What Price Democracy?

REVIEWED BY MICHAEL W. MASTERS

> *In a republic, the manners, sentiments, and interests of the people should be similar. If this is not the case, there will be constant clashing of opinions, and the representatives of one part will be continually striving against those of the other.*
>
> — "Brutus,"
> pseudonym of eighteenth century
> anti-federalist writer

Despite liberal gatekeeping with regard to political dialogue—enforced by the media and political, cultural, academic, and other institutions—a glimpse of reality occasionally makes its way through the scab of political correctness that obscures public debate about the future of the nation. The latest to break the barrier of silence is Bill Bishop, in his book, *The Big Sort: Why the Clustering of Like-Minded Americans Is Tearing Us Apart*. Coauthored with Robert Cushing, who performed many of the demographic and electoral analyses that form the factual foundation of the book, *The Big Sort* contends that America is fragmenting into two separate countries along distinct political, cultural, social, religious—and even racial—fault lines. These fractures show up as clustering of like-minded people into near-homogeneous local communities, groups that diverge politically and culturally from people in other locales with differing views.

The Big Sort:
Why the Clustering of Like-Minded Americans Is Tearing Us Apart
by Bill Bishop with Robert G. Cushing
Houghton Mifflin Company
New York, New York, 2009
370 pp, hardcover, $25.00

Bishop and Cushing spent years gathering data on localized voting patterns and analyzing them statistically. Their conclusion is that people are sorting themselves politically through individual selection of where to live, what types of careers to pursue, where to go to church, who to socialize with, and other common life choices. While the book takes its primary cue from voting patterns for the two major parties, Republicans and Democrats, the opposing viewpoints identified by Bishop, a self-proclaimed liberal, are more fundamental than mere party affiliation. They encompass conservative vs. liberal, rural vs. urban, religious vs. secular humanist, the great commission (spreading the biblical gospel) vs. church as social gospel apostle, right to life vs. abortion, firearms ownership vs. gun control, and traditional views of marriage, gender roles, family, sexuality, child-rearing, morality, public conduct, patriotism and social structure vs. attitudes that traditionalists would describe as decadent at least and bordering on nihilistic at worst.

These splits reveal polarization of Americans into two incompatible world views, a gap which dwarfs normal historical differences that have until the last half century coexisted through political compromise and social accommodation—or, at least, through toleration. In essence, the authors contend, Americans are retribalizing. Their book's findings were initially published in 2004 as a series of newspaper articles. However, as the magnitude of the Big Sort became evident, they began asking questions about its significance, questions that led to publication of the book.

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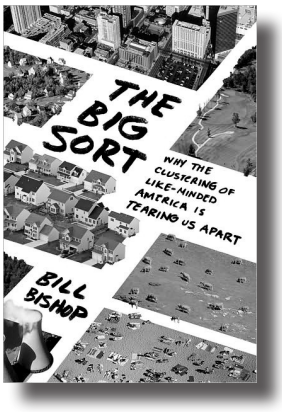
We knew that the pattern was clear. But was it meaningful? Did it matter that our communities were becoming more politically homogeneous? The country was polarized during the Civil War, but compared to those times, our own circumstances didn't appear dire. Furthermore, assuming that these demographic shifts did matter, why would they be happening now?

The last question was particularly perplexing. Certainly, in earlier years, the bonds of class, ethnicity, religion, and occupation, or the barriers of geography, had restricted movement and enforced a rough kind of segregation. But those previous periods of political polarization had come before the automobile, the interstate highway system, Social Security and other safety-net programs, commercial air transportation, widespread higher education, and laws enforcing racial equality. Americans now had unprecedented choice about where and how they wanted to live. They had incredible physical and economic mobility—but these freedoms seemed only to have increased segregation, not lessened it. Why?

Tipping Point Politics

Leaving aside the question of why for the moment, the authors present a compelling case for the existence of the Big Sort. The key indicator is fine-grained voting patterns from national elections. Differences begin to appear at the state level, but the pattern becomes clearer when the analysis is pushed down to individual counties. What the authors found is a phenomenon involving political beliefs that is not unlike that observed by demographers in ethnically mixed but previously white neighborhoods. Once the percentage of non-whites in a neighborhood exceeds a "tipping point," whites who are economically able move out—hence, "white flight." Bishop's thesis is that this phenomenon extends to political beliefs as well. Substitute "conservative" and "liberal," Republican and Democrat, for white and non-white, depending on the specifics of each locality, and the analogy is complete.

