

Love and Politics in a Polarized America:
Partnership, Partisanship, and Other Romantic Predicaments

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Thesis

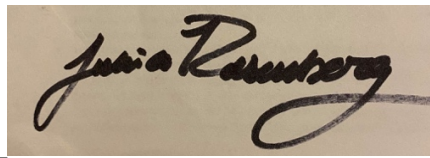
Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree of Bachelor of Arts
in the Nonfiction Writing Honors Program in the Department of English at Brown
University

April 9, 2020

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Prologue

Just hours ago, the United States Senate came to an agreement on the biggest stimulus measure in the country's history.¹ This comes after weeks of fighting between Democrats and Republicans in Congress and with the executive branch, struggling to find a way to best deliver a response to the COVID-19 health crisis crippling the nation. The fight over this bill sparked finger-pointing and political posturing; when Democrats blocked a Republican-proposed bill because it favored big corporations, Senate Majority Leader McConnell accused Democrats of holding up the process for extraneous reasons.² The infighting got so intense, and prohibited progress for so long, that one Arizona Senator proposed suspending Senators' pay until they came to a solution.³

American polarization has reached a point where Congress needs their pay made conditional upon their ability to pass a bill in the middle of a crisis. It seems like polarization in Congress feels like it is the worst it has ever been, and in the time of a pandemic we are seeing how its consequences can cost lives.

But this polarization predates the pandemic and is by no means limited to politicians in Congress. It is one part of a cycle that has for a long-time stimulated animosity across different facets of everyday life: media outlets put forth incendiary

¹ Jordan Fabian and Justin Sink, "Trump Signs \$2 Trillion Virus Bill, Largest Ever U.S. Stimulus," *Bloomberg*, March 27, 2020, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2020-03-27/trump-signs-2-trillion-virus-bill-largest-ever-u-s-stimulus>

² Erica Werner et al., "Senate Negotiators Cite Progress on Coronavirus Bill after Day of Drama and Rancor," *The Washington Post*, March 24, 2020, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/us-policy/2020/03/23/trump-coronavirus-senate-economic-stimulus/>

³ Aris Foley, "New Bill Would Withhold Pay from Senate until Coronavirus Stimulus Package Passes," *The Hill*, March 24, 2020, <https://thehill.com/homenews/senate/489347-new-bill-would-withhold-pay-from-senate-until-a-coronavirus-stimulus-package>

content because it grips viewers. Viewers are energized by the impassioned opinions and spread them in their social networks and on social media, later demanding their representatives act with aggression when it comes time for an election. Politicians, beholden to their base, oblige.

In 1994, only 17% of Republicans voters and leaders held a *very unfavorable* view of Democrats, and only 16% of their Democratic counterparts held a *very unfavorable* perception of Republicans.⁴ Those numbers nearly doubled by 2014, when 43% of Republicans and 38% of Democrats viewed the opposing party in strongly negative terms.⁵ As recently as 2019, 16% of Republicans and 20% of Democrats occasionally thought the country would be better off if large numbers of the opposition ‘just died.’⁶ Overall, 91% of Americans agree that the nation is politically divided, with 74% of Americans saying it is *very* divided.⁷

The United States has been through many bouts of intense polarization in its history, and it is no question that we are living through one of those periods right now.

You would think national polarization would translate to personal relationships. And often it does. Yet for all this pressure to choose a side, inter-political party romances

⁴ “Political Polarization in the American Public,” *Pew Research Center*, June 12, 2014, <https://www.people-press.org/2014/06/12/political-polarization-in-the-american-public/>

⁵ Ibid

⁶ Thomas B. Edsall, “No Hate Left Behind,” *The New York Times*, March 13, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/03/13/opinion/hate-politics.html>

⁷ Maxine Najile and Robert P. Jones, “American Democracy in Crisis: The Fate of Pluralism in a Divided Nation,” *The Public Policy Research Institute*, February 19, 2019, <https://www.ppri.org/research/american-democracy-in-crisis-the-fate-of-pluralism-in-a-divided-nation/>

persist. The most recent study of marriages in the United States shows that roughly 1/3 of American marriages consist of an inter-political party couple.⁸ And more than that, interracial and interfaith marriages are also at an all-time high⁹ during an era the majority of Americans say is divided along racial and religious lines.¹⁰

I started this project to examine how inter-political party romances exist in an era that encourages and rewards animosity towards a political opposite.

I began with how Donald Trump's presidency has led people to evaluate the elasticity of their political beliefs when it comes to romance, determining what values dictate their lives and what opposing beliefs they could make allowances for in the name of love. Each question I posed presented a different angle about this subject, including sociological, cognitive, neurological, interpersonal, and personal angles.

My initial questions included: Why is it considered socially traitorous to date someone of an opposing political party? Does political ideology, or any intellectual aspect of someone's identity, matter when choosing a partner, or do other biological factors outrank intellect to make political alignment or misalignment mere coincidence? Are the consequences specific to people of marginalized genders and sexualities when dating a political opposite?

⁸ Eitan Hersh, "How Many Republicans Marry Democrats?," *FiveThirtyEight*, June 28, 2019, <https://fivethirtyeight.com/features/how-many-republicans-marry-democrats/>

⁹ Janice Williams, "Interracial Marriage in America is Highest It's Ever Been Since Loving Vs. Virginia," *Newsweek*, May 18, 2017, <https://www.newsweek.com/interracial-marriage-relationships-history-loving-611820>

¹⁰ Najile and Jones, "American Democracy in Crisis: The Fate of Pluralism in a Divided Nation,"

Before I even approached answers to any of these questions, what became clear to me very early on in this process were my own blind spots created by the polarizing environments that I have been in. Writing this thesis was as much about unlearning what I thought I knew about love and polarization as it was about engaging with completely new ideas.

The first belief my research debunked for me was my assumption that “Opposites Attract.” About a hundred years of clinical psychology studies say that human beings are attracted to what gives them a sense of comfort and what reaffirms their world-views.¹¹ In short, “Opposites Attract,” is a widely-believed myth. According to studies in social psychology, it is the exception not the rule. But as I read more statistics on marriage, I saw that people in the United States were marrying outside of their own identities at increasing rates.¹² I quickly saw that I would need to look at law, culture, and real-world statistics in addition to clinical studies to get the whole story about the relationship between love and politics.

The second belief that quickly fell apart was an assumption that the past four years have been America’s worst era of polarization. When I ask people my age if they believe today’s polarization is the worst it has ever been, they generally respond that it is and express little hope that it will get better anytime soon. But when I talk to members of

¹¹ Viren Swami, *Attraction Explained: The Science of how we Form Relationships* (Oxon: Routledge, 2016), 160-192.

¹² Janice Williams, “Interracial Marriage in America is Highest It’s Ever Been Since Loving Vs. Virginia,”

older generations who lived through several bouts of the nation's most intense polarization, they have tended to describe today's climate with more optimism: people will eventually come together because they have to.

In order to answer the question of how politics became a topic of conversation within romance, I had to look at a time when it was *not* something the average person discussed. I went back to the elementary structures of governance in the 18th century and found that the polarization is embedded into our nation, as the country was founded on a binary of those who had access to political capital and those who did not. The natural trajectory of this country would lead to the disintegration of barriers to civic engagement, with each push igniting a unique cycle of polarization. From the first documents that gave only a minority the right to vote to the mass protests of the Vietnam War, my research showed me that America has been on track towards today's polarization since its inception.

The final assumption that fell apart was that human beings will act on their own desires rather than be deterred by the social consequences of their partnerships. I was disheartened to read up on the social power of political tribalism and concerned by its implications on our civil rights. People on both sides of the aisle are pressured to fuel an in-group-out-group mentality, but on top of that also face the consequences of being shamed if they do not behave in ways their party deems acceptable. I learned about the

threat of being labeled a ‘RINO’ or “Republican in Name Only,”¹³ an insult hurled at individuals who are deemed ‘insufficiently’ Republican. I also read about the shame Democrats experience when they fail to reach a certain moral threshold, popularized by vocal liberals like Congresswoman Alexandria-Ocasio Cortez who have invoked moral absolutism.¹⁴

Since starting this project, I have changed my mind over and over again on what the importance of studying this topic is. I have found that studying why people gravitate towards those who are like them is as valuable and political as why they are attracted to their opposites; that polarization is not just the doing of select politicians but requires the willing participation of American citizens; that if people stopped caring about the social implications of their political behavior, Congresspeople would not be so beholden to perpetuating partisan theatrics.

This project has not changed my beliefs. More than a study of love and politics, this has turned into a study on human behavior and reconciliation. Reading up on Republican beliefs has not made me less of a liberal nor produced a backswing that made me a more intense liberal. I just believe it has made me a more accepting and more open-minded person.

¹³ Fran Coombs, “New RINOS Could Spell Trouble for the GOP,” *Ramussen Reports*, April 26, 2018, https://www.rasmussenreports.com/public_content/politics/commentary_by_fran_coombs/new_rinos_could_spell_trouble_for_the_gop

¹⁴ Frank Guan, “What Could be Wrong with a Little Moral Clarity?,” *The New York Times*, January 2, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/01/02/magazine/what-could-be-wrong-with-a-little-moral-clarity.html>

Part I: Comfort in Likeness

In the days before our date I imagined Cam when he was off- duty, luring skinheads into alleyways and neutralizing them with punches and roundhouse kicks. Before we met in person, the little I knew about Cam came from his profile and our conversations over Tinder, the online dating app: I knew he was 26, blond, liberal, and worked as a journalist covering white supremacy in the United States. In my mind, his appearance and insider-knowledge of underground networks naturally made for a gig as a swashbuckling Nazi hunter.

