

America Is Atomizing

A nation of us versus them and them and them.



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By **Jesse McKinley**

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It's an article of faith that America is polarized. Its people are bifurcated and bunkered, engaged in a never-ending Spy vs. Spy with each camp finding it nearly impossible to relate to the other side of the divide. That certainly describes our ruptured two-party political system: The very concept of a United States, it seems, is now misleading.

But what if that idea doesn't quite sum it up?

Some social scientists and cultural observers are increasingly considering a more extreme concept: atomization, or the scattering of people — not into two opposing factions but into countless smaller tribes.

Like groups of atoms, those subsets can form — and dissolve — at quicksilver pace, leaving people in ever-tinier bubbles, devoid of connection with one another and the larger social fabric. Even subgroups have subgroups, dividing amoeba-like into combative factions, creating a nation of us vs. them and them and them.

It's a phenomenon pulling at almost every aspect of society. A report in June by Pew Research Center of more than 10,000 Americans found that the two-party system has basically split into nine groups, ranging from the “unconventional right” to the “left-out left” to the “tuned-out middle.” Each embodies “a complex mix of values and beliefs” that belie — and bedevil — traditional Democratic and Republican alignments.

At the same time, an atomized society provides community inside subcultures. Popular influencers, some with audiences far greater than those of traditional media outlets, have given voice to previously fringe interests, creating camaraderie for anyone who thought they were the only cat-loving gun owner. The palindrome enthusiast. A “hot”

girl with I.B.S. A knitting Swiftie. The constituencies start to sound like Mad Libs.

Even the use of “atomization” as a word has surged recently, with writers adopting it to explain things like the success of Mormon-mom influencers (capitalizing on the loneliness of motherhood, according to New York magazine) and the decrease in wine sales (“people across the rich world increasingly live, and eat, alone,” the Economist said).

Cultural critics and historians say our atomization is driven by many forces, including the nation’s foundational pledge of personal freedoms, its proud and sometimes stubborn streak of individualism and its regional and ethnic diversity. Perhaps most important is the internet, offering anything to everybody, no matter how niche — and often leading to a distracted, fragmented and overstimulated online world.

One of the darkest elements of this is the amplifying and normalizing of toxic ideologies: the racists and misogynists and white supremacists who connect online and reassure one another. Harmful ideas have long existed, of course, but they receive more oxygen in a world where people’s darkest impulses can gain instant validation on the internet.

Other side effects include the faster rise of baseless theories — Jeffrey Epstein is alive, Hamas’s Oct. 7 attacks were staged, Democrats stole the 2020 presidential election. Even if they seem absurd, each potentially undercuts faith in institutional sources of information, including the news media, further fueling doubt and cynicism.

That brew of disinformation and disgust parallels a deep civic disillusionment: Poll after poll has found Americans less likely to know their neighbors, to trust other people, to have faith in the modern family. America is the only country where a majority of people think their fellow citizens are “morally bad,” according to Pew.

The Balkanization of belief also undercuts a shared national narrative, students of political theory say, noting that commonalities are important to help bind people together in hard times like wars and economic downturns. Atomization has dangerous historical precedents, too. Hannah Arendt, the political philosopher widely credited with popularizing the idea, saw the phenomenon as a precursor to regimes like the Nazis and Stalinist Russia.

“Totalitarian movements,” she wrote in 1951, “are mass organizations of atomized, isolated individuals.”



George Etheredge for The New York Times

The great unraveling

It has been a quarter century since the political scientist and Harvard professor Robert Putnam published “Bowling Alone,” a diagnosis of a nation — and a collective national

identity — being torn apart at the seams. Putnam used data to show a decades-long drift away from civic institutions and tracked the decline of “social capital,” that amorphous bond of shared interests, values and goals between people.

The retreat from civic life began in the 1960s, a decade of assassinations, the Vietnam War and distrust of government, followed by the “Me Decade” of individualism in the 1970s. Just as urban and industrial movements had done a century before, subsequent suburban sprawl and lives dominated by cars also contributed to a sense of disconnection. More recently, the culprits include the 2008 economic crash, the Covid pandemic, the opioid epidemic and a profusion of low-wage, dead-end jobs in the gig economy.

Now, Putnam says, things are even worse.

“What most matters is face-to-face connection,” he said in an interview. “And that has almost certainly never been as low in American history as it is right now.”

While television had taxed interpersonal connections, social media has supercharged that process: Recent time-use studies show that Americans are spending more time home alone, with young people often passively scrolling. The so-called loneliness epidemic now generates government reports and academic deep dives.

The modern means of media delivery and consumption — where headphones are commonplace, in the workplace or at the dinner table — is even more isolating.

“You get all your entertainment and your connection to hobby groups and special interest groups through your cellphone,” said Richard Slotkin, the cultural critic and author of “A Great Disorder: National Myth and the Battle for America.” “Are you going to go to the church social — or are you going to do a game night on your phone?”

