the more important one.

Polarization, we're all moths to a flame on it because we feel it, it's knowable, we see it, even sometimes when we see our own families. Whereas institutions are staid, they're unchanging. They've always been with us. We've always had a Congress. And I want to say, take it the opposite way. Polarization is the natural, more or less, unchanging thing. The kind of levels of affective fury we have today, we had more of it in the 60s and 70s. It just wasn't sorted by party. It's a really, really, really important thing to say. The 60s and 70s are a low ebb of party polarization and, I would say, a pretty high level of civil fracture in this country. Multiple presidents or presidential candidates get assassinated, as does Martin Luther King Jr. and Malcolm X. Gerald Ford is almost assassinated. Squeaky Fromme is a couple feet away from him and the gun doesn't go off. Ronald Reagan is shot through the lung. You have Kent State. You have a civil rights movement, the freedom writers, the killings during the civil rights movement, the Vietnam War protest.

And the way people feel about the people on the other side of these issues, there's a lot more literal political violence in that period. Today, Chesa Boudin is in elected office in the city I live in. His parents were part of a violent political sect. It's a crazy period in mid-century American politics, but it is not sorted by party. And that is weird. That doesn't usually happen. Usually big political disagreements sort by parties. That is a point of having parties, so they don't end up in violence. You can resolve them through the political system.

So we have sorted by parties, but we have not created the institutions through which sorted parties and polarized parties can resolve disagreements by actually legislating and doing things in the political system.

So I cannot emphasize enough to people that the institutions of American politics are really important, that you cannot understand it just by looking at public opinion. You cannot understand it just by looking at politicians. You cannot understand it just by looking at polarization. You have to actually look at how does this warp the Senate, and how does the Senate work? That is the big lesson of me as somebody who has covered politics for 18, 19, 20 years now. You have to like institution structure so much more than we give them credit for. And they are changeable in ways that mass political opinion or mass political behavior often is very, very difficult to change.

Julia: Yeah, you know, it occurs to me that this raises an interesting point about how we think about causality. If you ask, what caused the mess that we're in today, you could answer that by pointing to a factor that has been changing over time like increasing polarization.

Or you could answer the causal question by pointing at the underlying factors that allowed polarization to have such a negative outcome, which are the features of our political institutions. Because those aren't changing themselves, they don't jump out at us as a cause. Naturally, when we try to explain something causally, we look at the thing that changed, as a factor, but there can be other necessary factors in the result we ended up getting, that were there all along.

Ezra: And let me go even deeper than that. What is the mess we're in today? Right? When people say that, what are they thinking of?

Julia: You know... everything! I'm just gesturing wildly.

Ezra: Yeah, like gesturing wildly, right? But let me give an example. Let me use Donald Trump as the example. I always try to tell people that in 2015, when Barack Obama was president, I was asked to sit on a lot of panels about the problems of American democracy. So it's not like everybody thought things were great in 2015, but I do think certainly a lot of liberals during the Donald Trump period would say the mess is what's happened to the Republican Party. Like, look over here. And so, okay, let's look at Donald Trump.

And I would say Donald Trump is... not a pure creature of institutional happenstance and quirk, but pretty much so. So it is a new innovation in American politics, only a couple decades old, it begins really in the 70s, that you begin moving candidate selection for the presidency from convention delegates to political primaries. And that's actually quite important. I quote in the book Levitsky and Ziblatt, who wrote *How Democracies Die*, one of the very interesting points they make is there have always been Trumpist figures in American politics. Henry Ford in certain ways was a Trumpist figure. Father Coughlin was a Trumpist figure. Huey long was a Trumpist figure. There were lots of them. Pat Buchanan was a Trumpist figure, though he actually comes after this, to be fair.

But in periods where parties had more control or, frankly, total control for much of this over who nominated, they never had a shot. Like they could not get through a convention. Donald Trump would never have won a convention. He won through primaries. And so then he also did not win more votes. In most countries, they have this crazy system where when they call themselves a democracy, what they do is they have people vote and they count up all the votes and they see which pile of votes is bigger than the other pile. And then they have

the person with a bigger pile of votes become the president or the prime minister or whatever. But in our country, we don't do that. What we do is we then filter all those votes through this bizarre electoral college system, in which, in theory, the electoral college is meant to be a bunch of elevated non-public mob seers, who can make sure the passions of the public are not leading to anybody crazy being chosen.

