

Partisan Sectarianism in the Divided States of America

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Abstract

The divide between Democrats and Republicans appears to be greater than at any point in post-war US history. Split ticket voting has declined; there are more 'landslide' counties than ever before; politicians are harshly punished for showing willingness to work with the other party. This growing chasm is usually explained through the lens of polarisation: the idea that voters and elected officials have adopted increasingly extreme policy positions which inhibit compromise. This paper argues that 'sectarianism' can provide a useful framework for understanding these political divisions. Although sectarianism is predominantly used to describe religious differences, this paper holds that the partisan divide within the US takes on similar characteristics. Extreme social aversion, 'othering', and moralising can all be used to describe Americans' attitudes to supporters of the opposing party. The United States has largely been exempted from studies of political sectarianism. This paper proposes to revise this omission.

Introduction

The terms 'polarisation' and 'sorting' have been used to describe the profound shift in the US party system in the past several decades (Levendusky 2009, Rosenfeld 2017). The Democratic and Republican parties, which have dominated US politics since the mid-19th century, were once decentralised, diverse assortments of different (and conflicting) ideologies and social groupings, structured by geographical and historical idiosyncrasies. These coalitions were maintained by the suppression of certain issues from national politics, made possible through federalism. Today, the parties' support has become much more nationally uniform, with race, education, and religion being highly predictive of voting behaviour. Even more significantly, the parties have come represent and promote clear ideological positions on a wide array of policy matters, with relatively little regional variation. The parties' policy programmes have become not only clearer but also more distinctive from each other. The Democrats' and Republicans' ideological centres have moved leftward and rightward, respectively. This change has been well-documented, with important implications for how the parties govern and choose to scrutinise each other.

This growing partisan conflict has also corresponded with sizeable social and attitudinal divisions. Partisanship is not simply a passive descriptor of how someone votes. It is an active identity category which shapes how Americans interpret the world and interact with their fellow citizens. There is a sizeable (and growing) scholarship about the intense social and political divisions within the United States, yet such discussions are almost entirely separated from the conversation about sectarianism (but see Finkel et al 2020). Sectarianism is seen as something 'other places' do. This article disagrees. The United States is now clearly divided between *sectae* ('followings'), not necessarily of the religious kind but of a similar fervour. Specifically, partisan identity – whether a person is a 'Democrat' or a 'Republican' -- now shapes how Americans view the world, other Americans, and themselves. Americans have increasingly grown to hate supporters of the other party, viewing the other sect's capture of political power as not merely unfortunate but illegitimate. The United States increasingly bears the hallmarks of a society that is riven by identity-based divisions mobilised for political ends, a classic definition of sectarianism.

This article will begin with a discussion of the transformation of the US party system over the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. It will then forward the view that partisanship is a deeply rooted identity of its own, which exists beyond a mere label for certain policy commitments. Partisan identity is bound up in group perceptions, including hostility to opposition party supporters. The article then draws a comparison to the description of sectarianism in the academic literature (which overwhelmingly looks past the United States), arguing that the US serves as an important case of a society which has undergone a form of political sectarianisation. Section IV offers some theories as to what might be driving this process of sectarianisation. Section V addresses fair criticisms of this argument and offers some qualified responses.

I. [Sorting and Polarising: Modern US Party Formation](#)

In the first half of the twentieth century, US political parties were unusual creatures. They were 'big tent' parties which accommodated very heterogeneous sets of voters, often with quite divergent policy beliefs. There were liberal Republicans, conservative Democrats, and almost everything else in between. The parties' supporters and elected officials often overlapped ideologically with supporters of the opposing party. While it would be wrong to say that there were no perceived policy differences between the parties, there was enough difference within the parties to mean that a voter of almost any political persuasion could find some ideological fellow travellers within the tent.