I met Cam towards the end of my semester living in Washington, D.C., where I was taking classes and interning for New York Senator and former Presidential hopeful Kirsten Gillibrand. After months of listening to prejudiced tirades over the constituent phone line, all I wanted was to spend an evening with a liberal to whom I could vent my anger and get sympathy from in return.

I told him how I had lost track of how many times the phrase “Build the Wall” crawled out of the phone to lay eggs in my ear; how I got weekly calls asking for the removal of Minnesota Congresswoman Ilhan Omar because she was a terrorist. Cam raised his eyebrows, said “Wow,” and kept eating his pizza. I recounted pleas from parents fearing that government-mandated vaccines would give their children autism, as well as the routine accusations that Gillibrand was a murderer because she supported abortion rights. I described a specific call from a man with a thick Southern accent asking

if I could “Hear the cry of the unborn across the nation,” his voice so ghostly and withdrawn I wondered if I was talking to Matthew McConaughey. Cam laughed, said “I love Matthew McConaughey,” and promptly changed the subject.

When we moved to discussing the policy stances of the Democratic candidates for the 2020 election, our conversation quickly lost steam. It did not take long for us to realize we agreed on the arguments for universal healthcare, aggressive climate policies, extended paid leave, and what four more years of Trump would do to America’s international standing.

As we fell into step on issue after issue, I could not shake a feeling of *déjà- vu*. I felt as if I had had this conversation before because, in some ways, I had: with myself, with my classmates, and with the most prominent outlets in the liberal media. The ideas Cam and I exchanged were cobbled together from the largest purveyors of liberal talking points and lacked personal interpretation, yielding a conversation that felt like a beginner’s guide to the liberal agenda. We each played it safe and stuck to generic bullet points because venturing anything against the grain would risk awkwardness, or worse, defrauded woke credentials. Where I expected to be comforted, I was instead very, very bored.

Like many people, I sought out someone who shared my values because I assumed that ideological overlap signaled compatibility and ease. But the disconnect between my expectations and the reality of the date is an example of easy it is to miss the

mark when searching for the romance we may think we want. Discussing the very policies Cam and I agreed on made me feel like I did not learn anything new, and his reacting to my experiences with less sympathy than I had hoped for left me feeling let down. The assumptions I brought to the date set me up to leave feeling emotionally and intellectually unsatisfied.

The tension between wanting the comfort of sameness and wanting a challenge represents the friction between two theories of how people look for love. The first is the famous “Opposites Attract” paradigm, which suggests people are drawn to the conflict that arises from some degree of incompatibility with their partner. Whether that conflict takes the shape of intellectual growth or a power struggle, romances between individuals of different identities would suggest human beings can both relish those differences or strive to overcome them. The alternative paradigm is that humans will seek the ease of sameness, which implies that humans are inherently conflict-averse and would want to spend their time with someone who affirms their world view.

So, exactly how popular are these theories and do either of them have any merit?

In one 2015 study, social psychologist Viren Swami asked British university students if they believed in the idea that opposites attract; 48% of the students said they thought it was true.¹⁵ When the same question was posed to university students in North America, a whopping 77% said they believed the theory was true.¹⁶ While the U.S. and

¹⁵ Swami, *Attraction Explained*, 8.

¹⁶ Ibid

the U.K. do share democratic structures that allow for diverse political thought, the America's political fringe movements, immigration patterns, and growing income inequality have all contributed to its being the world's most polarized Western democracy.¹⁷ Perhaps it is precisely the continuation of inter-political party romances despite that polarization that convinces so many Americans that opposites attract.

One explanation for why someone would seek out a partner with qualities they lack is what several psychologists call the 'self-expansion' model.¹⁸ The model has two key principles: that human beings are naturally motivated to self-expand and that they can achieve this by cultivating close relationships with people who differ from them in various ways. Self-expansion refers to a process to widen an understanding of the self as competent and able to reach new goals, such as learning a new language, trying a new hobby, or challenging previously-held beliefs. People may form a relationship with someone, who in some cases may be an "opposite," as a means of increasing materials that will facilitate achieving these goals, such as social support, friendship networks, or information. The model, though, does not assert that engaging with people are already like you prohibits growth, as people who share similar views are by no means unable to disagree or limited to contemplating their shared views alone.

Despite the model and widespread belief that opposites attract, there is actually little evidence in the world of social psychology that dissimilar people are regularly

¹⁷ Ezra Klein, "What Polarization Data from 9 Countries Reveals About the U.S.," *Vox*, January 24, 2020, <https://www.vox.com/2020/1/24/21076232/polarization-america-international-party-political>

¹⁸ Arthur Aron et al., *The Self-Expansion Model of Motivation and Cognition in Close Relationships* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013)

drawn to one another. In fact, the theory made the cut in a book published in 2010 titled *50 Great Myths of Popular Psychology*.¹⁹ It has not necessarily been proven that opposites *do not* attract, but across contemporary studies and those conducted over a hundred years ago, individuals with similar identifiers were much more likely to pair up than individuals who differed across those same categories. In the world of social psychology, romances comprised of “opposites” are the exception, not the rule.

In 1903, British mathematician and biometrician Karl Pearson published one of the earliest studies depicting the role physical similarity tends to play in governing mating preferences.²⁰ In his book *The Grammar of Science*, Pearson coins the term ‘assortative mating,’ which describes the tendency for husbands and wives to look similar. He found that light-eyed men tended to marry light-eyed women, dark-eyed men with dark-eyed women, tall men with tall women, and short men with short women.

Even as technology develops and populations become more heterogenous, Pearson’s findings on similarity-based attraction have held up almost a hundred years after his initial experiment. In 1999, the University of St. Andrews in Scotland asked heterosexual participants to rate the attractiveness of a series of headshots held in front of them.²¹ Not only did participants find headshots they resembled to be generally more

¹⁹ Scott O. Lilienfeld et al., *50 Great Myths of Popular Psychology: Shattering Widespread Misconceptions about Human Behavior* (West Sussex: Wiley Blackwell, 2010)

²⁰ Swami, *Attraction Explained*, 163.

²¹ I.S.P. Voak and D.I. Perrett, and J.W. Peirce, “Computer Graphic Studies of the Role of Facial Similarity in Judgements of Attractiveness,” *Current Psychology*, 18, 1999 (104-117)

attractive, the participants overall indicated that the headshot they found most attractive was a photo of themselves photoshopped to look like the opposite sex.

The researchers' explanation for this is that individuals are attracted to people and stimuli that provide a sense of familiarity. When we look at faces that remind us of our own, we see traces of our parents that tend to evoke a sense of safety and care. A follow-up study conducted in 2003 found that in a different sample of 697 men and women, the majority preferred partners found most attractive the participants who possessed the same hair and eye colors of their opposite-sex parent.²²

The first recorded instance of similarity-based attraction dates back over 2,000 years ago to the myth of Narcissus falling in love with himself. Though the romance is often dismissed as superficial, it can actually offer insights into profound reasons why people seek out the familiar.

In the myth, a young hunter named Narcissus is chasing a tree nymph through the woods when he stumbles upon a pool of water and discovers his own reflection. He crouches next to the pool to gaze at himself, but every time he lowers his neck to drink, the water recedes, taking his reflection with it. In order to preserve his image, he never

²² I.S.P. Voak et al., "Investigating an Imprinting-like Phenomenon in Humans: Partners and Opposite-sex Parents have Similar hair and eye Colour," *Evolution and Human Behavior*, Vol. 24, No. 1, (2002): 43-51.

drinks and ultimately dies of thirst and anguish. He then transforms into “a flower, its yellow center circled by white petals.”²³

Today, a Google search of the word “Narcissus” yields an image of a flower with six petals surrounding a yellow bullseye, similar to the flower described in the many iterations of the myth. To those that know the myth, the sight of “Narcissus,” which is more commonly known as a daffodil, evokes Narcissus’s corporeality even though he has died or perhaps never even existed at all. In a flowerbed, field, or vase, the object into which Narcissus dissolved preserves and asserts his essence.

The modern understanding of Narcissism says that a narcissist is a person whose ultimate desire is to see his essence radiating from objects that are not his own body, such as a flower or even other people. But this modern definition may misunderstand Narcissus’s initial preoccupation with his reflection. While it is true that Narcissus loves the image before him, he does not die because of its consuming beauty but because of the physical toll of knowing he is splintered into two entities without any viable recourse for reuniting them. As he reaches to touch the image and bring it to himself, he becomes impervious to his surroundings and to that which is needed to keep a human being alive. “While he tries to quench one thirst, he feels another rise”...²⁴

²³ Ovid, *The Metamorphoses of Ovid*, trans. Allen Mandelbaum, (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1993) Book III, 96

²⁴ Ibid

The modern definition of Narcissism might be calling vanity what is actually a yearning for completeness. Rather than the self-expansion that drives people to obtain social resources that help them grow, Narcissism is neither a love based on acquisition or self-absorbedness, but a journey to mend a fractured soul. It is not a coincidence that some of the most romantic phrases we have in our collective vocabulary, like “you complete me” or “she is my other half,” are written in the language of wholeness.

But forming a new understanding of Narcissism does not stop at validating a want to feel complete. When considered in a modern context, though, attraction to a similar counterpart could also be considered a measure to protect emotional health.