Beginning their analysis with the end of World War II, the authors examined voter preferences for the two major political parties for every presidential election through 2004. They found that only 346 counties across the nation had voted for the same party since 1948. However, as they moved forward in time, more and more counties tipped to one party or the other. Only fifty-four tipped in 1952 but a whopping 536 tipped in 1968. For untipped counties, the average spread between parties was typically a 2 or 3 percent difference. But for tipped counties, the spread was 20 percent or more in most elections. The trend has continued. Between 1976 and 2004, the gap between parties grew in an astonishing 2085 counties while only 1,026 counties became more competitive. Taking demographically changing California as a case in point, "17 counties grew more Democratic after 1976, and 30 became more reliably Republican. Only 11 California counties (19 percent) became more closely contested."



This process of self-segregation would be inconsequential if only a few Americans lived in politically homogeneous counties. But the numbers, we learned, weren't small. In 2004, one-third of U.S. voters lived in counties that had remained unchanged in their presidential party preference since 1968. Just under half lived in counties that hadn't changed since 1980, 60 percent lived in counties that hadn't changed since 1988, and nearly 73 percent lived in counties that hadn't changed since 1992....National political choices were being carved into local geographies.

The spread was more pronounced in Republican counties, "which saw the margins for Republican presidential candidates increase over time." And, "once these counties tipped, they grew more partisan." In fact, the authors found that "Republican counties tended to become more politically segregated than Democratic counties."

A major factor in the sorting process is the dichotomy between urban and rural populations. "Rural people have always seen things differently from folks in the cities." And, "Rural America made its own rules. The stereotype of the rural voter is a white male—undoubtedly toting a weapon." The result is an electoral map of the United States that shows vast areas of sparsely populated Republican counties broken by occasional urban Democrat metropolises and their outlying yuppie satellite communities.

> Between the second Clinton election in 1996 and the first Bush election in 2000, 856 counties changed allegiance. Exactly 2 of these 856 counties switched from Republican to Democratic. Both were metro communities....The 854 counties that switched from Democratic to Republican were mostly tiny places. Half of them had fewer than 8,300 votes. The wholesale shift of rural Americans to the Republican Party wasn't isolated to one region or even two. The entire country broke part, rural versus urban."

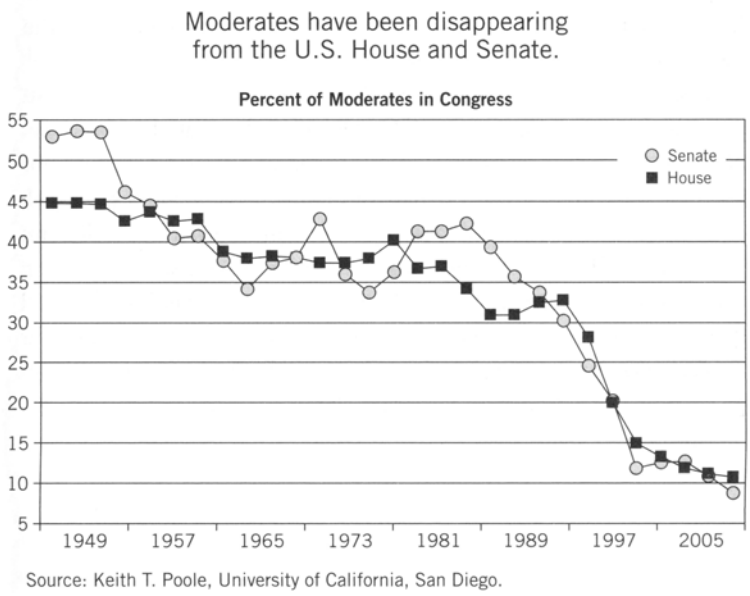
Although Congressional districts are larger than counties, the political realignment brought on by the Big Sort must inevitably be reflected in the composition—and eventually the conduct—of the House of Representatives and, to a lesser degree, the Senate. Once upon a time, as recently as the 1950s, there was fraternization in the aisles and cloakrooms, attendance at social gatherings, genuine friendships across party lines, etc. University of California political scientist Gary Jacobson wrote that

> In the fifties and sixties, these guys hung out in the gym....They socialized at functions held by lobbyists, across parties. They hung out in Washington together, and they formed friendship on affinities that had nothing to do with politics. It reduced the level of conflict. Now they don't talk to anyone except for people in their own party....It's a very different world.

Those times are long gone, and change has brought hard-line partisanship to Congress in a way that perhaps more than coincidentally echoes the sectional factions that dominated Congress and the country in the run-up to the fratricidal war of 1861–65.