Most of twenty century political science scholarship period took for granted that US political institutions accommodated and even promoted this kind of partisanship. Political scientists argued that the horizontally and vertically fragmented structure of the governing institutions in the Constitution were well suited to a decentralised party system. For example, under US presidentialism, with a relatively weak executive and strong legislature that contained super-majoritarian requirements, parties were incentivised to co-operate (Neustadt 1990, Lee 2016).

Federalism meant that parties did not need to take strong national stands on every policy, leaving room for voters of the same party in different states to agree to disagree. Nelson Polsby declared that 'one may be justified in referring to the American two-party system as making something more like a hundred-party system' (1997: 40). Because state parties exercised significant leverage over candidate selection and parties needed to be able to be both competitive at these local levels and to a wider national audience, parties worked to accommodate a range of ideologies and social groups.

Overall, the political science consensus was that partisanship was relatively benign and idiosyncratic and that the differences between parties were sometimes not even as great as the differences within parties. Using econometric methods, in his 'master theory' of the US party system, Anthony Downs 'proved' that candidates needed to seek the centre of the distribution of preferences when the electorate was offered two main party choices (Downs 1957). In sum, voters were not given an ideologically unambiguous choice between parties. Candidates from the same party could promote quite different messages. Even when the parties were seemingly more strongly divided in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, regional intraparty divisions over infrastructure, regulation, and redistribution persisted (Bensel 2001).

The American Political Science Association (APSA) found this state of affairs to be highly regrettable. They looked at other, mainly European, party systems with envy. In countries like Britain, France, or Germany, voters had a clear ideological choice. There was a right-wing, conservative or Christian democratic party which did battle against a left-wing, labour or social democratic party. In systems

with proportional representation, the parties might be more numerous and fragmented, but the ideology of each party was obvious to voters (for the most part). In 1950, APSA issued its call for a more 'responsible' party system. APSA's Committee on Political Parties believed parties having a clear ideological identity would enable voters to take a more informed choice at election time so that their vote would be more motivated by ideas and policies than personalities, patronage, or other trivial matters (APSA 1950).

The committee got its wish. The latter decades of the twentieth century were characterised by a profound ideological sorting, whereby liberals/left-of-centre voters flocked to the Democrats and conservatives/right-of-centre voters supported the Republicans. There was – and remains – a lively academic discussion as to whether this sorting was driven by supply (the parties and their elected officials offered clearer left/right positions and voters followed) or by demand (voters sought out more ideologically pure candidates and voted out those who held a heterodox ideological position within their party). In reality, it was probably a combination of the two but with supply being the driving factor. Because partisan identity is relatively fixed, cohort effects drive change, which can take generations to play out fully. That is to say, as generations containing conservatives who voted Democratic died out, they were replaced by generations of conservatives who now voted Republican and faced fewer cross-cutting social and political pressures than before. Nonetheless, this meant that by the start of the twenty-first century, ideology and party preference became closely aligned.

The aforementioned process, known as partisan sorting, is related to but different from the more commonly discussed concept of 'polarisation'. Sorting simply means that voters with similar ideological beliefs cluster together within the same party. Polarisation refers to the movement of these beliefs to opposite poles of the ideological scale. That is to say, polarisation refers to the idea that not only are the parties coherently left-of-centre and right-of-centre, but that they become *more* left- and right-wing, respectively over time.

There is some evidence that sorting drove ideological polarisation in the United States. Not only did conservatives overwhelming vote Republican, but conservative voters became *even more* conservative than they had previously been. The 'irresponsible' (big tent) party system had constrained the extremes in a way that the well-sorted party system appeared to encourage them. This is partly because voters in heterogeneous parties faced numerous cross-cutting cleavages. Conservative Democrats might help campaign to re-elect a liberal Democrat, while liberal Democrats might work with liberal Republicans on causes of common interest and concern. When all liberals are Democrats and all conservatives are Republicans, these incentives to work across ideological and party lines evaporate.