But because we actually have a reasonably high level of belief in democracy in this country, even if we don't always practice it, we don't really let them do that anymore. So we just rewrap. We slightly reweight all the votes by geography in this totally bizarre way. I mean, the whole thing is crazy, but it's all to say that if you don't have the move away from conventions to primaries, you don't have Donald Trump. If you don't have the electoral college, you don't have Donald Trump.

By the way, if Donald Trump had just lost in 2016 because he got three million fewer votes than Hillary Clinton did, then Hillary Clinton becomes president and names a replacement, as she probably would've been able to, for Scalia. And so Trump and the Trumpist faction of the Republican Party are blamed for losing a clearly winnable election and throwing away the Supreme Court for a generation, they probably lose a lot of power in the Republican Party and the Republican Party now, having lost two successive elections to Barack Obama, and then one to Hillary Clinton, is probably going to think pretty hard about reforming itself and going in a different direction next.

So the reason I press on institutions so hard is that there's so much discussion — and correctly so, right? I don't want to write this out of the story, but — of what Donald Trump represents in the American political psyche. And that's all fine, but it's also the case that the American political psyche had many of these features at other times. And other countries psyches have these features, but different institutions create different outcomes. And so, as we polarize ideologically, affectively more and more, we're going in weird directions.

Last quick thing I'll say, because I know I've said a lot in this answer, I do want to note that I think there's some evidence that the Republican Party is becoming somewhat less ideologically polarized at a moment that it's becoming much more affectively polarized. I think something weird's happening right now, as the parties are polarizing on different dimensions, which I wouldn't have said 10 years ago, let's say, which is that Democrats are becoming more polarized on policy and Republicans are becoming more polarized on the system of American politics itself. And that's creating an important sort of discontinuity in what the arguments in American politics are actually about.

Julia: Ezra, could you explain how this sorting process that we keep talking about happened — how we ended up having Americans sorted into Republicans and Democrats by race and religion and geography, et cetera? Because that's a very important part of your model that we haven't really gone into yet.

Ezra: I think the causality of this is really hard. And I don't believe there is a fully convincing answer, but let me give you a couple of factors. So one is simply that the parties became better homes to sorted people because they polarized ideologically in the aftermath of the civil rights movement and legislation. And so I do think of that as an enabling condition, that when you had these very mixed

up parties, it was probably the case then too that people who moved to cities either were or became a little bit more tolerant, a little bit more interested in diversity. If you look at Republicans who are mayors of big cities then and now, they tend to be a different sort than Republicans who are senators in highly rural states.

But because the parties weren't that different, that sorting that cities and rural areas already push, it didn't play out in quite the same way politically. You could be somebody who had a lot of these views and still found a home in the Republican Party, for instance. So that's one thing, that the enabling condition is the parties.

I struggle with this next part. And I think if you read the book correctly, you will see that I ultimately don't take a very firm position here. In your book, Julia, you talk about having to go and redo it or redo big parts of it because a bunch of the studies you just didn't quite trust.

Julia: Yup.

Ezra: And that's how I feel around the research in political psychology, but with one important quirk. I think the thrust of that research is clearly right, but I don't trust most of the individual studies to get at what they're getting at effectively.

So I think it is clearly true that there are personality and temperamental and psychological differences that are driving a lot of other things, including our politics, from where we live to who we love to all kinds of different pieces. But we are measuring these in a very blunt and changeable way that I don't think is reliable, to be honest.

So I'll give an example. There is just endless studies about how conservatives are more disgust-oriented, and they're more germophobic. And in a lot of ways you look at Donald Trump and he represents it perfectly. He's disgust-oriented. He's always talking about how disgusting things are. He's a germophobe. He's always squirting hand sanitizer. But then the thing those studies would predict is that Republicans would be particularly attuned to the threat of a pathogen coming from other places.

I mean, literally, there's deep history studies here showing that one reason we might have these psychologies has to do with pathogen resistance among different communities. Because if you have people coming in from other areas and you're not somewhat xenophobic, they can come in, bring bacteria you have no immunity to, and everybody dies. And yet it just doesn't have the outcome you would think exactly. Other things get in the way of it.

I think a lot of the sorting we see, not all of it, but a lot of it, actually does have psychological roots. I don't think we have sensitive enough understandings of these things to test it correctly and to predict it well. And so I think you basically have these couple of things. I think you have the enabling mechanism of the parties becoming more clearly differentiated homes.

I would say, and I do think this is important, you have a rise of highly competitive media. I have a whole chapter on this. But I think it's a very big part of the story. You used to have just very little media. You have a newspaper or two in your city.