To measure partisan polarization among members of Congress, political scientists Howard Rosenthal, Nolan McCarty, and Keith Poole track votes of individual members, who are then placed on an ideological scale from liberal to conservative. In the 1970s, the scatter plot of the 435 members of the House of Representatives was decidedly mixed. Democrats tended toward the left and Republicans drifted right, but there was a lot of mingling. Members from the two parties overlapped on many issues. When the scholars fast-forward through the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s, however, the votes of the 435 representatives begin to split left and right and then coalesce. The scatter plot forms two swarms on either side of the graph's moderate middle....In the mid-1970s, moderates filled 37 percent of the seats in the House of Representatives. By 2005, only 8 percent of the House could be found in the moderate middle.

Figure 10.1 The Decline of the Political Center, 1949–2005



Source: Keith T. Poole, University of California, San Diego.

This decline is illustrated graphically as Figure 10.1 from *The Big Sort*.

Irreconcilable Differences

There remains the question of why the Big Sort is happening. Party affiliation is simply a focal point for differences that go much deeper. Author Bishop explores a number of underlying demographic, social, cultural, and political factors influencing America's self-segregation. The authors spend a good many pages analyzing segments of the American body politic, from Bible-toting coal miners to Starbucks-sipping urban yuppies. Each example serves to illustrate aspects of the tectonic shift in American social and political thought—and surprisingly often traditional Christianity is at the point of the spear. One such case is the great school textbook battle that took place in Kanawah County WV in the mid-1970s. There, rural and religiously fundamentalist West Virginians rose up to repudiate culturally progressive revisionist school texts forced on West Virginia's children by the liberal urban segment of the population as it gained effective control of the West Virginia Board of Education.

Another example is the rise of evangelical megachurches. This phenomenon traces to the intellectual insights of Christian missionaries such as Waskom Pickett, author of *Christian Mass Movements in India,* and Donald McGavran, author of a book titled *The Bridges of God.* Initially ignored by established denominations, *The Bridges of God* asserted that non-Western peoples cannot be successfully evangelized in meaningful numbers except within the framework of their own culture and needs. Soon, enterprising young pastors applied McGavran's philosophy to disaffected Americans fed up with the liberal tilt of mainline churches. The result was the meteoric rise of city-sized evangelical congregations that provide parishioners a comforting refuge from a culturally alien wider world.

The differences identified by Bishop and Cushing run deep and crosscut many seemingly ordinary issues. For example, political scientists Marc Hetherington and Jonathan Weiler conducted a study that correlated child-rearing philosophy with political affinities. They concluded that beliefs in this seemingly innocuous and highly personal realm were a better predictor of party affiliation than income. "Little wonder our politics today are polarized. The values of the Republicans and Democrats are very much at odds. *We do not agree on the most fundamental of issues.*" [Emphasis added]

Bishop contends that much of the impetus behind the Big Sort, the "why," lies in a post-modern focus on individual choice combined with the ease of relocation that today's transportation network and job mobility confer on people—allowing each individual to follow through with his or her choice without undue economic impact.

> Tradition, economic class and occupation, religious denomination, civic structure, and party politics—the ways of life that had molded the country over the previous century—were losing significance. The new society was more about personal preference and worldview than public policy. It was as much or more concerned with self-expression and belief as with social class and economics.

It seems evident that mobility plays a key enabling role. And, the Big Sort is surely the sum of many individual choices, made easier by mobility as well as changing social conventions and legalisms. But, the answer Bishop gives seems a bit too trite to explain such a far-reaching realignment of American political geography. Uncorrelated individual choice implies a certain randomness of outcome—churn without pattern—that is contradicted by the observed systematic clustering around two polar opposite ideological beliefs. Motivation lies elsewhere.

Rather than random lifestyle choices, one sus-

pects that the animating force behind the Big Sort is a backlash against social, political, cultural, and demographic changes resulting from a conflict between traditional Western values and the strictures of a puritanical liberal ideology that, at times, borders on Marxism. Political correctness rules virtually every debate touching on civil rights, moral values, cultural norms, personal conduct, and "lifestyle" choices. Race is undoubtedly a factor as well. These taboos inhibit ordinary people from redressing deeply held grievances against undesired societal changes. Left without effective defenses, many uproot and flee to communities where they can be in the company of neighbors, and elected officials, whose values more closely match their own. The result is a hardening of political and cultural battle lines.