Polarisation in the United States has increased substantially over the past several decades. Political scientists have largely studied polarisation as an ideological question. Specifically, polarisation is generally understood in terms of how far voters or party elites diverge on key policy questions on a left-right (or liberal-conservative) scale. The United States has shifted from a system characterised by ideologically heterogeneous parties and low polarisation to a highly sorted and polarised political environment (McCarty 2019).

While American voters and political elites diverge to a larger extent on policy matters than previously, *policy* difference seems insufficient to capture the political divide which has been tearing apart the US public realm (Fiorina 2011). As the next section indicates, cues from partisan leaders can change the

position of voters on range of policy issues, especially those of lower salience. Instead, the rancour in US politics today can be in part explained by the divide over *perceptions* of the opposite party itself and its supporters. The growing gap in fellow-feeling between supporters of one's own party and supporters of the opposing party is known as 'affective polarisation'. Hostile sentiments to the opposing party have become increasingly pronounced. There is some evidence that these sentiments obscure and override policy differences. Even when policy consensus exists in principle, voters' and political elites' hostility to the opposing party is so strong that agreement in practice is not forthcoming. Partisan identity overrides policy or material interest.

It seems that affective polarisation has been driven mostly by a growth in hostility to supporters of the opposing party. Voters' attitudes about supporters of their own party haven't changed much. Four decades ago, people liked other people who supported their party. They still do today. But, what has changed is that while voters were once broadly apathetic or neutral in their feelings to supporters of the other party, they now strongly dislike them. This has led to a rise in 'negative partisanship', which refers to voting behaviour that is driven most by a desire to stop the other side from winning (Abramowitz & Webster 2016). Some commentators worry that the growth in negative partisanship can have serious ramifications for the health of democracy, with voters less likely to be willing to concede power to the opposing party (loser's consent), believing them to be beyond the pale.

II. Partisan Identity in America

Partisanship has become, in the words of Paul Pierson and Eric Schickler, a 'mega-identity' (2020: 50). Once cross-cutting cleavages, such as race, ideology, religion, or class, have increasingly aligned with partisan identity. Jonathan Mummolo and Clayton Nall declare, 'Partisanship now appears to be an important social identity, on par with race and gender, that shapes everything' (2016: 45). While earlier political science scholarship emphasised the instrumental rationality of voting, there has been a broader recognition that voting as an expression of identity often overrides seemingly instrumentally 'objective' reasons for supporting a particular candidate or party (Green et al 2002).

About 85% of Americans identify as either Republican or Democrat, about the same proportion who say they believe in God (Hyrnowski 2017). Party identification is roughly evenly split, with a slight edge to Democratic identifiers. Aggregate party identity in the United States is remarkably stable. In spite of all the ructions of the Trump presidency, for example, there was almost no change in the proportion of Americans who identified as Democrat or Republican throughout his four years in office (Jacobson 2020: 777). Individual partisan identity has also been shown to be highly stable in the United States, even when formal party positions on issues might change substantially. Partisanship is not just an expression of voting intention or an historical catalogue of past voting behaviour. Studies in the US show that party identification is overwhelmingly a product of socialisation and tends to remain consistent through life (Philpot 2017). One of the reasons immigrant voters in the United States are among the least strongly attached to a partisan identity may be due to the relative lack of partisan socialisation in their early life (Johnson, forthcoming).

Partisan identity shapes how Americans see the world around them. Voters interpret the same objective economic conditions differently depending on whether their party is in power. Voters 'update' or change their views on a whole range of issues, including objective facts, once it becomes clear to them what the view of *their* party is on an issue. This is sometimes called 'motivated reasoning', whereby people will tend to invent a rational basis or explanation for something, even if it

is inconsistent with the truth, so that it conforms to their prior assumptions or identity (Lodge & Taber 2013). Importantly, consistent with non-US literature on sectarianisation (Mabon 2019), partisan motivated reasoning can be made more salient and expansive when given stronger elite cues (Bisgaard & Slothuus 2018). In other words, elites can exacerbate sectarian difference in the United States – and they regularly do.