The word *Narcissus* is the Latinized rendering of the Greek *Narkissos*, a derivative of the word *narke* that describes a state of numbness or stupor. The closest English translation of the word *Narcissus* is thus “numbness” or “intoxication.”²⁵ Flowers belonging to the genus *Narcissus* are not primarily named such because they resemble the flower in the myth, but because they possess a toxic substance called lycorine that causes sensations of numbness when ingested. In one of his essays, the Greek philosopher Plutarch wrote that eating a daffodil “benumbs the nerves and causes stupid narcotic heaviness in the limbs.”²⁶ Narcissus’s very name suggests that an element of numbness is always present in the practice of Narcissism, which would frame

²⁵ Gordon R. Hanks, *Narcissus and Daffodil: The Genus Narcissus* (London: Taylor and Francis, 2002), 21

²⁶ Plutarch, “The Symposiacs,” *Plutarch: Complete Works*, Delphi Classics, 2013, <https://www.amazon.com/Complete-Plutarch-Illustrated-Ancient-Classics-ebook/dp/B00C456HGU>

similarity-based attraction both as a way of feeling complete as well as feeling insulated from the outside world.

It is easy to interpret wanting to be with someone like you as egotistical or closed-minded, but it is important to consider the many reasons two people would want to be together as a means of hushing something beyond their relationship. Electing to spend time with people who are like we are can offer a sense of protection and community. Many people find value in partnering with someone who shares their identities because walking through the world in similar ways lessens the barriers to understanding each others' experiences. This is certainly not to say that everyone within an identity has the same experiences, or partners who are not alike are incapable of understanding each other. It simply means that people are often treated in ways specific to their identity, and two people who spend lifetimes growing familiar with the nuances of that treatment might find it easier to communicate with each other.

For as long as I can remember, my mother has told me that marrying someone who is Jewish would be easier than marrying outside my culture. Until recently, I had never considered someone's religion to be a factor in whether I wanted to be with them, which is why the two serious relationships I've had were with men who *happened* to not be Jewish. But as anti-Semitism rises around the world, and my Jewish identity plays a larger part in shaping how I feel I fit into that world, I am beginning to see some of the hurdles my mother was warning me about. I often find myself explaining to non-Jewish friends things my Jewish friends are already up-to-date-on, such as daily incidents of

anti-Semitism that never make a mainstream news cycle. I have spent hours trying to explain the complexity of being White and Jewish in the United States, of experiencing white privilege as a porous membrane rather than an impenetrable shield.

I do not mind when my friends ask me questions about my racial identity, and in fact I often appreciate it, but I would be lying if I said I did not think all this explaining would not be exhausting over the course of a marriage. My racial identity has no parallels to help me communicate what it is like to walk between privilege and prejudice, no lesson-plans that offer a window into what it is like to recognize myself in euro-centric beauty standards *and* grotesque satires of my nose. There are no TED talks explaining why I feel comfortable meeting other white people until it comes time to tell them my last name, no manuals describing my guilt towards my ability to “blend in” in predominantly white spaces because I don’t feel attached to the traditional attire my relatives escaped ethnic cleansing to wear freely. I have always loved sharing my culture with my partners, teaching them Hebrew songs or describing traditions that have nurtured some of the warmest moments of my life. But when I envision a marriage with a non-Jewish man, I just see so much work. I see a disconnect I would have to repair with explaining, educating, and justifying, not to mention the work my partner would feel *he* has to put in to fill in gaps in my knowledge of his experiences. I realize that the intertwining of two disparate lives is what some couples cherish about their relationships, and a wish for anyone else to be totally fluent in the intricacies of my racial identity is about as realistic as asking them to draw my thumbprint. But at this point it is what feels right.

My desire to be with someone like me represents the other side the similarity-based attraction coin.

Until this point, all the clinical studies discussed have evaluated similarity-based attraction as it relates to physical likeness. But are people who share cognitive traits as strongly attracted to one another as those who share physical traits? Is it possible to feel attracted to someone without knowledge of their physical appearance?

Long before Netflix released the hit reality series *Love is Blind*, American psychologist Donn Byrne set out to see how attraction functioned in a setting where individuals only had knowledge of fellow participants' opinions and beliefs. In 1961, Byrne developed the "phantom other technique," in which participants completed a survey about their attitudes on a variety of topics and were then asked to evaluate an 'other participant' based on their 'response-sheet.'²⁷ The 'other participant,' though, did not actually exist; the researches crafted a fake response sheet that either greatly overlapped with or differed from the initial participants'. His results showed that participants were more attracted to people who held similar values than those he did not, and that that attraction intensified when there was a greater degree of overlap between the two participants' beliefs. When there was a greater degree of 'attitudinal similarity,' the participant more frequently rated the phantom as intelligent, knowledgeable about current events, moral, and better adjusted. In other words, belief of cognitive similarity breeds more attraction and positive perceptions of a romantic counterpart.

²⁷ Donn Byrne, "Interpersonal Attraction and Attitudinal Similarity," *Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology*, 62 (May 1961), 713-715.

Byrne's explanation for why people are attracted to similar people stems from the belief that humans are naturally conflict-averse. In his book *The Attraction Paradigm*, he puts forth the 'effectance motive,' which is the notion that humans have a need for a logical and consistent view of the world.²⁸ Byrne suggests that this dictates who we choose to date, which depends on how well or poorly a potential partner will affirm what we feel about the world. The attraction spurred by similarities across sociological backgrounds -- things like ethnicity, age, occupation, and financial background -- is called "status homophily," while the occurrence of attraction based off similarities in values, attitudes, and beliefs is called "value homophily."²⁹

Though Byrne's conducted his study in 1961, his findings hold up decades later. In 2016, Wellesley college in Massachusetts and the University of Kansas recruited 1,523 pairs of romantic partners as well as friends and sent them surveys asking about attitudes, behaviors, demographics, intimacy, and closeness.³⁰ The researchers found that between individuals in each pair, there was an average overlap of 86% of the variables described. One of the authors of the study said that searching for similarity in close relationships is so hardwired in humans minds that it could be described as a "psychological default."

²⁸ Donn Byrne, *The Attraction Paradigm* (New York: Academic Press, 1971)

²⁹ McPherson et al., "Birds of a Feather: Homophily in Social Networks," *Annual Review of Sociology*, 27, (2001), 415-444.

³⁰ Dana Dovey, "Opposites Attract? We May Actually be Hard-Wired to Look for Similarity When Choosing Friends, Partners), *Medical Daily*, February 24, 2016, <https://www.medicaldaily.com/birds-feather-opposites-attract-similarity-374869>

Yet, for all the decades of research suggesting that like leads to like, people still date people who they are very different from, whether those differences fall along racial, political, or religious lines. While someone like me may be apprehensive about trying to explain the daily complexities of living a certain way, others may find dating someone who is not like them to be a better option.

One person is who feels that way is Zoe, a staffer in Senator Gillibrand's I met during my semester in Washington, D.C. I asked to interview Zoe, a Democrat, about her romantic preferences because one day I overheard her say something that caught my attention: that she only dates Republicans.

Zoe is a 23-year old Asian-American woman who grew up in a small conservative town in Pennsylvania, where her father took her hunting every first day of school. Zoe moved to D.C. to attend American University, one of the most liberal universities in the country. She found her liberal stride at college and began working towards what would become a career in public service. She worked in her Title IX office at American University and was an official spokesperson to her school's fraternities to educate them on sexual misconduct.

During our interview Zoe explained to me that though she is not unwilling to date another Democrat, she believed it would be easier to date Republicans because of how they would interact with her conservative family.

Zoe also expressed frustration at the tendency to assume that political alignment determines each and every value of an individual. She used the example of her being a Democrat yet not conforming to standard opinions on gun control as an example of how oversimplified political alignment in dating gets. She asked me, “Wouldn’t you be frustrated if someone thought they knew everything about you’re because you’re a Democrat?”

She also shared the difficulties she has had with Democrats fetishizing her as an Asian-American woman. Though she assured me that men are gross on both sides of the aisle, people more readily believe she is fetishized by Republicans and make her do more work to convince them that members of ‘The Big Tent Party’ are as willing act in offensive ways.

Zoe is just one example of a larger trend that clinical studies in social psychology would have us believe is rare. Though there is much evidence that our political parties are developing more animosity towards one another, when it comes to love, we are still generally able to put our differences aside.

In 1994, about only 17% of registered Republicans and Republican leaders held a *very unfavorable* view of Democrats, and only 16% of Democrats had a *very unfavorable* perception of Republicans. In 2014, however, those numbers have nearly doubled, with

38% of Democrats and 43% of Republicans viewing the opposing party in strongly negative terms.³¹

Despite this polarization, people seem to be willing to put their party lines aside in the name of love. As of 2016, just 9% of the public said they would be unhappy if an immediate family member were to marry a Republican, and about 8% said the same of Democrats.³² According to the data collection site “FiveThirtyEight,” 30% of American marriages contained an inter-political party couple as of 2016. One third of those marriages include Democrat- Republican couples, while the other 2/3 are partisans married to independents.³³

The fact that so many American marriages are comprised of politically unlike individuals would suggest that studies crediting attraction to physical or attitudinal similarities do not tell the whole story. If similarity played as big a role in marriages as the studies suggest, 1/3 of American marriages would not be between politically- unlike people, and there would not be such strong steady increases in the rates of interracial and inter-religious marriages.