> As people seek out the social settings they prefer—as they choose the group that makes them feel the most comfortable—the nation grows more politically segregated—and the benefit that ought to come with having a variety of opinions is lost to the righteousness that is the special entitlement of homogeneous groups. We all live with the results: balkanized communities whose inhabitants find other Americans to be culturally incomprehensible; a growing intolerance for political differences that has made national consensus impossible and politics so polarized that Congress is stymied and elections are no longer just contests over policies, but bitter choices between ways of life.

Beyond the Tipping Point

The ideological divide between liberalism and the more traditional view is certainly a major cause of the Big Sort. But, it is not the only one. There is another, and it is race. This also includes immigration, which is now almost exclusively a Third World affair. Not surprisingly, since both racial integration and Third World immigration began in the 1960s, the political realignment represented by the Big Sort traces from that decade.

> Ronald Reagan did not lead white men out of the Democratic Party with his 1980 campaign. Rather, the switch can be traced to 1964, when "men's support for the Democratic Party dropped precipitously from 51 percent to the high 30s throughout the seventies to a low of 28 percent in 1994." The gap in the party preferences of white men and women that became so pronounced in the 1990s and has continued into this century resulted from white men leaving the Democratic Party beginning in the mid-1960s.

The flight of whites away from the Democratic Party began when the party initiated major civil rights and Third World immigration legislation in the 1960s, sparking a perception that Democrats no longer represented the interests of whites. Up until about 1970, the voting patterns of whites showed little correlation with whether a county was likely to vary by party from one election to the next or show a tendency to be landslide Republican or Democrat. However, since then whites have migrated to Republican counties in increasing numbers. "By the time of the 2000 census, only 18 percent of the nation's white population lived in Democratic landslide counties. By contrast, in 2000, 30 percent of America's white population lived in counties that provided Republican landslide margins in the 2004 presidential election."

Not only did integration change the racial character of neighborhoods, but the Immigration Reform Act of 1965 began tipping the racial balance of the nation toward an eventual Third World majority. As did blacks before them, the new Third World electorate prefers the party of racial entitlements: "...those born outside the United States fa-

vored Democratic counties. By 2000, 21 percent of the population in Democratic landslide counties was foreign-born, compared to just 5 percent in Republican counties." White flight, which has become the "sociological equivalent of assortative mating," has largely created the Big Sort's political realignment. "The real 'white flight' of the past two generations has been *whites moving to communities that were becoming staunchly Republican.*" [Emphasis added.]

This is a significant change from decades prior to the 1970s in which "Republican landslide counties actually had a slightly *smaller* percentage of the total white population than did Democratic landslide counties." However, "By the time of the 2000 census [35 years after the Immigration Reform Act of 1965], only 18 percent of the nation's white population lived in Democratic landslide counties. By contrast, in 2000, 30 percent of America's white population lived in counties that provided Republican landslide margins in the 2004 presidential election."

At one time, traditional values formed a relatively stable foundation for social and cultural norms, preserved throughout the 400-year history of Europeans in North America. However, beginning in the 1960s with the civil rights overthrow of the established order, race became a major factor in the political calculus in a way that it never was before. But, a funny thing happened on the way to the millennium—the promised utopia of racial harmony never materialized. As even Bishop admits, the melting pot "turned out to be a big flop. People, classes, and races didn't 'melt' as expected." Nor has religion, sometimes represented to be the exclusive purview of conservative Republicans, provided a counterweight. For non-whites, at least, "[r]ace trumps religion....Black Protestants were the most Democratic of the groups, followed closely by Jews and Latino Catholics." Typically, and without a hint of awareness of inconsistency, whites get the blame: "The dealignment of voters was almost entirely a white phenomenon."

The Fatal Flaw

It would be an oversimplification, however, to ascribe the Big Sort entirely to racial issues. The foremost purveyors of non-traditional lifestyles are largely white. School integration was commanded by an all-white Supreme Court, and the civil rights- and Third World-friendly immigration legislation of the 1960s was passed by a virtually all-white Congress. Clearly, there are fundamental ideological differences among whites. These diverging core values might well be expressed as the brotherhood of all mankind vs. loyalty to a set of principles that, whether by conscious design or accident of history, serve to preserve and protect the interests of whites as a group.