It is important to emphasise that parties – and the conflicts between them -- are a normal and inescapable feature of democratic politics. There is virtually no political system in the world which lacks parties. Even when parties are formally banned, proxies for parties, such as candidate-centred lists, soon crop up. As in the US today, parties in many other parts of the world are well-sorted along ideological lines. Voters have a clear choice, and it makes sense to structure the party system around coherent policy offers. In itself, partisanship is not something that should cause concern. Even ideological polarisation itself is not inherently dangerous to the democratic order. What makes the US different, however, is that voters do not simply disagree with people of the opposing party more than they once did; they hate them much more too (Iyengar et al 2012, Iyengar & Krupenkin 2018). They are, therefore, less willing to see disagreements as legitimate or understandable. They might also be less likely to accept the concession of power to the other ‘side’ following an election defeat.

Americans sort *socially* according to party, not just politically. Americans express a clear preference for living among people who vote like they do (Hui 2013, Gimpel & Hui 2018 but see Mummolo & Nall 2016). They express strong preference to working with, dating, and socialising with people of the same party. When a group of random American adults were asked to allocate scholarship money to secondary school pupils, co-partisans were more likely to give to a student whose CV revealed them to be a member of the ‘Young Democrats’ or the ‘Young Republicans’, depending on the partisan attachments of the donor (Iyengar & Westwood 2015).

These findings of partisan homophily are perhaps not terribly surprising or even concerning from the perspective of democratic governance. Causing more cause for alarm is the growing aversion that American partisans express to supporters of other parties, including in seemingly non-political contexts. Multiple studies have found quite extreme negative animus to the opposition party (Mason 2018, Cassese 2019, Martherus et al 2021). These include the use of dehumanising language and aspersions about the patriotism or loyalty of supporters of the other party to the country itself. Americans view opposing partisans as not just wrong but also morally degenerate. ‘Feeling thermometers’ are one way in which political scientists gauge the intensity of voters’ sentiments. The more positive a respondent feels to a person or group, the ‘warmer’ they will place themselves on a thermometer (scaled from 0 to 100). Since the 1970s, affection for co-partisans has hovered at about 75 degrees, but sentiments about supporters of the opposing party have dropped from about 50 degrees (neutral) to 25 degrees (cold) (Finkel et al 2020).

Ideology (policy) can explain this phenomenon only partially. Studies have shown that even when voters are made aware of shared policy outlook with supporters of the opposing party, they still have strongly negative views of supporters of that party. On the other hand, strong partisans can be remarkably ideologically flexible. A study by Lilliana Mason (2018) found that Republicans were content to adopt left-of-centre positions, if they were first told that Donald Trump supported those positions (see also Barber & Pope 2019). Evidence suggests that partisans are more strongly motivated about ‘winning’ or ‘losing’ than the substantive policy gains. People will accept less so long as it means

the other group gets even less. This is not just a policy disagreement. It is about sentiment, feeling, and tribalism.

In sum, Democrats and Republicans exhibit not just high levels of homophily for each other, including in ostensibly non-political domains, but they also demonstrate growing levels of explicit and implicit discrimination or disdain for the opposite party, not just as a matter of politics but in their attitudes and social interactions.

III. Is this Sectarianism?

'Sectarianism' has traditionally referred to group conflict structured by religious differences, especially within the same faith. Study of the phenomenon has largely been confined to zones with violent conflict, especially the Middle East. In a strict sense, sectarianism is conflict between *sects*, coming from the Latin '*secta*' or 'following', as in a religion. Yet, religious sects are hardly ever composed of intellectual or doctrinal divisions alone. They often map heavily (if not perfectly) onto ethnic, linguistic, class, and regional lines. Religious doctrine often is only peripheral to sectarian conflict.

