

Why America is coming apart at the seams

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The Week

America is tearing itself apart. People are angrier at each other, more resentful and contemptuous of each other, than they've been in living memory. Americans are experiencing a collective nervous breakdown, and there's no telling what happens if they don't find a way out of it.

At the center of this is politics, which has become a tribal battle between Team Blue and Team Red. And quite often, at the center of our political battles is race.

Race has always been an important and divisive issue in American politics, but there's no question things have become much more abrasive in recent years. Why is this? An obvious answer is "Donald Trump." And he certainly deserves more blame than any other living individual. His career in politics has been defined by racial demagoguery and by remaking the GOP in his image. In taking the White House, he has done more than anyone to make racial divisions deeper and more acrimonious.

But Trump is not the whole story. Gallup has been tracking Americans' views of race relations, as good a proxy for the intensity of racial conflict as any, and we were doing okay until 2013-2014, when we start going into a tailspin. That's before Trump was on every TV screen every day. And it makes sense:

Demagogues don't create new tensions — they tap into and exacerbate pre-existing anger and conflict, even as they intensify it on their way to the top.



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So if not just Trump, what or who is to blame? The answer is American political parties, which have become structurally designed to whip up racial anger and division to their maximum extent.

The word "structural" here is important: This is bigger than any individual, or even any camp. It's the system.

A lot has been written about the Republican Party's infamous "Southern strategy" of the 1970s to appeal to white Southern voters, including through coded racial appeals. And a lot has been written about the concept of the "emerging Democratic majority" where minorities, coastal elites, and the young would deliver permanent and unassailable governing majorities for the left. This strategy works out to what the political analyst Robert Tracinski called a "Southern strategy in reverse." For the strategy to work, Democrats need to get supermajorities of minority votes, and need to keep voters polarized along racial lines.

Each party is now associated with certain shades of skin color. If you look at every national election cycle we've had in the last decade, one finding becomes starkly obvious:

The party that turns out more of "its own" wins. In 2008 and 2012, minority turnout was above average, and the Democrats won. In 2010, 2014, and 2016, white turnout was above average, and the Republicans won. The incentive for both parties is not only to keep voters polarized along racial lines, it's to make their own voters more angry, more panicked, and more fearful — so that they turn out to vote more than the other side. And because both sides are doing it, the system is set up for a never-ending arms race.

Now, it's important to note what I am not saying. I am not saying that both parties are morally equivalent, or that both sides are equally to blame. Of course they're not. Of course white racism is worse, and of course it's morally worse to stoke white racial anxieties. That is indisputable.

I am not making a moral argument. I am looking to understand the way things are so that we can tell where we are going. The reason it's important to note that both sides have these incentives is not to make some tepid moral equivalency, but because it shows how the system is self-perpetuating. If you say the U.S. is locked in an arms race with the Soviet Union, you're not saying communism is equivalent to democracy, or that Stalin is the same as Eisenhower. Accurately describing what is happening is not the same as saying it's right or just.

It's also important to understand that our media ecosystem is only making things worse, because it is also incentivized to stoke division. Racial controversies are great for ratings and clicks, and social media is perfect for engineering anger and division.

Now, obviously, we cannot just stop talking about race. There are real issues of discrimination and policing that we need to address. But please notice that today, we're doing everything but actually addressing these issues.

After Ferguson, and the subsequent Black Lives Matter protests, many Americans asked tough and probing questions about policing in black communities. But now our debates are about Colin Kaepernick, the national anthem, and Confederate statues. However you feel about any of these issues, please note that all of them are *purely symbolic*, and that none of them directly affect policing, or criminal justice, or discrimination, or racial wealth disparities.

If you have a system where the parties are wired to stoke racial division and hatred (and the media to magnify it), the worst thing you could do is address any real issues, because then people might have to talk about the tradeoffs that any particular policy might involve, and people might start to have ideas for compromises. The temperature might cool, even a little bit. If the issues are symbolic, however, all that's left is for Team A to remind itself of how virtuous it is and how hateful everyone is on Team B. It's the system, man.

If at any point in the previous argument you found yourself angrily thinking "No, the problem is Trump!" or "No, the problem is the Democrats!" well, you're not entirely wrong. Of course they're part of the problem. But not the real problem.

Ideas matter. Policies matter. Politics matters. But political parties themselves are nothing more than utterly amoral vehicles for winning elections. Which is fine — you need political parties in a democracy. It's important to have utilities. But I wouldn't wear my utility's T-shirt or feel contempt for someone who gets their electricity from a different company.

So ... what do we do about it? Our political parties are obviously not going to de-racialize. So it has to start with us.

Believe what you believe. Fight for your issues. Yes, Trump is a dangerous demagogue. Yes, some social justice warriors can be crazy,

and it's disturbing how powerful they are within the Democratic Party. But at the same time, it's also the case that if you feel yourself getting angry at the latest outrage to pop up on your Facebook feed, you are being played. Not that the issue isn't real, or important. But there are millions of real and important issues in the world. And the reason why this specific issue is being put in front of your eyes is because you are played by the cold unfeeling monsters that are the political powerbrokers behind Team Blue and Team Red. Team Blue and Team Red want you angry, pissed-off, and contemptuous of your fellow American, every day, so you don't notice the political elite picking your pocket.

You can believe in your ideas and defend them and advance them without giving in to tribalism and hatred. And when we do give in, we feed into a vicious cycle that is taking us into a tailspin.

Wake up. We need you.