Several decades back, many Americans got their news from just a few channels, whether through print or pixels. Those dominant media, of course, might have been boring, or worse, limited to certain cultural perspectives. But they created a common lexicon — and defined places where we responded to them: the editorial page, academic and intellectual journals, the counter at the local diner.

That age is over, a sensation that is particularly acute for anyone trying to identify and market to customers whose tastes, habits and obsessions change daily.

“We are light-years away from any monoculture of ideas, aesthetics and interests,” said Zack Roif, the group creative director at Mother New York, an advertising agency in Brooklyn.

Of course, the decline of traditional gatekeepers and the embrace of — and demand for — diversity led to new voices online and on streaming platforms. Self-published books

and musical micro-genres like hyperpop have found broad audiences.

But ad executives are sometimes baffled about how to sell in this environment.

Corporate clients still want to “break through the clutter,” said Gaston Legorburu, a longtime marketing executive, but they’re terrified of offending. His firm, GlueIQ, made an ad for Ram trucks, for example, that aimed to capture a “rebellious American spirit” — without being jingoistic. But all too often, he said, the result in the advertising world is “vanilla washed in vanilla.”

A broken polity, and a comeback

An atomized political environment is also inherently unstable, requiring leaders to cobble together ever more disaffected voting blocs. And there's little question today's electorate is unhappy with the current system: There are a record number of independents in the country, and a 2024 survey by Pew found 85 percent of Americans believed elected officials "don't care what people like them think."

President Trump won a second term by uniting a diverse collection of voters — tech bros and manosphere influencers and anti-pesticide parents — while also turning out infrequent voters on issues like the cost of living and immigration. His campaigns also had a rebellious, big-tent enthusiasm, giving followers a sense of community.

Yet, little holds together these days, and Trump's coalition is already unraveling. Some pollsters have found Latino voters, for example, who banked right in 2024, are returning to Democrats, apparently disillusioned, in part, by the aggressive tactics of Immigration and Customs Enforcement, even putting a Texas Senate seat in play. Young men and blue-collar voters are leaving Trump's side, and some of the podcasters who endorsed or spoke warmly of the president — like Joe Rogan, Theo Von and Andrew Schulz — say they feel betrayed.

Even some core MAGA voters are disaffected about the Epstein files, the war in Iran and the insufficient progress for Robert F. Kennedy Jr.'s plan to Make America Healthy Again. Concerns about corruption and self-dealing have only intensified distrust.

But if political movements built around a single person often fail, what should other movements learn as they try to unify voters? The Democrats are at least as fractious as Republicans, and recent declines in the president's popularity haven't resulted in big polling gains for the opposing party, another indication of voters' discontent.

George Packer, the author of "The Unwinding," a seminal study of the schisms in modern America, noted in an interview that traditional coalition building required "a lot of grinding it out with people you don't particularly like," adding that such consensus was more difficult amid ideological purity tests on the left and the right.

"The political parties seem to proceed more by subtraction than addition," he said.

All these things happened as American life moved online and places that helped people find like-minded souls — professional associations, trade unions, the Rotary — declined. "In the 20th century, people's lives were lived on the shop floor, in big factories, in churches," said Michael Waldman, the president and chief executive of the Brennan Center for Justice at New York University's law school. "There were communal activities."

Online communities *can* provide bonds between people, but researchers have found the ephemeral nature of many of them to be less emotionally gratifying than those in the real world. It's also a landscape increasingly dominated by sycophantic A.I. bots that parrot and affirm users' thoughts, sometimes to the point of paranoia or tragedy.

There is also a disquiet that seems especially pronounced in young men, who have sought meaning in religion, cryptocurrency, gambling and extreme sexual activities like "gooning." The surprise summer hit "Obsession" featured a lonely young man whose wish for a girlfriend goes badly awry.

Indeed, America's pop culture landscape reverberates with political unease and paranoia, themes running through movies like "Bugonia" and "One Battle After Another," and television shows like "Severance" and "Pluribus." Another unlikely summer hit, "Backrooms," features another isolated hero, wandering amid eerie, abandoned liminal spaces; it has online roots.

Geoff Boucher, an associate professor of literary studies at Deakin University in Australia who has studied hundreds of works of dystopian fiction, said that such dark-themed art "doesn't just reflect the mood; it helps to create the mood, too."

Then again, maybe earbuds are to blame.

"Everybody has their own separate media, and they can sit in the living room with headphones on and not talk to each other," said Dowell Myers, a professor emeritus of policy, planning and demography at the University of Southern California who has studied the social compact. "That's as atomized as it can get, I think."

Still, there is a precedent for our current moment — and a comeback, Putnam said. The last Gilded Age, in the late 1800s, also had enormous concentrations of wealth, technological advancements and a self-centered sense of social Darwinism.

But he argued that those Americans found their way back to a more unified country, in part by solving issues at a local level, where citizens have more trust in their leaders. And they relied on younger people to find solutions.

Americans led their country to "an upswing," as he described it in a 2020 book.

"They," he said, "fixed it."

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Jesse McKinley is a Times reporter covering politics, pop culture, lifestyle and the confluence of all three.