Sensitivity to the breadth of identities involved in sectarian divides has led to a more inclusive understanding of the concept 'sectarianism'. Simon Mabon and his collaborators have offered two conceptual innovations. The first is to widen the geographical scope of the study of sectarianism, which is heavily focused on violent religious conflict in the Middle East. Mabon writes, 'there is nothing inherently "Middle Eastern" about [sectarianism]', even if the region 'undeniably' is at the centre of many of these discussions (Mabon 2021: 177). The second is to widen sectarianism to apply to communal, identity-based divisions of all kinds, rather than ones simply focused on religious belief. Sectarian identities are not 'primordial' but 'constructed'. They are 'malleable entities that are often used for political ends' (Mabon & Ardonivi 2016: 552). Crucially, sectarianism depends on the construction of 'the other' which entails 'dehumanisation and scapegoating for political purposes' (Ardonivi 2016: 579).

The role of elites in driving sectarian divisions has been widely commented upon in the Middle East-dominated literature on sectarianism. The term 'sectarianisation', which draws from security studies' concept of 'securitization', emphasises the role of elites in stoking, provoking, and giving meaning to identities that might otherwise be relatively shallow, hollow, or benign. Sectarianisation has been defined by Nader Hashemi and Danny Postel as 'an active process shaped by political actors operating within specific contexts, pursuing political goals that involve the mobilization of popular sentiments around popular identity markers' (2017: 3).

Sectarianism, thus, comprises (1) identity shaped around belief and motivated for political ends, (2) that identity acting as an interpretive frame for both political and non-political interactions, (3) a sustained and seemingly irreconcilable hostility to another identity group. These factors are driven by elite political actors, and the identities in question are not necessarily ancient or primordial. There is a good case to be made that partisan divisions in the United States fit all of these criteria.

In this light, negative partisanship – hatred and social disgust towards the other party – can be seen as a form of sectarianism. Partisan identity is strong and remarkably stable, but it is, like other kinds of sectarian identity, ultimately constructed. Partisan identity is used to structure and interpret the world. Perhaps most importantly, partisan identity helps generate a clear sense of an 'other' group, which is viewed not just as an opponent in a normal political competition but as an enemy to be

blocked from power. This weakens one of the traditional mechanisms of elections as moderating forces. Hitherto, campaigns could be fought bitterly, but both sides accepted the validity of the outcome and often wished the winner well in their role for the sake of the wider electorate. When voters see the other party as ‘an alien force hostile to their core values’, their willingness to welcome or even accept an election defeat diminishes (Pierson & Schickler 2020).

IV. What is driving this sectarianism?

This paper does not propose to test the definitive causes of sectarianism in contemporary US politics, but the academic literature on polarisation and negative partisanship can provide some insight. These explanations have centred around (1) the role of political elites, (2) the role of intermediary institutions like the media and interest groups, (3) the increasing nationalisation of US politics and policy, (4) social changes such as social sorting and religious decline, and (5) the destabilising incentives of US governing institutions and practices.

Elite Cues

Some accounts of polarisation focus on supply-side factors. Politicians have determined that negative partisanship is a powerful motivator and can boost turnout, even amongst an electorate that is cynical about politics (Huddy & Bankert 2017). Voters might feel fairly unenthusiastic about all politicians, but even a jaded citizen might vote to stop a morally abhorrent candidate or party from being elected. Additionally, it is said that ordinary voters are increasingly forced to choose more extreme party nominees due to gerrymandering and the increased prevalence of primary elections. In these narrower contests, ideologically extreme candidates are selected by the party faithful and then stand in safe seats (‘the decline of the marginal district’). Voters are given two extreme visions of the parties and this only reinforces stereotypes and negative perceptions (Abramowitz et al 2006).

The Media and Interest Groups

Media-focused accounts tend to portray the process as one of media corporations promoting extreme messages which radicalise voters who then demand greater radicalism from their representatives. Some have blamed the increasingly partisan media environment. The academic scholarship on sectarianism emphasises that it is an elite-driven phenomenon. A media-driven explanation would be consistent with this understanding of sectarianisation.