After the Supreme Court legalized interracial marriage in 1967, 3% of marriages in the United States were comprised of interracial couples. In 2017, 17% of marriages were comprised of interracial couples. In 2015, Pew research center found that only 19%

³¹ Pew, “Political Polarization in the American Public”

³² Pew, “Political Polarization in the American Public”

³³ Eitan Hersh, “How Many Republicans Marry Democrats?”

of marriages that occurred before 1960 involved two people of different religions, yet 39% of Americans who married after 2010 belong to an interfaith marriage.³⁴

The increase in marriages of people who are unlike in politics, race, and religion rebut conventional assumptions of attraction in two major ways. The increase in such marriages contradict the assumption that seeking out a similar partner is so mainstream it could be described as a ‘psychological default.’ The unparalleled diversity of the United States injects the question of “nurture” into a body of science that had practically decided “nature” determines who we love. These trends press pause on centuries-old theories that assert people seek out certain kinds of homophily, suggesting that whom we love, similarly to whom we hate, is learned.

Had we taken the older studies’ findings as a hard and fast rule, there would be no such thing as marriages between dissimilar people, and yet here we are. The issue this raises is that there is no possible way to predict behavior based on a set of data, especially when those findings come from data pools that are very homogenous. Additionally, Karl Pearson, the British biometrician who published the earliest ‘grand-daddy’ of findings on similarity-based attraction, was a pioneer eugenicist. He believed that war against “inferior races”³⁵ was justified and wrote articles warning that allowing Jews to mix with

³⁴ Caryle Murphy, “Interfaith Marriage is Common in the U.S., Particularly Among the Recently Wed,” *Pew Research Center*, June 2, 2015, <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2015/06/02/interfaith-marriage/>

³⁵ Erik van Ree, “Marx and Engels’s theory of history: making sense of the race factor,” *Journal of Political Ideologies*, 24:1, (2019): 54-73

the Aryan population would develop a “parasitic race.”³⁶ And though we will never know if Pearson’s prejudices tainted his results, it is likely that the subjects he studied were susceptible to the same culture of racism he was, which blurs whether or not physically-similar people ended up together because of physiological attraction or because they were socialized to believe Eurocentric traits were desirable. Still, if Pearson’s findings had *no merit*, how would it be that researchers in more diverse settings in the 2000s produced very similar results?

The uncertainty surrounding similarity-based attraction will abate as more studies are conducted with diverse subjects and as harmful beauty stereotypes subside. But until then, the best most people can say is that attraction is a mix of nature and nurture.

And if research that spans over 100 years cannot come to a definitive conclusion about why people are attracted to certain people, it is certainly not possible for the layperson to make any hard and fast rules about how partisanship shapes our love lives.

Zoe’s preference for dating men outside the Democratic party defies the logic of polarization and is just one example of the failings of trying to categorize people into labels, political, romantic, or otherwise. Zoe’s political beliefs are not dampened by the people she chooses to date because romantic preferences are not a reflection of anyone’s political beliefs. People are much more complicated than their political alignment, and

³⁶ Karl Pearson and Margaret Moul, “The Problem of Alien Immigration into Great Britain Illustrated by an Examination of Russian and Polish Jewish Children,” *Annals of Eugenics*, (1925): 125-126

any attempt to use a partisan lens to make sense of why people do what they do will yield oversimplified and inaccurate conclusions.

Part II: The Roots of Polarization and When the Political Became Domestic

My grandparents' marriage ended in their kitchen in 1984, when my grandma launched a frozen chicken at my grandfather's head for declaring he was going to move into his rented apartment full-time.

My grandfather was relentlessly critical of my grandmother throughout their 24 years of marriage, and, though he never physically harmed his children, my grandmother has described his parenting style as "cruel." While their incompatible personalities would have likely led to a divorce anyway, the political upheaval happening just beyond their window injected a kind of conflict into their relationship that had not been present when they got married.

Despite the fact that my grandfather was a Republican and my grandmother was a Democrat, they rarely spoke about politics before the Vietnam War. My grandmother disagreed with what she overheard her husband arguing over with her father, but she kept those disagreements to herself. From her father she inherited the belief that Americans have a responsibility to "be each other's keeper," but observing how her own mother discussed politics shaped how she would express those beliefs: "What he said, she said." But in my grandma's case, she didn't say anything at all.

That changed as discussion of the Vietnam War became unavoidable. Unlike any war prior in our nation's history, television brought civilians face-to-face with the

gruesome realities of combat. The draft equalized American families across racial and economic lines in ways they had not been before, and because only elites who could maneuver their way out of service, a political movement was bolstered by unity across parts of a nation that until this point had been segregated in every way possible.

When my grandfather expressed his admiration for President Nixon as the war continued, my grandmother decided to march in the streets without him. She would now challenge him to political debates when he returned from work, which he deflected with proclamations of wanting to watch TV or discuss golf. This became enough of an agitation for my grandfather that during their couples' counselling sessions their therapist tried to get him to see her involvement as a positive thing. "Isn't it good to have a wife with so many interests?" she would ask.

The stress of newfound disagreements exacerbated the pre-existing conflicts in their marriage to the point where my grandmother fantasized about leaving him as a coping mechanism to calm herself down. The effect the Vietnam War had on my grandparents manifested in the ways it did because it came on the heels of second wave feminism, which placed my grandparents at a crossroads with themselves and with each other. My grandfather's frustration with his wife's behavior derived from his own unmet expectations of what a wife should be, which were fulfilled when they first met. My grandmother also experienced the tension of living through such a time of transition: inspired by the movement and motivated by the Vietnam War, she spoke against her husband and engaged in behaviors that distanced herself from him, but the financial and social progress of second wave feminism had not yet materialized into circumstances that

made leaving him a viable option. She debated leaving him for years until he finally told her it was ending.

My grandmother only ever dated Democrats after her divorce, eventually marrying a Democrat and Professor of Sociology we all called Papa Lee. They read the paper together and discussed politics all the time; he asked her thoughts on current events as frequently and casually as he asked ‘what do you want to do this weekend?’ or ‘what did you think of that movie?’

Though he passed away a decade ago, my grandma continues to be more politically involved than most people my age. She is the social media manager for a political action group my mother runs in our neighborhood. She regularly canvasses for local causes and manages a voter registration booth. She is so active and spirited that the group considered printing “Lois2020” T-shirts.

My grandparent’s marriage was a sped-up example of the social phenomenon still happening again today: the integration of politics into private life as a result of political polarization. Television, heightened concern for life upon return and compulsion to engage in politics shattered the barrier that made people the ‘every-day’ person like my grandmother feel that politics was external to her life. Today, social media is facilitating a new intimacy between lay-people and politics. The ability to observe and participate in politics through blogs, online comments, Tweets, etc, is making it nearly impossible to avoid thinking about it.

The Vietnam War is one of many examples of the collapsing of domestic and politics spheres. This collapsing and every subsequent movement that made politics a common topic of conversation was inevitable; it makes sense that the trend is functioning this way because the country started out denying so many people the possibility to participate in politics. Tracing the history of political participation should give us some idea of how today's polarization functions: but, as already seen, in chapter 1, it is really impossible to predict human behavior, especially as it relates to how politics to romance. So while tracing the history of the collapsing of the political and private can provide insight into *why* people act the way they do, it should not be considered a *predictor* of what they will do.

When the first Presidential election happened in 1788 and 1789, only propertied white men had the right to vote.³⁷ Even then, there were religious restrictions on which of those white men could vote, as Jews, Quakers and Catholics were barred by “religious tests”.³⁸ The Constitution left great discretion to the states to determine their own voting qualifications, which meant that there were some exceptions in states for women, freed black people, and Native Americans to vote.

In 1869 Congress passes the Fifteenth Amendment, which gave African American the right to vote.³⁹

³⁷ Carnegie Corporation of New York, “Voting Rights: A Short History,” *Carnegie Corporation of New York*, November 18, 2019, <https://www.carnegie.org/topics/topic-articles/voting-rights/voting-rights-timeline/>

³⁸ Ibid

³⁹ Ibid

Even with these amendments and variation across states, citizens had limited control of who they could vote for. Until 1913, Americans did not vote for their Senators; they were appointed by the State Legislatures.⁴⁰ This structure also ensured a compounding effect where a few matters even made national concern. If everyone who could vote for the President or for their state assemblies were white men, and the Congress was comprised of a House directly voted upon by white men, and the Senate was appointed by the state legislatures, there were inevitably fewer interests represented.

Fearing that there were too few women on the Western Frontier, Wyoming became the first state to grant women the right to vote to sweeten the deal.⁴¹ States throughout the West started granting women the right to vote until 1929 when the nineteenth Amendment was passed which federally gave women the right to vote.⁴² Despite the nineteenth amendment, though, black women faced all the same barriers faced by black men.

During the era of Reconstruction, states passed a series of racist voting restrictions that seriously limited black men's access to voting. Former confederate states passed Jim Crow laws that included literacy tests, grandfather clauses, and poll taxes.⁴³ In addition to these systemic barriers was extreme social intimidation that deterred black men from even trying to vote in the first place. The Voting Rights Act of 1965 marked one of the most substantive shifts in the erosion of barriers to civic engagement,

⁴⁰ United States Senate, "Direct Election of Senators," *United States Senate*.

https://www.senate.gov/artandhistory/history/common/briefing/Direct_Election_Senators.htm

⁴¹ Editors, "Women's Suffrage," *History*, March 27, 2020, <https://www.history.com/topics/womens-history/the-fight-for-womens-suffrage>

⁴² Ibid

⁴³ Carnegie Corporation of New York

eliminating many of the most overt obstacles to voting that targeted black Americans more severely than White Americans.⁴⁴ Even today, voter suppression is rampant: whether it is gerrymandering or strict voter ID laws, which is making the pushback even more intense.⁴⁵ Of course the Voting Rights Act did not end the civil rights movement or voter suppression, but it did mark a time that garnered national attention.