You have three television networks. You've got some radio. That's about it. The rise of media choice, hundreds of cable networks, the functionally infinite expanse of the internet, Twitter, et cetera. It matters.

Julia: And did the rise of different forms of media contribute to the sorting of, like, religious people being more likely to be Republican and atheists being more likely to be Democrats?

Ezra: Yeah. I think very much so.

Julia: How so?

Ezra: Because it narrow-targets people to be sorted.

So the thing about niche media, the thing about competitive media, is you need to break the marketplace down into smaller and smaller niches in order to stand out. So on one version of this, you pull a lot of people away from politics altogether. One reason you don't see political information go up as media choice goes up and media availability goes up, is that the people who aren't interested in politics really tune it out.

It used to be that you had some networks... you enjoyed I Love Lucy, you also watch the news. Now, if you love I Love Lucy, maybe you just watch Nick at Nite. Or if you like old movies, you watch Turner Classic Movies. And there's no news that happens at 6:00 PM on that channel. Simultaneously, you sort into Fox News and MSNBC and CNN and all the other things we know about.

But it's not just that. It's also that, for instance, you have things like the rise of Christian Broadcasting. And Christian Broadcasting narrow targets the Christian right and attaches it to a political agenda, right? So that helps accelerate... Pat Robertson is very successful. In addition to being a Republican presidential candidate, he's a very successful television programmer for a very, very long time. Jerry Falwell, not a presidential candidate, but same situation.

And you'll see the same thing on the left as well, not from the perspective of Christianity, but from other perspectives. I think if you look for instance at...

Julia: A cosmopolitan identity?

Ezra: Yes, that's actually a great... Well, actually initially I thought about Cosmo itself.

Julia: Oh! Accidentally correct, there.

Ezra: Cosmopolitan identity is a good one too, but Cosmopolitan, right, is targeted at young women who are a more liberal group in general. And over time, Cosmo, Teen Vogue, et cetera, they become much more liberal. They've gotten much more of a political agenda than they had... I don't know how long Teen Vogue's been around, but Cosmo has been around for quite some time. And I would say it has become much more explicitly political in the past, let's call it, 10 or 15 years.

And so the nichefication in the media really matters here.

Julia: But why would that — sorry to interrupt. Why would that... as you point out in the book, people all have a lot of different overlapping identities. The identity of a cosmopolitan urbanite, the identity of a woman, the identity of a black woman, et cetera. So why would it turn out that the media targeting all of a person's different identities would end up pushing them towards one party? Like why would it be the case that the media targeted at an urban, black, woman all line up in the direction of "You should be a Democrat"?

Ezra: This to me is the enabling function of the parties becoming themselves more polarized because it created a clearer sense of what goes with what. So what you're getting at here, which I do talk about a lot in the book, is this idea of cross pressured versus, I call them, stacked identities.

So if you're a white evangelical man who is a low-income union member in the south, right, you've got things moving in both directions there.

Julia: Right. That's a good example.

Ezra: Whereas if you are a black atheist, gay person living in New York, that's all going in one direction politically. And the point is that as a party's differentiated in order to serve their coalitions, they develop positions that connect it. And so on some level, there's not really a reason that the people who believe abortion shouldn't be legal are also the people in general who believe climate change isn't real, but those things just ended up going together for, I think, primarily coalitional reasons.

And so people begin to learn what goes with what. To some degree, they change their identities, or emphasize different identities, or change the opinions of those identities held. But that's where the party differentiation becomes very important.

The party differentiation, it is enabling for that kind of media, right? I think I say this in the book, but if I don't, it would be harder for Fox News to be Fox News if liberals were evenly distributed between the Democratic and Republican parties or even heavily distributed into the Republican Party, if not evenly. That was a situation for a long time and you did have conservative media, but it was a more complicated kind of thing, particularly for generating affective polarization. And similarly, as you begin to have these clear parties, as people begin to realize what goes with what, then people begin to ultimately make decisions. And when something is on the line, the parties will transform in order to pull people over.

I'll give just one good example of actually how this worked in practice, which is black voters. It's really interesting. The Democratic Party is the foundationally racist party in American politics. It just is. The Democratic Party is a party of the Dixiecrats. The Republican Party is the party of Abraham Lincoln. Black voters do not begin moving to the Democratic Party during the civil rights period. They move in the New Deal period. That is what starts it.