The US media environment has always been partisan. In the nineteenth century, newspapers regularly advertised the party they supported in the name of their publication, such as the *Waterbury Republican*, *Quincy Herald-Whig*, or the *Tennessee Democrat*. Additionally, local newspapers were known for making up or embellishing stories to suit a particular partisan narrative. For example, in the years leading up to slavery, local newspapers regularly spread conspiracy theories and shared lurid, half-true pro- or anti-slavery stories, which had indirect, and sometimes direct, contributions to political violence (Freeman 2018).

However, the key change today is that the media environment has become not just partisan but also nationalised in its partisanship. Local media has become less partisan because they now typically operate in one-newspaper markets, where their audience will naturally be ideologically heterogeneous (Petrova 2011). In contrast, the national media environment is much more competitive and, therefore, news outlets have found pitching themselves to particular partisan audiences can be effective at securing a loyal readership or viewership. Studies have shown that partisan outlets like FOX News are successful in pushing their viewers’ beliefs further to the right over

time (Martin & Yurukoglu 2017). However, it is important not to overstate the causal influence of the media on changing political beliefs. Ideologically one-sided news exposure has an impact on the relatively small section of the population who consume high quantities of partisan news, but it has limited effect on more casual viewers (Prior 2013).

Interest group behaviour can also intensify polarisation. When the parties were ideologically mixed, it made sense for interest groups to pitch themselves as bipartisan or non-partisan in order to capture the attention of like-minded people in both parties. When it is now obvious that virtually all of the supporter or opponents of a particular cause might be on one side of the partisan divide, interest groups' incentives change. It now makes sense for them to align themselves with one party and to undermine support for an unsympathetic one.

The End of Political Decentralisation

All of American politics has nationalised, not just the media ecosystem. In the last century, the federal government has assumed greater policy responsibility (Hopkins 2018). Major policy questions have become centred in Washington, as the debates over civil rights, healthcare, the environment, and (until *Dobbs*) abortion, have shown. The expanded policy authority of the federal government has contributed to polarisation, in part by sending signals to citizens about the partisan valence of issues which might have been read through a different partisan lens, if through one at all, in a decentralised political system.

The increased reliance on primary elections removes intermediary party officials from the candidate nomination process. Candidates are far more linked to national party organisations or factional national interest groups. There has been a marked shift in fundraising from within a district or state to national sources. In the early 1990s, less than a third of campaign contributions crossed state lines, but by 2012, the figure had shot up to two-thirds (Hopkins 2018).

Social Factors

Others have blamed social media echo chambers. Social factors have also been said to be part of this. As people have moved to communities with like-minded people, echo chambers can form and generate suspicion of outsiders. Kelly Garrett (2009) found that subjects were more likely to read news stories which had headlines that confirmed their prior beliefs than those which challenged them. Selective exposure to bias-confirming information has become easier through the internet and social media.

Some commentators have blamed the decline in religious practice and belief with the rise of this kind of sectarian partisanship. From the 1930s until the 1990s, religiosity in the US remained high and survived the kind of declines in religious belief and practice that characterised much of the rest of the rich, democratic world. However, in the last two decades religiosity in the United States has dipped, even if it remains relatively higher than peer countries.

Governing Institutions

While it was once thought that US governing institutions muted these kind of divisions, it is much less clearly the case now. Presidentialism, in particular, seems to exacerbate these divisions. In his seminal work on presidentialism and governing instability, Juan Linz (1990) held out the United States as an exception among presidential systems for its stability. In general, Linz argued, presidentialism produces a separate mandate for the legislative and executive branches which can become dangerous, as neither side recognises the governing authority of the other. Negative partisanship facilitates a 'half

of a half' strategy (Pierson 2017). A candidate who can command a modest majority of support within their own party in a primary election will then go on to expect near-total loyalty from his own side in the general election.