Of course major political occurrences affected the entire nation, but the absence of technology that could inform the entire nation of what was occurring meant that national focus was generally splintered. There were of course ways to communicate with people across the country -- printing press, postal system, underground railroad, etc.- but for many years the country remained fractured because it couldn't focus on the same thing. The radio was making its way into American homes around the same time as the 19th amendment was passed. So, newspapers and radios were the most important ways that people were able to be politically active when politics was meant for the engagement of just a sliver of Americans.

Tracing the history of federal-level civic engagement shows that this country was, from the beginning, designed to incubate a binary attitude. Beyond Democrat and Republican, there was generally an “us vs. them,” the “haves” and the “have nots” mentality, stemming from the fact that so many people had to claw their way to have a

⁴⁴ Ibid

⁴⁵ Wendy R. Weiser and Zachary Roth, “This is the Worst Voter Suppression We’ve Seen in the Modern Era,” *Brennan Center for Justice*, November 2, 2018, <https://www.brennancenter.org/our-work/analysis-opinion/worst-voter-suppression-weve-seen-modern-era>

say in the policies that would affect them. The polarization the United States experiences at any point in history was inevitable.

Though all these watershed moments of social organizing and progress faced enormous opposition, the Vietnam War was different for a few reasons, the primary being that it garnered more attention and concern from Americans to act. Two things stood out about the Vietnam War: #1) Television allowed Americans to see for themselves how gruesome the war they were fighting was, which #2) United the American people in ways other movements had not.⁴⁶ Other feats of organizing that occurred before were spearheaded by minorities who were the victims of systemic discrimination by the American Government- in other words, many Americans did not participate in this movements because they did not have to because of whatever privileges they enjoyed or because they were barred from doing so. While some fled to Canada or had the option of somehow dodging the draft, the combination of a draft *intended* to equalize Americans and huge mistrust of the government and its motives led the sky to crack. The gruesomeness of what they saw on TV, the fact that all soldiers were at risk and these were people's children, the enormous trauma wrought from WWII that threatened to young American men led to the first time it was the people vs. the government rather than *some people* vs, the government.

⁴⁶ William M. Hammond, "The Press in Vietnam as an Agent of Defeat: A Critical Examination," *Reviews in American History* Vol. 17, No. 2 (June 1989): pp. 312-323.

This tidal wave of people caring kicked down the door between the politics my grandfather wanted to not discuss and the home life my grandmother could no longer be confined in.

Not only were Americans as a whole becoming more politically involved, the intensity of the Vietnam allowed for quieter changes to happen at home. When President Nixon resigned from office after being impeached in 1974, Democrats had controlled Congress for almost thirty years.⁴⁷ Nixon's resignation only worsened the possibility of Republicans gaining back control, as there was frustration from the public about the party's handling of the scandal as well as within the Republican party for allowing the Democrats to rule for so long. In 1973, Newt Gingrich decided he had had enough and that he would take back Congress.

In 1978, after two failed runs, Newt Gingrich successfully became a congressman for Georgia's 6th Congressional district, and, in short, upended all modes of cordiality that had been established between Congresspeople since its inception.⁴⁸ He called for investigations into behaviors of Democratic leadership based purely on hunches he had. He questioned Democrats' patriotism when it came to their foreign policy, a move that seems to us dramatic but not unheard of, but in his time this was simply not done.⁴⁹

⁴⁷ Steve Kornacki, *The Red and the Blue*. (New York City: HarperCollins, 2018).

⁴⁸ "Newt Gingrich." *Ballotpedia*,. https://ballotpedia.org/Newt_Gingrich

⁴⁹ Steve Kornacki, *The Red and the Blue*

One of the most important things Newt Gingrich did was continue upon breaking the barrier between private and public life. Specifically, he capitalized on the unmatched access television offered politicians to the inside of their constituents' homes.

People barely watched C-Span when it was invented in 1979. After a few years, though, Gingrich found a way to use it for his own gain. At the ends of every day is a period called "After hours," where members of the House can go to the podium and address issues that had not been covered in the day's session.⁵⁰ Gingrich would use this time to go and say inflammatory things, which would not be countered because no one else was in the Hall. However, the audience did not know this: it is against C-Span's policy to show anyone besides the speaker at the podium, so the audience would have the impression that this congressman was saying what he said unopposed by his colleagues.

This planted the seeds for the animosity we see between the parties today. Of course the tribalism is not exclusively Newt Gingrich's doing: it set the stage for the contentious Bush-Gore election of 2000, Mitch McConnell's promise to undermine Barack Obama's presidency in 2009, and most recently with the fact that only 1 member of the entire Republican Party voted to impeach Donald Trump despite undeniable evidence.

But what Newt did was not only stoke the tensions in the political space, he rode the wave of partisanship stoked by the Watergate Scandal and the Vietnam War. By presenting his arguments on-camera when nobody could counter him, he delivered to the public a carefully crafted distortion of his political power that legitimized statements too

⁵⁰ Ibid

divisive to say when others could counter. And because he was able to grab the attention of the voter inside their home, he was able to win re-election every two year for twenty years until he chose to step down from being Speaker of the House in 1999.

Gingrich could have published his most divisive opinions in magazines or in interviews, but he knew that reaching every-day citizens in their home offered something other means of communication would not: command of the viewers' and those they lived with. Gingrich identified that energizing someone in the privacy of their own home with no politicians around to contest him would move the viewer to see his side of things and then discuss his arguments with other members of that home.

Newt Gingrich pioneered a strategy of communication designed to polarize people, engineering the same echo-chamber effect that makes today's media so popular and one-sided. The acquisition of voting rights and protests during the Vietnam War pulled people out of their homes and into the public sphere, but social media erases that boundary 10-fold. Unlike other revolutions that brought about civic engagement, social media offers unprecedented ability to curate which opinions make their way through to you, and because humans are naturally conflict-averse, they will likely choose to hear voices that reaffirm their opinions in creative ways.

Similarly to the end of my grandparents' marriage in the 1980s, polarized opinions are causing a change in dating and marriage patterns. The marital stress caused by social unrest of the Vietnam war, partnered with increasing financial opportunities for women, both contributed to the fact that American divorce rates were at their highest ever in the early 1980s. In 1981, there were 5.3 divorces for of every 1,000 people, which

translates to 1.2 million divorces in that year alone.⁵¹ In 2016, the divorce rate was 3.2 per 1,000.⁵²

While national divorce rates may be lowering, though, it would be wrong to assume that this is because the polarization that pulled my grandparents apart is not operating today. A Wakefield research study found that 1 in 10 Americans (11%) have ended a romantic relationship over political differences, which actually *doubles* for millennials, as 22% of this age group reported having broken up with someone over political differences.⁵³ The research also found that more than 1 in 5 Americans (22%) know a couple whose marriage or relationship has been negatively impacted due specifically to Trump's election. Twenty-nine percent of Americans, either married or in a relationship, acknowledged the current political climate caused tension with their partner.⁵⁴

While there are no statistics on divorces that ended precisely because of political differences, New York based divorce attorney Lois Brenner has told Fox Business that in her 35 years of matrimonial law she has never seen so much fighting over politics.⁵⁵

Lower divorce rates could suggest that the financial independence women were gaining in the 1980s is allowing women today to marry more compatible partners rather

⁵¹ "Number of Divorces Reached Record in 1981," *The New York Times*, February 2, 1984, <https://www.nytimes.com/1984/02/02/garden/number-of-divorces-reached-record-in-1981.html>

⁵² Marisa Lascala, "The U.S. Divorce Rate is Going Down, and We Have Millennials to Thank," February 27, 2019, <https://www.goodhousekeeping.com/life/relationships/a26551655/us-divorce-rate/>

⁵³ Wakefield, "New Wakefield Research Study: The Trump Effect on American Relationships," *Wakefield*, May 17, 2017, <https://www.wakefieldresearch.com/blog/2017/05/10/new-wakefield-research-study-trump-effect-american-relationships>

⁵⁴ Ibid

⁵⁵ Ibid

than for money, which may end in divorce. It could also be because millennials are marrying later than older generations, waiting to learn more about themselves and their partner, and to become financially stable first.⁵⁶ Finally, it could also be due to the fact that millennials, who get their news from social media more frequently than any other generation,⁵⁷ *are* in fact more polarized and are seeking out people who are politically similar, which could lead to less conflict.⁵⁸

Newt Gingrich's ability to reinforce a Democrat-Republican binary not only built the binary of American society but also the willing citizen. Polarization is not just a politician's game, but something all Americans feed every day. Gingrich, much like today's divisive figures on either side of the spectrum, are not mind-controllers. Their ability to capitalize on an "us vs. them" mentality also rests on the willingness of the American citizen to exist in a binary. Citizens should think what they want, and that is the beauty of freedom of speech. But citizens do not have no responsibility for today's polarized climate; it is a vicious cycle. When bases become polarized they call for their representatives to aim for 100% of what they want with no compromise.