And it doesn't start it because the Democratic Party became dramatically less racist. There is cross pressuring in the Democratic Party at that time. Truman does some good things, but there's a lot of not good stuff happening in the New Deal too. But the New Deal really helps black voters who are overwhelmingly low income, materially, during that time. Not now. And it really helps them

materially. It begins to create a coalitional shift. That coalitional shift, where now black voters are a bigger part of the Democratic Party, is inextricable from why the Democratic Party becomes a party that decides to prioritize civil rights. It is a decision to go with one part of their coalition over another.

And having gone with that part of the coalition and then creating pressure, which the Republican Party ends up going in the other direction, you get this what goes with what? So now there was a tension between having redistributive views on economic policy and having liberal views on race. Because Democrats are more redistributive, but Republicans were traditionally the party of Lincoln. But if you care about racial uplift, a big part of that is redistribution because of the wealth gap and income legacies of America's long racist history. And so that then ends the tension and it ends the cross pressuring.

Now the party that believes in more redistribution is also the party that believes in more racial equality, and the party that believes in less redistribution and less of the government moving things around is also the party that doesn't want the government coming in and telling you that you can't discriminate against black people riding on your bus or being in your store or being in your school.

This is why I say polarization and sorting have this dynamic effect with each other. But it's also why the party's becoming clearer in their differentiations create some of the sorting we're talking about, because it does create a clearer sense of what goes with what.

So then the final thing I'll just say on this, because it is important, is that then over time, if you're a Democrat, because maybe you're a Democrat because of reasons of whatever, the ethnic group you belong to has been helped by the Democratic Party, you are also someone now who trusts Democrats more. And so when they tell you this is good tax policy or good health policy, you're more likely to believe it. And so once you've made the attachment, that then also begins to change the views of different parties or make them not literally monolithic, but lean more towards one party or the other, which is also a very important dynamic.

All this stuff is very interwoven with each other. It's why in the book I say over and over again, I'm trying to describe a model of how politics works, not just one thing happening. This is a system that is in a constantly shifting dynamic equilibrium.

Julia: So that story makes sense, I just wanted to ask about the timing. Like, the timeline of when things started to change, when polarization started to really go up in both the parties and in the electorate.

There are all these interesting results that you mention in the book from the 90s, where Republicans and Democrats still have really similar opinions on issues that today are huge wedge issues. Like in 1994, the percentage of Democrats and Republicans who agreed that immigrants strengthened the country was almost identical. It was 32% of Democrats and 30% of Republicans. And similarly on climate change and a few other things.

But so that was true as late as the 90s. Whereas it seems like in your model we should have been seeing polarization going up much earlier, ever since that

coalition shift you described after the New Deal, where the parties kind of realigned themselves so we didn't have conservative southern Democrats, and so on. And yet instead, it seems like we didn't see much increase until the late 90s, when we got a ton of it.

Does that seem right to you?

Ezra: No, because we actually... We do see the steady increase. This is actually an important thing. What you're describing is weird, but I think it actually fits the pattern better than you suggest.

As you say, the Civil Rights Act, it sets off a long period of party change, but it doesn't happen all at once. It happens at a kind of slow lag. You begin to see immediate shifts. Barry Goldwater, in that election, he wins some confederate states. That's a very, very big deal.

But it's not like all of these candidates who have been winning in the South for decades begin to lose. They still win. They're just still Democrats and increasingly a little bit out of step with their party, but not unbelievably so. I mean, the Civil Rights Act was a big rupture for them and they voted against it. But the next year Democrats are back to doing things that they agree with a little bit more.

And so, some of them begin to change parties. You see people like Strom Thurmond and Jesse Helms. There are these famous examples of Democrats who changed to become Republicans and when they become Republicans, they become very conservative Republicans. But the other thing you see is a slow process by which the players lose when they retire, or when there are big wave elections.

It's interesting you mention the '90's. One of the things that happens in the '90's, which is a real accelerant of this process, is that the Republican Revolution in '94 overwhelms a lot of Southern Democrats who had been holding onto seats for a long time. It's a big disruptive jump in polarization, but it's built on trends that have been happening for quite some time at that point. It's not like no Republicans are winning in the South before then. No Republicans win in the South to a first approximation before the '60's, and then, slowly they begin to strengthen. And then, when there are big jumps forward they win a lot.

I mean, this is just a weird thing about politics everywhere, but very much American politics: ideological change is, to use the antiseptic term, driven by cohort replacement, which is to say that people die. And then, the next generation that is rising reflects the politics of that moment differently. If you look at even American politics now, older Americans are much more conservative. Younger Americans are much more liberal. There's a very, very big disagreement on the two sides between what this country should look like.