While the post-New Deal US system remains an executive-centred system, with Congress still playing second fiddle to the powerful president, partisan identity has become so clearly inflected in the relationship between the two branches that it overpowers all of their other constitutional responsibilities. The effectiveness of congressional oversight now is best explained by the division of parties rather than the division of powers.

V. Qualifications

There are a few obvious counters to the idea that partisanship in the United States should be regarded as a variety of sectarianism. This section will address those points but ultimately none decisively overwhelm the argument of this piece.

The first qualification is whether partisanship is an appropriate identity category for sectarianism. Can Republican or Democratic identity be compared to ethnic, religious, or other cultural signifiers often associated with sectarianism? While there is a reasonable case to be made that partisan identity is in fact remarkably constant, it is not unchangeable. On the other hand, the same could be said for religious affiliation; though, it is harder to be said for ethnic identity. Additionally, while ethnic or religious identity is, to some extent, 'inescapable' for most people, partisan identity is ultimately a matter of individual choice, however much it might be shaped by social factors and pressures (see White & Laird 2020).

A second qualification is that partisan divisions in the United States are often more symbolic or tactical than they are substantive (Lee 2016). While political elites have strong incentives to generate division between the parties, in fact most voters' attachments to the parties and their perceptions of difference with the parties is strongly but not deeply held (Costa 2021). Deep, generational narratives of betrayal or ancient hatreds are not nearly as well developed with US negative partisanship as they might be with some sectarian feuds, where animosities can make reference to events which happened decades or even centuries earlier. On the other hand, the work of Simon Mabon and his colleagues has shown that deep rootedness of these kind of sectarian divisions is often overstated and stoked by elites in the sectarianisation process. Even seemingly 'ancient' hatreds often are the product of more modern storytelling and spin.

A third qualification is whether the sectarianism being described is equally felt by both sides. Many scholars have commented upon 'asymmetric polarisation', with the view that the Republican Party has become more extreme than the Democratic Party (Hacker & Pierson 2015). There is some indication, based on roll-call voting patterns in Congress, that Republican members have moved further to the right than Democratic members have moved to the left (Grossmann & Hopkins 2016). Some scholars have emphasised the highly organised networks of wealthy elites who have strongly influenced the Republican Party's governing priorities (Skocpol & Hertel-Fernandez 2016). It can also be pointed out that the Democrats experience greater cross-pressures on economic issues because they have an ideologically left voting base but still rely on undertaxed, wealthy Americans to finance their party and campaigns (Pierson & Schickler 2020). Additionally, Jonathan Rodden (2019) has pointed out that the political geography of the United States disadvantages the Democrats. It requires them to win more ideologically centrist and even conservative-leaning districts and states in order to

secure House and, especially, Senate majorities (Johnson & Miller 2022). Republicans do not face these same geographical hurdles, and, therefore, do not need to make the same kind of broad-based electoral appeals.

The limitation of this literature is that it focusses overwhelmingly on the policy-based or ideological divisions between parties, whereas the scholarship on affective or emotional polarisation shows a much more equitable balance of animosity between Democrats and Republicans on identity grounds. Indeed, these findings further reinforce that we should not simply regard the divisions between Democrats and Republicans today in terms of disagreement over policies but rivalries between two followings, or sects.

Conclusion

This article has proposed that comparative sectarianism is a relatively novel framework by which to understand the growing divide within US society. Scholars of sectarianism grapple with similar questions – identity, race, religion, ideology, belonging – and consider its implications for politics – inclusion, democracy, minority rights. Yet, very little of the literature applies this concept to the US case, and it is overwhelmingly dominated by religious themes. While acknowledging the importance of this intellectual context, some of these approaches can be carried over into an analysis of the United States. It is hoped that by seeing negative partisanship as a case of sectarianism rather than simply policy disagreement can help explain other worrying developments in US politics, such as the willingness of political actors to breach established rules and norms to prevent the ‘other side’ from gaining power. In this light, the events of 6th January 2021, to overthrow the US presidential election, become more explicable, if not any less concerning.

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