While representatives obviously need to work for the people, they cannot be beholden to the collective yelling of the loudest voices in the party. This is how you get a President like Donald Trump: polarization is equally, if not more, about political communications as it is policy.

⁵⁶ Marisa Lascalea, "The U.S. Divorce Rate is Going Down, and We Have Millennials to Thank,"

⁵⁷ Kate Clark, "How are 'Millennials' Using Social Media for News?," *Family Online Safety Institute*, June 26, 2018, <https://www.fosi.org/good-digital-parenting/how-are-millennials-using-social-media-news/>

⁵⁸ Cathy J. Cohen, et al. "Political Polarization and Trust Among Millennials," *GenForwardSurvey*, May 2018, <https://cms.marketplace.org/sites/default/files/GenForward.pdf>

Part III: Inter-Political Party Couples

I waited for fifteen minutes in front of a bar in Dublin where I was supposed to meet a guy who did not include an apology in his text that he would be late.

Almost a year before I lived in D.C. I spent a summer in Ireland, and at that point all I was looking for was to connect with someone who could show me around Dublin. I did not have any sense of Connor's politics before we met at the bar; this would be the last time I would go on a date via an online dating without discussing someone's politics beforehand.

Tinder told me to look for a 24-year old redhead who was exactly 6'1", which I knew because this was the only detail Connor had written about himself besides a promise that he would give his dates food. Connor was much thinner in person than he was in his photos, which made it hard to reconcile the image of the athlete I had expected to meet with the person standing in front of me whose voice cracked on "Hello." The noticeable network of Connor's bones, the lightness of his steps, and his vivid copper hair set against the grey exterior of the bar gave him the aura of a robin.

Over cider and a vodka soda we discussed my plans in Ireland and made our best efforts to connect over the World Cup. When I told him that I regrettably was not following the soccer tournament all that closely, he assured me that this was alright because most girls don't like sports anyway. I could not tell if he was joking, but he shifted the conversation before I had time to process.

After we decided to get a second round of drinks, I stood up and offered to buy both of ours. He insisted, I insisted, and then he said with no hint of irony, “It makes me uncomfortable when girls buy me things.” This made up my mind for me that his comment about women not liking sports was not ironic. I asked him if it made him uncomfortable that women have their own money, at which point he went silent and I left him to buy our second round.

Though I did not seek out Connor because of his political beliefs, since I began dating as a young adult I have found politics an interesting and unavoidable topic of conversation to discuss on dates. I believed discussing Ireland’s political hot-topics would be a great way to get to know the country I was staying in, so I asked Connor about the event dominating the news at that moment: the referendum to legalize abortion that passed just three weeks before I arrived. There has never been a more obvious topic than abortion to avoid when on a date with a misogynist, but he was a temperate misogynist, we were both intoxicated, his Tinder muscles had evaporated and I did not think I had anything to lose.

I asked him what the climate was like during the referendum and he said calm, an answer I felt could only be given from someone uninvolved in the referendum, given the waves of protests I was reading about in the news. He said that, at first, he wasn’t going to vote in the referendum at all because he didn’t believe men should vote on an issue concerning women’s bodies. “A feminist turn of events,” I thought to myself. But then he

continued and asked if nine months was really that long of a time and argued that there were plenty of families that wanted to adopt children. I told him that women were not baby-making machines and no matter how badly any family wanted a child, it was not some random woman's responsibility to give it to them. He said he had not thought about it that way before, so he was glad that he ultimately voted to make the procedure legal.

Our conversation over our third round is admittedly hazy, but I do remember it had nothing to do with politics.

As we walked back toward the city's center he said he would walk me home, at which I cackled in my head and thought "You will not!" I thanked him and said I was going to meet my friends at a certain club, knowing he would because he had mentioned he lived in the opposite direction.

We hugged and then, to my surprise, kissed. And then we parted ways.

I felt proud of how I handled myself on the date. I did not hold back how I felt and challenged Connor to consider perspectives he had not thought of before. Though I was surprised at myself for kissing someone who expressed such upsetting views of women, I felt content with the fact that I had broadened his mind and engaged in physical intimacy that I enjoyed at the same time. I did not feel used; I felt like I did exactly what I wanted.

But these feelings changed when I met up with the other Americans I was living with. When I described my date to them, one student named George said that I had “let Connor win” because I had kissed him even though he was a misogynist. I disagreed and explained that I had called Connor out whenever he said things I found offensive, but George explained that me kissing him signaled I was willing to look past his sexism or forgive it just enough to engage in physical intimacy. Though I believed my words spoke for me, it was clear that George weighed his own interpretation of my actions as the more credible indicator of what I believed in. No matter what I said, there was an argument to be made that I was not as ardently pro-choice as I claimed.

George’s comment was one example of a kind of policing that draws the boundaries that determine who falls within or outside of a certain political party in the United States. Though this particular experience only involved two people, this comment was inspired by a much larger social norm responsible for the deepening of today’s intense political divisions.

Political Tribalism, most broadly, refers to a set of behaviors or thoughts motivated by maintaining loyalty to a certain group.⁵⁹ This desire to remain in good standing with the “tribe” encourages people to prioritize belonging to that group at the expense of challenging it. It is more a marker of identity than simply a list of what you

⁵⁹ George Packer, “A New Report Offers Insights Into Tribalism in the Age of Trump,” *The New Yorker*, October 13, 2018, <https://www.newyorker.com/news/daily-comment/a-new-report-offers-insights-into-tribalism-in-the-age-of-trump>

believe: it is as much about what you believe as it is about *how* you believe it. It is belonging in exchange for conformity.

The word has its racist origins in colonial-era anthropologists describing the destruction of social cohesion among African tribes.⁶⁰ Though African tribes did and continue to have complex systems of wealth, art, and bureaucracies, politicians- particularly from Western countries- co-opted this language to describe the chaos or breakdown they perceived between tribes as the result of blinding loyalty to one tribe in particular. One op-ed published in the *New Yorker* in the fall of 2018 argued that politics today “requires a word as primal as ‘tribe’ to get at the blind allegiances and huge passions of partisan affiliation.”⁶¹

Maintaining two political camps means there are certain behaviors one must abide in order to remain in the party’s good graces. Pressure to act in a certain way can be exerted on a small- scale platforms like shaming people on social media or in person, but it can also happen on a national scale with implications of freedom of speech. The term “RINO,” or “Republican in Name Only,” is a pejorative term hurled at Republicans who are deemed insufficiently Republican.⁶² In August of 2019 President Trump called El Paso’s Republican Mayor a RINO for arguing that the city’s low crime rate had nothing

⁶⁰ Christine Mungai, “Pundits who Decry ‘Tribalism’ Know Nothing about Real Tribes,” *The Washington Post*, January 30, 2019, https://www.washingtonpost.com/outlook/pundits-who-decry-tribalism-know-nothing-about-real-tribes/2019/01/29/8d14eb44-232f-11e9-90cd-dedb0c92dc17_story.html

⁶¹ Christine Mungai, “Pundits who Decry ‘Tribalism’ Know Nothing about Real Tribes”

⁶² Fran Coombs, “New RINOS Could Spell Trouble for the GOP”

to do with a wall erected at the U.S.- Mexico border.⁶³ President Trump has also used this term to criticize Utah Senator Mitt Romney, the only Republican who voted ‘guilty’ on his impeachment trial.⁶⁴ From voting against a party’s figurehead to casually kissing someone who puts forth views antithetical to your party’s, there will always be behavior that can constitute treachery against your political camp.

If certain behaviors are markers of how intensely you hold your political beliefs, what are the implications of romantic behavior that includes a political opposite? Does dating someone who holds views that chafe against yours constitute open-mindedness or a partial- surrender of your beliefs?

The fact that 1/3 of American marriages are comprised of individuals with different political beliefs remind us that, if anything, such relationships are possible. They teach us differing political views can exist at the periphery or a relationship or at its core and serve as examples of opposites attract because of or in spite of their differences. While real-world examples reassure us that love can conquer some, fictional representations of inter-political party couples are useful for helping us understand the undercurrents of such attraction that may be deemed too sexual to discuss openly in the real world.

⁶³ Jeanine Santucci, “El Paso Mayor says Trump Called him a ‘RINO’ Following Mass Shooting,” *USA Today*, August 15, 2019, <https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/politics/2019/08/15/trump-called-el-paso-mayor-dee-margo-rino-according-interview/2023715001/>

⁶⁴ Benjamin Fearnow, “What does ‘RINO’ Mean? Trump Calls Romney Terrible Presidential Candidate’ After Senator Tests Negative for COVID-19,” *Newsweek*, March 25, 2020

Aaron Sorkin's *The West Wing* features the top White House staffers of the fictional Bartlett administration working to mold the country to a Democrat's dreamscape. The characters are liberal superstars that viewers today look back to as reassurance that people in Washington can be driven by good intentions.⁶⁵ The characters are extremely dedicated to their causes, working overtime whenever needed and fighting off jabs from detractors left and right. The show initially aired in 1999 and ended in 2007, but the hot-topic issues it addresses are almost identical to America's contemporary issues: white supremacy, gun, violence, minimum wage, healthcare, and more. It is impressive that the show is able to address issues in ways that remain relevant, but the fact that dialogue from ten years ago feels as if it could have been written today is a sobering reminder of how little progress has been made

The show is, in a word, dense, which only underscores the value and complexity of the office romances. The first relationship is between C.J. Cregg, the White House Press Secretary, and a Hill journalist, whom she can't date because they always believe the other is trying to get something from the other. Then there is, of course, Deputy Chief of Staff Josh Lyman and his secretary, Donna Moss. Their relationship is a slow burn that takes place over the course of the show's seven seasons and is one of the first examples of "will they won't they?" office relationship.