If you look at, say, the South during this period, you have older voters who have voted Democratic their whole life, who don't like the Republican party for reasons of history and culture and so on, and some of them ... This is where the idea of Yellow Dog Democrats comes from. "I would vote for even a yellow dog, as long as it was a Democrat." But, as those voters die, the younger voters in the South are much more Republican.

So there's a lot of things going on, but it is just not the case that these are jumps that only happen at one point. It's just... the process of beating incumbents is slow, and the process of changing people's views is slow. It begins to happen, but actually views change in the South far before party affiliation does. People begin to be open to the Republican party, and then they begin to flirt with the Republican party, and then they become Republicans, and then they become hardcore Republicans.

I'll name one other dynamic of this, which is because of the strength of the remaining Dixiecrats in the Democrat party even late into the 20th century, Congress, particularly the House, is not competitive for much of 20th century American politics. I talk in the book about this other book by a political scientist named Francis Lee called *Insecure Majorities*. We have never had ... We have never, I want to repeat it, never had a period in American politics as competitive between the parties as this period we're in now.

We have, at every other point, had what they called the sun and the moon parties. There's a period where one party is a sun party — Republicans after civil rights, Democrats after the new deal — and one party is a moon party, the minority party. The dynamic of believing that your party is not going to win, you will not get back into the majority in the next election, leads to a lot of compromise, leads to a blurring of differences and distinctions, leads to needing to work with the majority party because if you're not going to be in the majority, you at least need to be able to go home and show your voters that you're bringing home the bacon.

But in '94 and coming up before that... I describe this a bit, but there are other books that are better on this like, Frances Lee's. By '94, Gingrich has for some time been really pushing the idea to the Republicans you cannot work with the Democrats, you have to try to beat them. You have to actually create, to use the old Barry Goldwater language, a choice and not an echo.

So it'd become much more confrontational, that process of differentiation happens, and begins to accelerate. And then, they win. They actually take back Congress in '94. They replace a lot of these more moderate, middle of the road, and even conservative Democrats, and then the situation begins to accelerate.

But I've seen this argument made, "How can you pin this on civil rights if so much of it still isn't even happened by the '90's?"

Julia: Right. Yeah.

Ezra: ... and I think people are really underestimating the institutional sluggishness by which parties and coalitions change.

I mean, the pressure begins to build, even starting really before civil rights, as I said, in the New Deal. The New Deal, it takes some time for the Democratic party to become anything like a party that represents black voter interests by the Civil Rights period. It's still an iffy proposition. It's slowly continuing, decade by decade by decade by decade.

People want to see a faster cause and effect than you're going to get in a system so mediated by complicated party and congressional and electoral and media institutions. But this process of change and pressure is building the whole time. I

mean, you can really see it if you track elections in the South, if you track opinion, if you track media coverage. There's not a supposition on my part. I mean, this is very clear.

Julia: So an alternate theory I often hear, about what's happened to our country, is that, well, polarization started ramping up in the late '90's and early 2000's — what fits that timeline? Newt Gingrich, and Fox News. That makes sense as a story of polarization, and that fits the timeline.

So I guess I'm curious what you think is wrong with that model, or why you don't think it explains the facts as well as yours.

... Or maybe you're saying that the underlying demographic factors were what allowed Fox News to suddenly take hold in the late '90's, when it couldn't have, a decade earlier? Is that right?

Ezra: Yes. I have a problem with the ... So much polarization literature is just a biography of Newt Gingrich —

Julia: It's a one factor model?

Ezra: It's a one factor model. I have a real ... I'm being a little too glib and I don't want to impugn work on... It's an important period in American politics and Julian Zelizer has written a good book on it and Steve Kornacki's written a good book on it. But I disagree with the nature of attaching so much of this to Newt Gingrich's particular tactical decisions. Which is to say that Newt Gingrich-ism would have happened at some point. Somebody was going to make the break, and people were experimenting with it before.

I think I use this analogy in my book, that a lot of political analysis focuses on the flowers and not the soil. And the question for me is always why do different politicians take root in different soil?

Julia: Yeah, that's a good one.

Ezra: Why do different politicians take root in the different parties? Okay, yeah, Newt Gingrich is a very bombastic, very wedge issue oriented, et cetera, kind of politician, but why does that work in the Republican party? I mean, you don't have a Newt Gingrich or the Democrat party in that period. I would say in terms of congressional leadership, you've not had a Newt Gingrich or Democratic party even yet and nor have you had a Donald Trump has a presidential candidate.

