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The Big Sort: Why The Clustering Of Like-Minded America Is Tearing Us Apart



Synopsis

In 2004, journalist Bill Bishop coined the term "the big sort." Armed with startling new demographic data, he made national news in a series of articles showing how Americans have been sorting themselves into alarmingly homogeneous communities -- not by region or by state, but by city and even neighborhood. Over the past three decades, we have been choosing the neighborhood (and church and news show) compatible with our lifestyle and beliefs. The result is a country that has become so polarized, so ideologically inbred that people don't know and can't understand those who live a few miles away. How this came to be, and its dire implications for our country, is the subject of this ground-breaking work. In *The Big Sort*, Bishop has taken his analysis to a new level. He begins with stories about how we live today and then draws on history, economics and our changing political landscape to create one of the most compelling big-picture accounts of America in recent memory.

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Customer Reviews

Now that Bill Clinton is using Bill Bishop's book "The Big Sort" as the basis for his current speeches, I should finally post a review. I read this book as soon as it was published and liked it, but not being one who regularly picks up social science books on political culture I procrastinated. Now it's time, and here are a few observations. "The Big Sort" refers to the fact that lifestyle choices are leading like-minded folks to live together in communities where they feel comfortable and perhaps unchallenged. That has significant ramifications for our country's political and social development.

To quote the book, "The lesson for politics and culture is pretty clear. It doesn't matter if you're a frat boy, a French high school student, a petty criminal, or a federal appeals court judge. Mixed company moderates; like-minded company polarizes. Heterogeneous communities restrain group excesses; homogeneous communities march toward extremes." The fact that Republican strategists understood this well before the Democrats is detailed in a discussion with Matthew Dowd, George Bush's pollster in the 2000 election and chief strategist for the Bush campaign in 2004. According to Bishop's account, Dowd understood that "American communities were 'becoming very homogeneous'. He believed that to a large degree, this clustering was defensive, the general reaction to a society, a country, and a world that were largely beyond an individual's control or understanding. For generations, people had used their clubs, their trust in a national government, and long-established religious denominations to make sense of the world. But those old institutions no longer provided a safe harbor.

The authors' thesis is intriguing. U.S. counties are becoming increasingly homogenous in their lifestyle and politics. As a result, they are becoming polarized. The authors state this phenomenon is more pronounced for Republican counties. They are concerned that our society has become increasingly fragmented with close by communities having radically different sets of values. The authors partly explain this clustering into homogenous communities over the past three decades resulting in polarizing differences between them. Their main supporting observation is that the % of voters in Presidential election from counties with a 20 percentage point differential (in either direction) in close elections has steadily increased over the past 30 years (from 26.8% in 1976 to 48.3% in 2004). They also rely on Alan Abramowitz work who observed the same phenomenon at the State level. In 1976, the average Presidential election margin in the States was 8.9 percentage points. In 2004, it was 14.8 percentage points. But, it is unclear if the latter just picked two points. That's because when you look at the standard deviation of the Democrat's % at the State level minus the nation's Democrat's % for each Presidential election over the same period, you get pretty much trendless results. If polarization had really increased, the standard deviation as defined over the period should have increased. The authors also observed that since the 70s, Democratic counties share of the college educated and foreign-born citizens has risen. Meanwhile, Republicans gained shares of the Church going and white population. This demographic shift explains why Republican counties have become more polarized as they are more religious, less ethnically diverse, and less moderate in their views.

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