

INTERNATIONAL AND INTERDISCIPLINARY SEMINARS

Party Misfits: The Social Bases of Pluralism in an Era of Polarized Politics

Delia Baldassarri

New York University

Chair

Federico Bianchi (NASP - University of Milan)

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Abstract

Although media and political elites frequently portray the United States as a deeply divided nation, many ordinary Americans do not fit neatly into partisan categories. This is due to their varied social backgrounds, politically diverse social circles, and unaligned political preferences. Challenging the simplistic narrative of a country split into Republican and Democratic camps, I question the extent to which partisan identities are rooted in social divisions—and whether they have become an organizing principle of social life.

First, I analyze changes in the cleavage structure of U.S. society over the past fifty years. I find that while individual cleavages—such as race, religion, and class—have grown deeper over time, they have not become more aligned. Instead, Americans are increasingly cross-pressured, with identities pulling in different partisan directions. Second, I examine whether Americans are intentionally sorting into politically homogeneous networks. I find that acquaintance networks remain surprisingly mixed, and that even casual cross-partisan exposure helps reduce hostility toward out-partisans by challenging distorted views of political opponents. These informal interactions are vital in curbing polarization. However, as partisan identity becomes more visible and salient in everyday life, opportunities for such interactions may dwindle—posing a risk to the social fabric of democratic life.

Overall, documenting the tensions that citizens experience in their daily lives—within an environment shaped by an increasingly polarized political elite—offers a more nuanced assessment of divisions in American society. It also highlights the growing disconnect between voters and the two major parties.

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