So why are Gingrich and Trump and these kinds of figures taking root in the Republican party, while a different kind of figure, I would say, frankly, if you want to frame it... the Democratic party is undergoing a lot of educational polarization in this period, so you're getting these figures taking root in the Democratic party who really emphasize how smart they are. Your Bill Clintons, your Barack Obamas. It's a very cosmopolitan, Rhodes scholars, Harvard Law Review kind of thing.

There's just different soil happening, and that reflects the coalitional opportunities on the two sides. Newt Gingrich can only exist because Newt Gingrich understood what was happening in the Republican base, in the

Republican coalition and what they wanted. And that it was overdue for a politician to come and cater to them. They felt unrepresented.

And, by the way, something I say at great length in the book is that the alternative to polarization is often suppression of these kinds of disagreements, tactics, disputes, because the parties don't want to split themselves. But suppression can be bad — or it can be good, for that matter, but it is what it is.

And so, Gingrich, talk radio, things like Rush Limbaugh, Fox News... everything is multicausal. I mean, Talk Radio and Fox News, you can't have Fox News until you have cable and you don't have cable until well after the '60's. But, nevertheless, it would be harder for them to take root if you don't have the enabling changes in the parties and the party coalitions. And the thing that happens with the Newt Gingrich on the one hand, or Donald Trump — and also, the thing that happens with the Barack Obama — is these politicians, who could not thrive in the other party and probably could not have thrived at other points in American politics emerge, and correctly understand that their party has changed and a new set of tactics and appeals can work. And then, they begin employing them.

But my view is typically that somebody would've recognized a market opportunity sooner or later. Donald Trump beat 17 other Republicans in 2016. There were a lot of other people offering a lot of other options. He just understood what was going on. I don't think you can make it all about Donald Trump's tactical decision making there. Some of it, obviously, reflects things he did, but he won because he correctly intuited the Republican party as it now existed was more motivated by a feeling of fury, a feeling of losing its country, by issues around immigration, by issues around demographic change...than they were motivated by a Paul Ryan-esque vision of tax cuts and Medicare privatization. And he was right about that.

Julia: Is that in conflict with the statistic I was referring to earlier, in which Republicans and Democrats in the '90's basically agreed about how good immigration was? Like, doesn't that suggest that the parties, or maybe the media, caused a shift in public opinion about immigration, rather than the other way around?

Ezra: I have complicated thoughts on this particular question. But that's not the way I see it, for this reason: I think if one wants to posit that Republicans and Democrats agreed on these things, then the question is: Why when they tested it did the parties go in different directions?

And so, something you see during this period is actually a number of Republican politicians try to do immigration reform. A lot of people have forgotten, but there is a second-term Bush attempt, second term George W. Bush, to do immigration reform and he loses because of a conservative uprising. And then, there is a 2013 attempt, a bipartisan attempt, but led Marco Rubio and John McCain, among others, to do immigration reform. And they lose in the house due to a conservative uprising. And then, there's Donald Trump, of course.

And so, I know those polls that there's relatively similar views on “Are immigrants good for the country?” But in truth, when the coalitions differentiate, Democrats, who have a lot more Hispanics in their coalition and have more cosmopolitan views, turn out to be much more pro immigration when it becomes a central issue in American politics. And Republicans turn out to be much more

anti immigration. Whatever people were saying in the polls, when it actually became an issue, the parties did polarize. I think they polarized in a predictable way given what the underlying coalitions were. And then, that just continued gathering force.

I will just say as a matter of political analysis, I am very skeptical of public opinion polling on the issues that are not at the center of public opinion. People have all kinds of weakly held views...

Julia: Oh, it's so interesting. I thought you were going to say the opposite — that you were skeptical of polls on issues that have become ideologically charged. But you're skeptical of ones that are not at the center of the debates? Why?

Ezra: Yes. Because I think that the ways that issue views become cemented have to do with positions that leaders and parties take under duress. It's not just about people's opinions. And so, I think a lot of Republicans have gone wrong time and again, electorally, looking at polls like this and saying, "Well, look, actually most Republicans believe in a pathway to citizenship." And it may even be that that's true, by the way, but an incredibly important ... There is a concentration of the most anti immigrant voters in American politics in the Republican party. And those voters become very, very powerful when you infuriate them.

