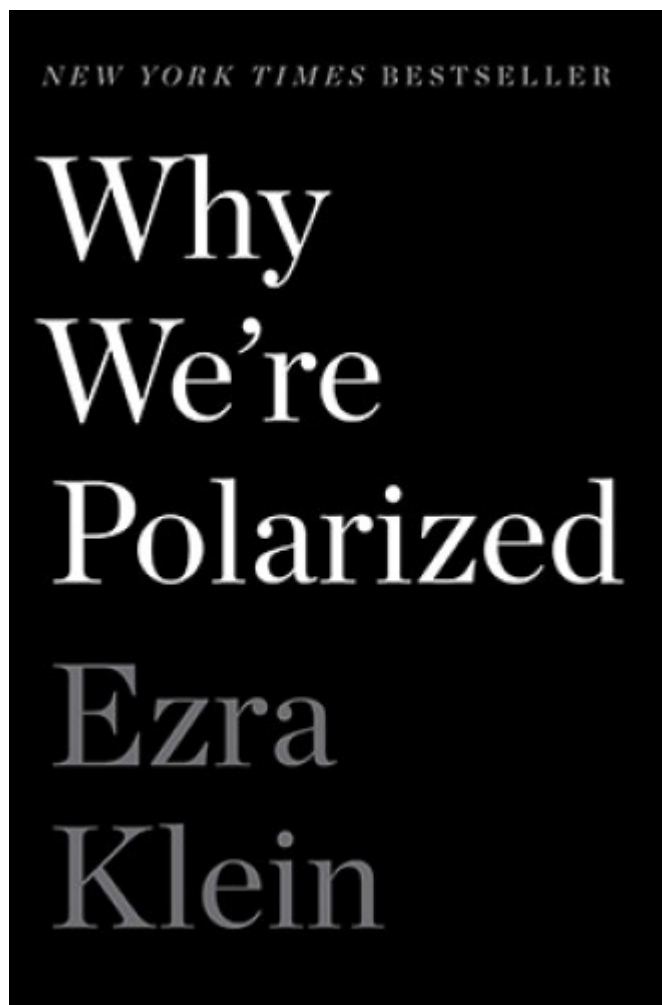


How can we make our political polarization less destructive?

Ezra Klein suggests structural changes. Darrell West suggests talking to each other.

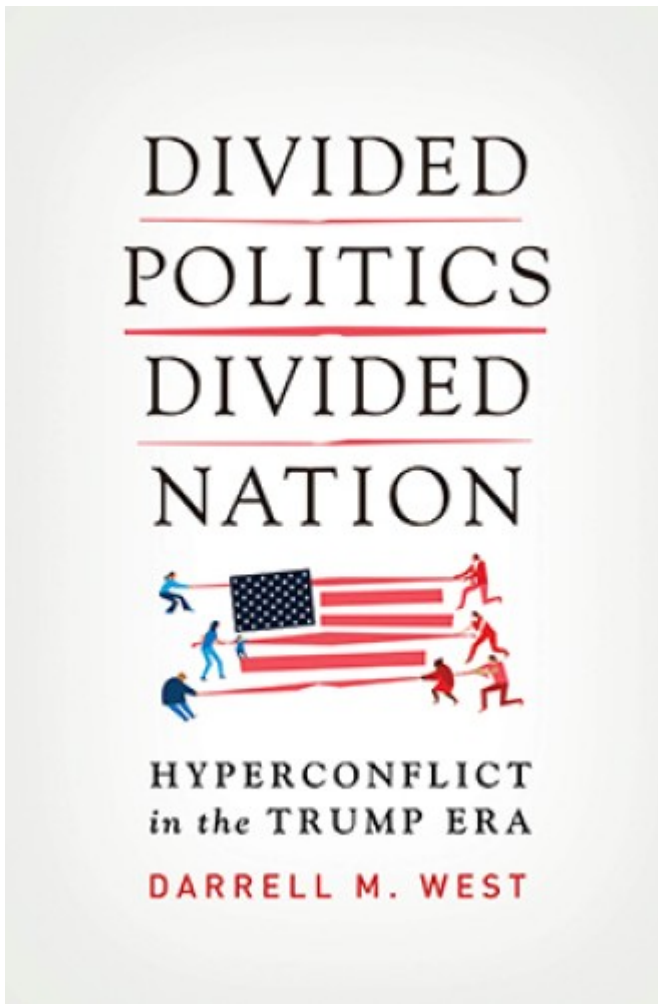
by [Anthony B. Robinson](#) in the [May 20, 2020](#) issue

In Review



Why We're Polarized

By Ezra Klein
Simon & Schuster



Divided Politics, Divided Nation

Hyperconflict in the Trump Era

By Darrell M. West

Brookings Institution Press

Remember when Grandma might be upset that someone in the family was marrying outside the faith? “But he’s a Protestant (or Jew or Catholic)!” Nowadays, the family fuss sounds different. “She’s marrying a Republican! His family all voted for Trump!” Or, “Her parents are liberals! They loved Obama!”

