



## **Race and Beyond: Why Do We Have Gridlocked Government?**

By Sam Fulwood III  
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If you've paid attention to the noise in Washington, D.C., you know all too well that our nation's government is hopelessly divided.

Although some, such as the late William A. Niskanen—the former chairman of the libertarian Cato Institute and former member and acting chairman of President Ronald Reagan's Council of Economic Advisers—celebrate the fractured state of politics, most of us decry the leadership's unwillingness to do the public's business.

Yet, the nation clings to stalemated politics. Of the 34 federal elections since the end of World War II, 21 have installed either a Democratic president and Republican-led Congress or, conversely, a Republican president and Democratic-led branch in Congress. Currently, the nation is in its fourth year of the most recent iteration of this trend, with the White House and Senate controlled by Democrats and the House of Representatives in the firm grip of the GOP.

Why do we prefer a government mired in quicksand? "Political Polarization in the American Public," a recent study by the Pew Research Center for the People & the Press, provides one possible answer to that question. Released with much fanfare and handwringing in Washington's punditry circles, the report noted that our nation's electorate appears "more divided along ideological lines—and partisan antipathy is deeper and more extensive—than at any point in the last two decades."

The study is huge. It surveyed 10,000 adults nationwide, and its findings are simultaneously depressing and unsurprising:

'Ideological silos' are now common on both the left and the right. People with down-the-line ideological positions—especially conservatives—are more likely than others to say that most of their close friends share their political views. Liberals and conservatives disagree over where they want to live, the kind of people they want to live around and even with whom they would welcome into their families.

I was transfixed by the report. Reading it brought to mind former Sen. John Edwards's (D-NC) speech at the 2004 Democratic National Convention in which he decried the "two Americas" and the stratification of the privileged and the poor in our nation. On

that day, as a candidate for vice president—and not yet disgraced as an admitted adulterer—Edwards described a reality that was readily apparent but few dared discuss.

The Pew Research Center report, however, makes clearer how the nation got into such a fix. Average Americans chose it. By making millions of seemingly insignificant individual choices over an extended period of time, everyday people have sorted themselves into communities of like-minded individuals. The Pew Research Center analysis found that liberals tend to live among liberals, conservatives among conservatives, and the two view each other across a widening gulf of distrust. “Not surprisingly, this tendency is also tightly entwined with the growing level of partisan antipathy,” the reports states. “In both political parties, those with strongly negative views of the other side are more likely to be those who seek out compatible viewpoints.”

I could find only one solitary sliver of hope in the entire 120-page report, which I scoured repeatedly for good news to share: The vast majority of Americans are apathetic, refusing to share in the extremist views of their most partisan neighbors. As the report states:

These sentiments are not shared by all—or even most—Americans. The majority do not have uniformly conservative or liberal views. Most do not see either party as a threat to the nation. And more believe their representatives in government should meet halfway to resolve contentious disputes rather than hold out for more of what they want.

But this reasonable majority is drowned out by the irrational fringes, giving truth to the old adage that the squeaky wheel is the one that gets the grease. Yet, we go about our daily labors, complaining bitterly about the way Washington functions—or doesn't.

Pity and shame on us all for allowing such a sad state to persist. Our refusal to live outside our comfort zones is at the root of divided government. Our failure to get to know and respect our neighbors, even when we disagree with their opinions, is reflected in the harsh attitude and strident postures of those whom we send to Washington and state capitols. This is why we have divided government.

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