Look, Pat Buchanan, who was Trump before Trump, he was running and almost winning in Republican primaries going back into the ... I believe he starts in the '80's. I think he's a candidate in '88, if I'm not wrong, and then he runs another campaign in '96. So Pat Buchanan, who looks like Trump however many decades ago now... there's no Pat Buchanan figure who makes a strong run in the Democratic party during this period. So I look at the Republican party and I see a lot of precedent for what it's become now. And I think sometimes people get a little turned around by vague issue polling.

Julia: Interesting. So you're saying there's two separate things. One is how voters think about an issue in isolation, and the other how voters would think about an issue if it became a big deal on a national level? And politicians often look at the former, but the latter is actually what's more relevant to them strategically.

Ezra: Right. Or think about it in terms of the earlier analogy we did around polarizing and sorting. Let's say... and these are just made up numbers for now. Let's say you have a 100-person electorate and 20 people in it are seriously pro immigration — not quite open borders, but let's let people through, let's legalize those who are here illegally. Let's do it. And 20 of them are incredibly anti immigration. Just close the borders, deport everyone who is here illegally. And then, the remainder, the 60 people in the middle, there's some mix between the positions.

And let's say that the mixed people are split between the parties, and a couple of the pretty pro people are split between the parties. But the hardcore anti immigration people are not. Of those 20 people, 18 of them are in the Republican party. So then, if you're polling this, "Well, maybe Democrats are a little bit more supportive of immigration, but actually left is a pretty big concentration in the Republican party of people who are either pro immigrant or in the middle on it so you can work with that middle." But actually the single issue voters in the Republican party are the ones who matter here.

This is, by the way, canonically, this is a case on guns. If you poll Republicans on guns, they have very, very ... Universal background checks are fine. There's a lot of things that people wanted to pass for a long time. They get majority support in the Republican party. But the Republican party is full of people.... of the people for whom guns are the voting issue, and all gun control is a step on the road to tyranny, they're all basically in the Republican party.

And so, when anything happens like gun control, it turns out that those are the people that Republican politicians have to fear because they're the ones who their votes can actually be lost. And then, the Republican party becomes more anti gun control and then the people who don't care about it that much, they change their position a little bit because their political leaders are telling them to do it. That's where the sorting becomes polarization dynamic takes play, which I would say has happened to some degree in the Republican party on immigration too.

But this is why, again, it's really important where the intense players are on an issue. I just don't buy some of these... I'll look at some of these polls, and I will even use them sometimes because I think they're interesting, but I don't think they tell you nearly as much about coalitional dynamics as you need to know. And then, because positions are unstable, particularly when challenged and when your leaders are telling you to take a different view, then things can change really rapidly.

So I would say look at the Republican party for 50, 60, however many years now. It's been a party that is more fearful of the way America is change. It has been a party where politicians who speak up for those viewpoints do better and better and better. And then, it just keeps going on like that until you get to Donald Trump who's a kind of apex predator of that kind of politics...

And the same is true in the Democratic party in the opposite direction. If you're listening to this and you're more conservative, there is a cosmopolitan strain in the Democratic party that strengthens and strengthens over the same period of time. The parties are pulling apart, but they're not necessarily pulling apart because people in the middle developed wildly different views on these things. They're pulling apart because as these things become central the people in the parties, the interest groups in the parties, the coalitional partners, the money, et cetera, that's often the most polarized part of the party. It has a lot of influence on the ultimate position a party takes. And when a party takes a position, that exerts a polarizing influence on the people who didn't have a strong position on the issue to begin with.

Julia: Right. Well, the other kind of alternate model of polarization, besides the “Fox News and Newt Gingrich” one that we already talked about, is something I think you'll like even less. I'll call it the liberal overreach theory of polarization. It's basically that in the last 10 to 15 years, liberals have been moving to the left much faster than conservatives have been moving to the right, especially white liberals. And conservatives reacted against that.

Actually, Kevin Drum wrote a post making this argument, that got a lot of play in conservative circles, as you can imagine. The title of his post was “If you hate the culture wars, blame liberals,” Although, he did say that he thinks most of that move leftward was good. He just thinks it's also causally responsible for the culture wars. So what do you think about that model?

Ezra: I don't particularly disagree with parts of Kevin's model here. I actually talked about this in a recent podcast I did with Lilliana Mason.

The only pushes I would give on that model — and there are a couple... One is it gets to something that I was discussing earlier which is ... First, Republicans were polarizing very hard on issues for a long time, and then it slowed down in the past 10-ish years, particularly as the party lost its internal consensus around economics. And so, I just want to note that, because it isn't just that policy polarization has been going on in one direction. If you follow this conversation in the 2010s, or particularly in the oughts, you would've heard it described in the opposite direction.