This divide has been present in the West for a long time, and it may be the West's greatest weakness—perhaps a fatal weakness in the end. Early European liberalism sought equity within ethnically unified societies. If it had been content to lighten the burden of its own people, classical liberalism would have been a valuable adjunct to long-term group survival. However, it did not stop there. Instead, it extended its grasp to the entirety of mankind, a reach that Charles Dickens called "telescopic philanthropy"[1]—to the inevitable detriment of its founding peoples. Aided and abetted by Frankfurt School cultural revolutionaries, liberalism has become the domain of aggressive, proselytizing true believers, who feel compelled to demonize their opponents rather than compromise with them. Consider this example reproduced by *The Big Sort* author, Bill Bishop, from a Seattle newspaper, *The Stranger*— a manifesto titled "The Urban Archipelago."

> Liberals, progressives, and Democrats do not live in a country that stretches from the Atlantic to the Pacific, from Canada to Mexico. We live on a chain of islands. We are citizens of the Urban Archipelago, the United Cities of America. We live on islands of sanity, liberalism, and compassion. . .And we are the real Americans. They—rural, red-state voters, the denizens of the exurbs—are not real Americans. They are rubes, fools and hate mongers.

Such incendiary rhetoric spells an end to meaningful dialogue. "Tolerance—and its progeny in the political world, compromise—were the victims of late-twentieth-century politics." In reality, the

absence of tolerance has, over the last fifty years, been largely a liberal phenomenon. The liberal double standard is aptly captured by the aphorism, "Tolerance is a virtue extended only to those with whom tolerant people agree." In other words, "tolerance for me, but not for thee"—a motto in consonance with the Frankfurt School's critical theory handbook for undermining the foundations of society.

Demand for tolerance at the sacrifice of self-interest is a form of aggression—and such coercion is especially insidious when deployed against a morally conscious people. Traditional Americans are only now getting the message after having long been dragooned into a nearly debilitating excess of it. Bishop laments the loss of tolerance without really acknowledging that the dearth has, until recently, been mostly one way. But, the demise of tolerance is also a sign that people are waking up to the consequences of unrequited accommodation and are starting to fight back.

Thinking the Unthinkable

Bishop cites English anthropologist Max Gluckman, who observed that societies endure when parties to disagreement on some issues are also allies in agreement on others. But, he adds, according to political scientist Robert Dahl, if all divisions "occur along the same lines, if the same people hold opposing views in one dispute after another, then the severity of conflict is likely to increase. The man on the other side is not just an opponent, he soon becomes an enemy." Welcome to Big Sort America. The Big Sort is objective evidence of the death of the American social contract, killed by too much diversity—not just of race, ethnicity, language, culture, and religion, but, perhaps more importantly, of animating ideals and core values.

The irreconcilable differences Bishop identifies in *The Big Sort* bespeak an ideological gulf that calls into question whether national unity can be achieved other than in times of war. The "clustering of like-minded Americans" is not "tearing us apart." There is no longer an "us" to tear apart. Two antithetical world views are locked together by history in a fatal embrace, and, as Yeats foretold, "the center cannot hold."[2] Democracy itself becomes an instrument of oppression when the interests of disparate parties diverge so radically that fulfillment of one group's agenda violates the fundamental beliefs and jeopardizes the long-term welfare of another.

The Big Sort reveals a deep foreboding about the future on the part of traditional Americans, who sense that their future is threatened by changes they cannot control. While lacking the blood and physical destructiveness of armed conflict, political processes have come to resemble war rather than the giving of the consent of the governed—to the winners go the spoils and to the losers go the loss of cherished ideals and more. Marriages may be ended when there are irreconcilable differences, but how does one peacefully divorce an incompatible citizenry? For now, white flight, AKA the Big Sort, is the only recourse—but it is at best a temporary expedient. Soon, no place will remain to which to flee. Whether democracy, or, indeed, the nation itself, can continue to exist other than in name only—or whether conditions may devolve into real violence if the demographic and cultural changes now in train spin out of control—is a matter of conjecture.

This is the central dilemma facing traditional Americans, whether they consciously recognize it or not. Multicultural and multiracial democracy—and the cultural Marxism driving it—are inexorably displacing an entire people, united by common history, heritage, culture, language, religion, and values. The solution, of course, is not to abandon democracy but rather to reject the nation's post-1965 social, cultural, and demographic trends. One must ask, is it possible to achieve a no-fault parting that (re)creates political, and ultimately, national associations possessed of sufficient harmony of values and sharing of interests to make benign consensus a reality? Only in such circumscribed conditions is democracy an equitable form of government. The Big Sort is an as-yet-inchoate step in that direction. Whether it will ripen into a coherent political movement remains to be seen. ■

Endnotes

1. *Bleak House*, serialized 1852–53.
2. "The Second Coming," 1920.