⁶⁵ Sarah Lyall, "They Can't Get Enough of the West Wing Right Now," *The New York Times*, December 19, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/12/29/us/politics/west-wing-politics.html>

Unlike these two relationships where all participants are Democrats, one of the show's steamiest relationships is a series of Democrat-Republican standoffs between two characters who never even date. This relationship is between Sam Seaborn, played by a sculpturesque Rob Lowe, and Ainsley Hayes, the fast-talking, Harvard-educated Republican lawyer from North Carolina, who is brought onto the president's team to provide counter perspectives to the firewall of progressive dogma. Ainsley and Sam never date during the series but their attraction to one another is palpable. Their flirtatiousness comes to a peak in the third season, when Ainsley and Sam debate the merits of adding the Equal Rights Act (ERA) to the constitution. Sam says it should be there, Ainsley says it shouldn't on the grounds that it is paternalistic to claim that women need an additional layer of legal protection. She adds that it implies that women are not as "American" as men because the ERA claims women do not enjoy the benefits of the constitution men have.

Though Sam has two serious romances before Ainsley's joins the staff, it is no coincidence that their relationship is both the show's steamiest and the first one that presents an intellectual challenge for Sam. Sam's first relationship is with a law student working as an escort to pay her way through college, and while she and Sam are able to spar, the relationship is borderline-problematic because its most prominent quality is Sam's benevolence. The purpose of Sam's second relationship is to showcase how difficult maintaining a personal life is while working inside the White House, and thus this romance is dominated primarily by how much the couple hate their circumstances.

Sam and Ainsley's romance is the only one where we see Sam sweat. For me, the discomfort was always the most compelling reaction Sam had in any of his relationships because it played with power dynamics in ways his previous relationships had not. The will-they-won't-they of this relationship was always the most interesting for me because it was the only romance dedicated to exploring what it would look like when two characters of different parties wrestled within their intellectual parity. The numerous face-offs the pair had was both educational and sensuous.

Sam is Ainsley's superior and yet she regularly disagrees with him, even occasionally disobeying his instructions to do what she thinks is right. More than that, she often intellectually bests him. The heat of Sam and Ainsley's romance stems from the obfuscating of power dynamics between the two. It wasn't a coincidence that the most prominent Democrat- Republican relationship of any kind was a romantic one.

Many people credit Aaron Sorkin for writing a show that manages to stay politically relevant today. But we should also credit him for having the foresight to write a romance like Sam and Ainsley's that tapped into patterns of attraction that did not even have a name at the time.

In 2018, a researcher at the Kinsey Institute named Justin Lehmiller published a book called *Tell Me What You Want*, which explains the results of the largest survey in history assessing the sexual fantasies of everyday Americans.⁶⁶ The survey reached over

⁶⁶ Justin J. Lehmiller, *Tell Me what You Want: The Science of Sexual Desire and How it Can Help You Improve Your Sex Life* (New York: De Capo Press, 2018)

1,470 adults across 50 states and, in addition to asking them to describe their sexual fantasies, required them to fill out various demographics they belong to, including political affiliation. If that detail strikes you as unrelated to someone's sexual preferences, the study's findings may surprise you.

While self-identified Republicans and self-identified Democrats reported fantasizing with the same average frequency -- several times per week -- the fantasies of both parties were driven by themes directly opposed to the values of the parties they belong to. For example, Republicans are more likely to fantasize about a range of activities that involve sex outside of marriage, including orgies, infidelity, and partner swapping. Republicans also had more 'voyeuristic' fantasies, including visiting strip clubs and watching their partners have sex with someone else. Democrats, on the other hand, were more likely to think about things along the BDSM spectrum, including bondage, spanking, and dominance-submission play.

In the Republican party, fidelity and conventional sex are very important, which makes sense given that a major party value is maintaining the nuclear family structure. For Democrats who answered the survey, a.k.a. the significant portion of the *Wing's* audience, their fantasies consisted of exaggerating a power imbalance, which contradicts a party whose focus is often on "levelling the playing field."

The tendency for people to fantasize about behaviors they are not supposed to engage in is called Reactance Theory, and it follows the philosophy that people want what they are not supposed to have.⁶⁷ Much like distancing yourself from certain foods you want when you're on a diet, denying yourself certain pleasures because of political alignment wets a different kind of appetite. But not only are we looking for something we can't have, we are looking for something that entertains us and varies from what we are used to.

The *West Wing* was written by a liberal team and was primarily adored by liberal audiences, so it makes perfect sense that Sam and Ainsley's relationship was based off touting power dynamics. But not only did they tap into this political fantasy, they also exhibited the Self-Expansion model discussed earlier. Though they often came to standstills, they often conceded that they had not thought about a certain issue through the other's perspective. There was a tenderness and gratitude between the two for helping the other grow intellectually.

A real-life example of the pull of the self-expansion model is politics' #1 odd couple, James Carville and Mary Matalin. The spouses are strategists for their respective political parties, with Carville being a Democrat and Matalin being a Republican. The pair actually met while working on opposing political campaigns in the early 1990s.

⁶⁷ Lehmiller, *Tell me What You Want*

Their marriage is one of the handful- if the only- of inter-political party romances that anyone can name on the fly. Their marriage is an answer to the fundamental question of how do they make it work. The answer? Not seamlessly. Their marriage, like most, endures ups and downs that directly correlate to current events. For example, Carville says: “The more tense things got in Florida, the more tense they got at home... the recount soured everything. It was a weird time in the country, and certainly a difficult time in our marriage.”⁶⁸ The Iraq war also posed a similar problem, getting so bad they had to agree to “shut up or move out.”⁶⁹

But their relationship is perhaps one of the strongest examples of the power of the self-expansion model.

Carville says, “Always test the way you think. At the end of the day, you very well may conclude that you were right in the first place, but at least you came to that conclusion yourself.”⁷⁰ He added, “If you’re the smartest person in the room, get out of that room; there’s nothing for you.”

An open call from the New York Times for people to submit descriptions of their inter-political party romances reveals that there are many ways couples choose to

⁶⁸ Patrick Gavin, “Matalin, Carville Recall Finding ‘Love,’” *Politico*, December 20, 2013
<https://www.politico.com/story/2013/12/james-carville-mary-matalin-recall-finding-love-101333>

⁶⁹ Ibid, Patrick Gavin

⁷⁰ Charles Lussier, “Political Odd Couple James Carville, Mary Matalin say it’s OK to disagree, even over Trump,” *The Advocate*, February 6, 2019,
https://www.theadvocate.com/baton_rouge/news/education/article_02d02290-28c1-11e9-9bd1-5bfe28919a73.html

approach the topic of politics.⁷¹ It functions on a spectrum: some don't discuss it at all, some discuss it on the grounds that they do not engage in social media outside of the house. Some explain that you have to prioritize your partner over your politics, and their beliefs are not the most important things about them. Some actually said that Trump's election solved their previous disagreements because they were now able to agree that his administration was so unqualified. And some, like Carville and Matalin, describe that it made them think more clearly about their beliefs -- that the polarization forced them to really consider their ideas so they would be able to articulate them.

Romances describes in articles such as these represent a shift in dating and romance patterns in the United States. Unlike my grandparents' marriage, where they did not talk about politics until the end, politics is playing a more central and divisive role in our relationships. This is the natural output of polarization and social media that enables instantaneous consideration of current events when you turn on your phone.

We can expect to see polarization's impact on population growth over the next few decades. Conservatives have a lot more sex with fewer people in fewer positions. Liberals have more sex with lots of different kind of people and are less satisfied with the sex. Because conservatives tend to have more children, we can expect the conservative population to grow over time.⁷²

⁷¹ Josephine Sedgewick, "When You're in Love with Your Political Opposite," *The New York Times*, February 14, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/02/14/reader-center/love-in-the-time-of-partisanship.html>

⁷² Rose McDermott, Interview with Julia Rosenberg. Providence, Rhode Island. November, 2019.

There is no one right way to sustain an inter-political party relationship, just as there is no one way to sustain a political matched relationship. The only thing surveying inter-political party romances proves is that partisan categories again fail to encompass the complexity with which individuals approach love and politics. The only way to learn anything about an inter-political party romance is to talk about it with the people in them.

Epilogue

In 1780, John Adams wrote, "There is nothing which I dread so much as a division of the republic into two great parties, each arranged under its leader, and concerting measures in opposition to each other."⁷³

The Founding Fathers were able to see division on our country's horizon long before America developed anything that resembles our current structures of governance. Today's polarization is neither what the Founding Fathers intended nor a particularly pleasant experience, but it is dangerous to dismiss it as simply a 'failing of the system' and something that needs to be eradicated. America's polarization is a self-devouring beast, undoing the very structures of free speech and free press that make it possible in the first place. Because it encompasses both the best and most dangerous aspects of American design, it should neither die nor remain the way it is. But it must change.