But putting that to the side for a minute, my view on that model is that Democrats have polarized more on policy and Republicans have polarized more on the system itself. That is the story of the past decade.

... The one place I really disagree with Kevin on this, which I just don't think he does enough to deal with it, is that it was not policy that started this, it was personnel. Which is to say that what kicked this off was Barack Obama. And Barack Obama and his presidency were not themselves all that left on policy, particularly not on these issues. Barack Obama was famously careful on race itself, but it kicks off both in the Democratic party a move towards a left on race, both because of sorting and of persuasion. And it kicks off in the Republican party, moved to the right.

Then, there's a big jump after Ferguson, but Ferguson gets interpreted in a very, very different way in the modern Democratic party and in the modern kind of more liberal media spheres and social media spheres than it would've before that. This is, again, a place where I think policy views are a little bit of a lagging indicator. What changed is that the Democratic coalition, a multi-racial coalition develops a power to elect a black man as president. That sets off a series of making a period in which race becomes much more central again as the political conflict in American politics, to some degree immigration as well. And we see downstream effects of that.

So I don't disagree with a lot of what Kevin is saying. I would probably describe the causality somewhat differently. And I would say that I think that if you only look at polarization on a limited set of policy issues, you miss a lot of what is driving the political conflict now. Donald Trump, he's got very weird views on policies, and they kind of go all over the place on most things. What he sells is a vision of America that is not always legislatable, but is very clear and, I would say, is a very, very, very strong kind of anti-system polarization, which is important to take seriously as its own political force. Populism is famously not as much of a policy appeal as it is a temperamental appeal and Donald Trump is a populist.

So comparing the Democratic party, which is fundamentally still a coalition built around policy transactionalism that is moving to the left, and the Republican party, which now has an increasingly dominant populist right strain in it... The two parties are simply polarizing rapidly on different dimensions.

And so, I do think you have to account for differences like that if you are trying to say one of the parties has polarized more. That's why I say that I think there's a difference in the way Democrats and Republicans have polarized. But I would

not, at this point, dispute that Democrats have... Although, again, to go back to the book, one thing that was a real unknown when I wrote it was, and this really goes to the Democratic and Republican chapter, I make the argument in that chapter that for reasons of the way electoral geography works, reasons of how the Democratic coalition works because the Democratic coalition includes moderate and conservative blacks and Hispanics in a way that the Republican coalition doesn't have any liberal counterweights.

I made an argument that Democrats have an immune system, I called it, of democracy and diversity that was going to keep them from polarizing in the same way Republicans have in terms of their ... At the very least, their political strategy. It was a little bit unclear to me. It was possible that Democrats in the primary would've nominated somebody who looked much more like a lurch in the other direction, but that isn't what happened. I would say for the exact reasons I laid out, Democrats ended up with Joe Biden. And so, I don't think you can have a theory of polarization that doesn't account for the different tactical and strategic decisions and personnel decisions that the parties are importantly making.

Julia: Great. Well, Ezra, thank you so much for coming on Rationally Speaking and letting me explore and poke at your model of polarization, for so long. I really appreciate it.

Ezra: It's been a pleasure. Thank you so much, Julia.

[musical interlude]

Julia: That was Ezra Klein, author of *Why We're Polarized*, co-founder of Vox and host of the Ezra Klein Show. You should definitely check out his book, especially the second half which we didn't cover as much in our conversation, about the institutional features of the US that take polarization and turn it into political gridlock and more polarization.

Also, if you want to learn more, another important thread we didn't cover is the question of "How do these dynamics Ezra is talking about manifest in other countries compared to the US?" Which is important because it gives us more clues about which explanations for polarization fit best. These cross cultural comparisons aren't really in his book because he wasn't able to find good evidence about it before publication, but there is a Vox article he wrote after the book came out with some new evidence about how affective polarization has changed over time in the US and other countries. Interestingly, it suggests that the US used to have unusually low level of affective polarization, and that we've simply become less of an outlier over time.

And then one more recommendation to pair with this episode is, if you haven't already listened to my episode with the political analyst David Shor, he also explores polarization in the US in recent years especially around education, and why we've seen higher-educated Americans increasingly voting Democrat and lower educated Americans vote Republican, and what the consequences are of that. So that's a nice pairing with this episode I think.

I'll link to all of those on the podcast website. That's all for this episode of Rationally Speaking -- I hope you'll join me next time for more explorations on the borderlands between reason and nonsense.