In 1960, marrying someone of a different political party was no big deal. That’s changed, according to research cited by Ezra Klein. Political partisanship is now the real cleavage in American life, the factor that creates marital consternation. We are a nation sharply and deeply divided by politics.

Darrell West, who taught at Brown University for two decades, now directs the Governance Studies program at the Brookings Institution. But he grew up on a dairy farm and in a small town in Ohio, where his family's life revolved around their conservative Christian church. In our polarized world, West has feet in both camps.

His book attempts to look at both camps and explain them to each other. "My immediate family is unusual in the breadth of its political and religious disagreements," writes West.

The four siblings of my generation include an academic researcher who studies American politics, a gay brother who distrusts conservatives, and two sisters who are Christians supporting Donald Trump. We are about as far apart as a family could possibly be in twenty-first-century America.

While West and his siblings are far apart, they aren't unique. The annual appearance of guides for having (or avoiding) hard conversations at the Thanksgiving table is testimony that America's polarization cuts through the heart of many families.

West is aware that his life could have been very different. He wanted to leave the farm, where the work was exhausting and relentless, and he knows he could have ended up working at the town's lone manufacturing plant. He imagines he might even have become an alcoholic like many of his classmates. The fact that he did not is due in large part to intervention from the government, he believes. "I wouldn't have been able to afford college without loans from the federal government . . . I am exhibit A on the value of that kind of investment."

While he got a winning ticket in the lottery for upward mobility, he writes that "most of today's young people have losing tickets," especially those in rural areas and small towns. The balance of West's narrative chronicles the political repercussions of the tickets these young people have been dealt.

While West traces his personal journey and locates it in the context of cultural and economic shifts of the last 40 years, Klein takes a different approach. "Let me be clear from the beginning," he writes. "This is not a book about people. This is a book about systems."

Klein, a self-confessed political wonk, is the cofounder of *Vox* and a widely followed podcaster. While he lives, eats, and breathes politics, he knows that many people

don't. His book is full of analysis and policy issues, but it is also accessible.

American politics has become "a toxic system," Klein states. To understand how we got to this place and what might be done about it, he examines the power of groups in our lives.

The human mind is exquisitely tuned to group affiliation and group difference. It takes almost nothing for us to form a group identity, and once that happens, we naturally assume ourselves in competition with other groups. The deeper our commitment to our group becomes, the more determined we become to make sure our group wins.

There was a time when our various group affiliations were more fluid and mixed. (Fred Rogers was a lifelong Republican.) But that time is long past. Marketing, media, technology, and the more sharply defined nature of political parties today reinforce our group identification and the desire to "maximize our group's advantage," even if those outcomes are overall "worse for everyone."

Lest we bemoan polarization as a complete disaster, Klein argues that it was the civil rights movement and the Civil Rights Act of 1964 that prompted a more polarized American politics, moving the two parties to be much more clearly delineated. Polarization, in other words, is not always "on its own . . . a problem." Klein explains: "The alternative to polarization often isn't consensus but suppression."

This is a helpful point. It is easy, perhaps especially for church people, to lament "all this conflict and division" and wish that everyone could just get along. But it's not always that simple. Klein's approach is not to urge an end to polarization (which is unlikely to happen anytime soon) but to argue for changes that make it less obstructive and destructive. While West argues for building relationships across party lines, Klein argues for policy changes like ranked-choice voting and elimination of the Electoral College.

Why have our group affiliations become so much more rigid and critical? In a chapter titled, "Demographic Threat," Klein argues that it's largely about race. The fundamental polarization driver is that a white Christian majority is losing its long-held dominance. In the debate over whether support for President Trump was prompted more by racial or economic drivers, Klein cites research to suggest the former.

Klein analyzes the role of media and social media in our polarization. “The old line on local reporting was: ‘If it bleeds, it leads.’ For political reporting, the principle [now] is: ‘If it outrages, it leads.’” Outrage is deeply connected to identity: “we are outraged when members of other groups threaten our group.” In traditional media and on social media, “loud gets noticed. Extreme gets noticed. Confrontational gets noticed. Moderate, conciliatory, judicious—not so much.”

Not only is our current polarization destructive, it has all the earmarks of a vicious cycle. “Institutions polarize to appeal to a more polarized public, which further polarizes the public, which forces the institutions to polarize further and so on.” Then along comes a crisis, and the necessary collective response is jeopardized by divide-and-conquer politics.

The challenge for Christians is to discern what “love your enemies” means in America today. When conflicts arise, can we face them forthrightly but without demanding total destruction of the other side? Is it ever right to advocate for the other side? We are called to something different and harder than winning at all cost.