⁷³ John Adams to Jonathan Jackson, October, 1780, *The Federalist Papers*, December 1, 2012. <https://thefederalistpapers.org/founders/adams/john-adams-letter-to-jonathan-jackson-october-1780>

On the one hand, polarization poses a serious threat to civil liberties. Mitt Romney's singular Republican vote to not acquit President Trump is proof that partisan belonging is already being leveraged to cow individuals into 'falling in line.' The 'RINO' or 'Republican in Name Only' movement, which shames politicians who are 'insufficiently' Republican, is practically a way of bulldozing diversity of thought.⁷⁴ And the blind support of a leader we see among politicians has a ripple effect among citizens. Polarization can manifest in ways that may seem commonplace at this point, from assuming someone is "bad" because they belong to the opposition party to voting down-ballot for candidates without knowing individual stances. These actions seem limited in scope, but they reverberate across larger populations and threaten democracy. A 2017 study by the Pew Research Center found less than half of Republicans felt that the freedom of the press "to criticize politicians" was "very important" to maintaining a strong democracy in the United States.⁷⁵ Other studies conducted that same year found that over half of Trump supporters believed that President Trump 'should be able to overturn decisions by judges he disagrees with.'⁷⁶ It is nearly impossible to imagine that these sentiments are unrelated to the fact that the President they are referring to regularly calls the media "the enemy of the people"⁷⁷ and refers to the Congresspeople upholding checks and balances as "scum" and "evil."⁷⁸ Polarization can take many shapes, but a form that cannibalizes the freedoms that make it possible is one that must be addressed.

⁷⁴ Francis Coombs

⁷⁵ Amy Chua and Jed Rubenfeld, "The Threat of Tribalism," *The New Yorker*, October 15, 2018, <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2018/10/the-threat-of-tribalism/568342/>

⁷⁶ Amy Chua and Jed Rubenfeld

⁷⁷ Amy Chua and Jed Rubenfeld

⁷⁸ Ledyard King, John Fritze, and David Jackson, "In 1999 Bill Clinton was 'Humbled' by Impeachment. Now, Donald Trump Unloads on a 'phony, rotten deal,'" *USA Today*, February 11, 2020, <https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/politics/2020/02/06/donald-trump-bill-clinton-impeachment-reactions-different/4680500002/>

On the other hand, polarization is also the fruit of a Constitution founded upon civil liberties. Any polarizing op-ed, protest, Tweet, bid for office or snarky comment made by a member of the media from either side of the aisle is American liberty in action. Every statistic on partisanship that makes this thesis possible doubles as documentation of feelings towards the party in power and our president, information that is censored or non-existent in the majority of countries around the world. America borders a country where journalists are regularly murdered, and we had our last presidential election interfered with by a country that prohibits opposition parties to run for office. When evaluated in a global context that seems to be tightening around America's neck, polarization is a small price to pay for the rights we so often take for granted. Polarization is thus both a poison and a privilege.

And lost in all the debate on whether polarization strengthens or weakens civil liberties is discussion of *why* Americans are so polarized. Regardless of whether or not polarization is good or bad, its existence is a symptom of larger issues that deserve more attention than the spectacle of which side is winning.

Sociologists agree that some of the main causes of America's polarization include seismic demographic shifts, growing wealth divides, decreased economic mobility and a media that profits from outrage.⁷⁹

⁷⁹ Amy Chua and Jed Rubenfeld

The first of these causes is demographic shifts that researchers project will cause whites to lose their racial majority by roughly 2050, if not earlier. This is accompanied by a constant decline of the American population that identifies as Christian. Reactions to these demographic changes fall along partisan lines, as Democrats and Republicans differ in their racial and religious compositions as well as their understandings of the place these identifiers have in a national identity. According to a 2016 survey commissioned by the bipartisan Democracy Fund, 30% of Trump voters think European ancestry is “important” to “being American; 56% of Republicans and 63% of Trump supporters said the same of being Christian. Though Republicans tend to trust American institutions more than Democrats, this understanding of American identity contradicts the principles of the Constitution that says Americans are citizens regardless of race or religion.⁸⁰

Surprisingly, these trends are having the same effects on young progressives who are also turning away from the Constitution. To many young progressives, the government has repeatedly failed to mitigate wealth inequality, racial disparities, and religious discrimination. Some believe the government is directly responsible for these problems, and the disillusionment is showing. In a recent poll, 2/3 of college-age Democrats said that a “diverse and inclusive society” is “more important than protecting free speech rights.” Only 30% of Americans born in the 1980s believe that living in a democracy is essential, compared to 72% of Americans who believe this who were born in the 1930s.⁸¹

⁸⁰ Ibid

⁸¹ Ibid

These statistics teach us that while polarization may feel trivial it is actually a symptom of profound national ills. People often say that a solution to polarization is to recalibrate our partisan values to better focus on what unites us. But the ‘unity’ solution misses the bigger picture; any attempt to mitigate polarization without addressing the underlying issues is a missed opportunity.

Polarization has macro-scale implications for national wellbeing as well as lower-level implications of social cohesion. This project has taught me many things about the ways politics affects our relationships, and it has made me especially aware of the ways partisans police what other people say.

A few weeks into writing this thesis I went out to dinner with a few students from Brown and their parents. One parent asked us students if we would all be voting for Bernie Sanders in the Democratic primary, and everyone except for me responded that they would. When I said that I planned to vote for Elizabeth Warren, one student said, “Ok. That’s the only other answer I would accept.”

People are perfectly entitled to use their politics as the determinant of whom they spend their time with. But the politicians we vote for are not neat summaries of how we think about the world. Every progressive who reluctantly votes for the moderate Joe Biden this November would likely agree that they are not voting for him because he represents every single one of their beliefs. A vote for Joe Biden, Hillary Clinton, or

Donald Trump does not tell the whole story. Human behavior is unpredictable and we get no closer to understanding it by fueling one-dimensional caricatures of partisans. If we knew human beings as well as we think we do, then why are pundits always so surprised at voter behavior at every election? From Hillary Clinton's unexpected loss in 2016 to the wave of support for Joe Biden from Black voters in the South this primary, partisans regularly fail to anticipate the behavior of members of the opposition and their own party members.

What I've learned from all this: think for yourself, especially when it comes to your political identity. There are plenty of voices clamoring to tell you what is or what isn't a "true" value or belief of a certain party. But not all Democrats are pro-Government, pro-choice, pro-Revolution, or pro-Universal healthcare. Many Republicans detest Trump, want more background checks, are terrified of climate change, and want to expand healthcare systems. People are so much more varied in their political beliefs than the media or our assumptions allow them to be. I am not suggesting we reach across the aisle and hold hands. Friendship is not a solution to the issues that are fueling polarization. I am suggesting that we all check our egos once in a while and admit that we don't know what we don't know.

The rising number of interracial and interfaith couples,⁸² which contradicts all the science that says people are attracted to the familiar, proves that human behavior is much messier than any study that seeks to explain it. No one is as predictable as a partisan

⁸² Caryle Murphy

framework sets them up to be, which means we can neither form conclusions about someone's beliefs or their willingness to work together. This is exactly why split-ticket voting is at its lowest ever recorded, yet 77% of Americans believe that our differences are not so great we cannot overcome them.⁸³ Politicians, journalists, and sociologists often present one narrative of partisanship that can be misleading; it's up to every individual to remain skeptical of what the loudest voices are saying.

Lastly, politics can seem like it has nothing to learn from the world of romance. And while politicians do not necessarily need to seek the advice of inter-political party couples, they can certainly reframe the bigger picture they are working towards in more domestic terms. It could be useful to revisit the meaning and origins of President Lincoln saying, "A House divided against itself cannot stand."⁸⁴

That phrasing appears twice in the Bible, once in the Gospel of Mark: 25 and then in the Gospel of Matthew when Jesus says, "Every kingdom divided against itself is brought to desolation; and every city or house divided against itself shall not stand." The history of likening a nation to a house suggests that politicians need to be reminded of the domestic nature of their work. Every constituent they are responsible for lives under the roof they build and should be treated as if known on a personal level.

⁸³ Stephen Hawkins et al., "Hidden Tribes: A Study of America's Polarized Landscape," *More in Common*, 2018, https://hiddentribes.us/pdf/hidden_tribes_report.pdf

⁸⁴ Abraham Lincoln's "A House Divided" speech, delivered on June 17, 1858, in Springfield, Illinois.

Because citizens participate in polarization just like politicians, Americans can also benefit from seeing each other and themselves as parts of the same whole rather than competing for their individual interests. There is an assumption today that forming relationships across the aisle signals treachery or weakness: that anything that resembles a concession is evidence of a lack of conviction. And I can understand that asking someone to check their partisanship can seem like a smokescreen to get them to stop advocating for their beliefs. But political identities are capacious, and they include more than policy stances. Fighting tirelessly for your cause does not depend on sorting people into either side of a moral absolutist binary. Willingness to see the validity in opinions that differ from yours is not a surrender of your beliefs. Nothing will get done if we continue to approach each other with the baseline assumption that the other is the enemy.

Lincoln's call for unity was not a call to put differences aside because he knew that the divisions back then, much like they are now, were not arbitrary. He stressed unity because there was no alternative. And the Biblical use of the phrase challenges us to see unity as an epic, if not holy imperative. If people in Biblical times and in the midst of a civil war came to agree that unity was necessary, how are President Trump, Republicans, Democrats, you or I above reaching across the aisle? Checking your partisanship takes humility. Seeing someone's wellbeing as intertwined with your own takes a bird's-eye view. As long as we refuse to admit that much of our partisanship is dispensable we delay progress on the issues that really matter.

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