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



Synopsis

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

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Customer Reviews

This book was written just before the 2008 election so Bishop concentrates on the 2004 election. The point is that Americans are increasingly clustering in politically homogeneous neighborhoods, counties, and states. In 2004 half of the counties gave Bush or Kerry a landslide victory, defined as a twenty point victory. This has been a growing trend since 1976 when only a quarter of the counties had landslide victories. In a short afterword, Bishop confirms that the trend continued in 2008. There are now no more than about ten battleground states. This political segregation is happening because it is now easy for Americans to move to places they find more congenial. They find the same people there and they vote the same. The country is thus segregating geographically, which is a return to the original condition of the founding states. This clustering has increased political conformity so that the independent vote is now only about ten percent. People are also simply choosing the lifestyles they like and the result is political. Democrats prefer big cities and older suburbs while Republicans prefer newer suburbs and rural areas. This assorting migration is producing assortive mating and tribal attitudes with political polarization. This cultural shift actually started in 1965 when people first began challenging institutions in the post-WWII era. It was initially a silent revolution because it was first picked up in voter attitudes polled by Gallup. People then became more partisan and the era of compromise and bi-partisanship began unraveling. It first started from the left in 1965 with anti-war demonstrations but in 1966 Republicans joined in with unexpected Congressional victories where they ousted local Democrat politicians. 1966 was also the year when Reagan won the California governor's race by upsetting the incumbent Democrat. Bishop says this is part of a post-materialist society, meaning one where people's material needs are satisfied so they concentrate on higher value needs such as lifestyle and the accompanying political conformity. So the cause is prosperity as people can increasingly afford to move and cluster. Bishop says the 2004 election was the first big sort election where motivating the base was more important than chasing independents. The GOP latched onto this earlier and used marketing techniques to find conservative voters. The Democrats caught up in 2008. Accompanying all this has been the increasing distrust of national institutions and political parties. The most recent example has been the election of Donald Trump who is the quintessential political outsider. He has broken all the political conventions and amassed a major following. The 2016 election has probably changed American politics indefinitely.

Now that Bill Clinton is using Bill Bishop's book "The Big Sort" as the basis for his current speeches, I should finally post a review. I read this book as soon as it was published and liked it, but not being one who regularly picks up social science books on political culture I procrastinated. Now it's time,

and here are a few observations. "The Big Sort" refers to the fact that lifestyle choices are leading like-minded folks to live together in communities where they feel comfortable and perhaps unchallenged. That has significant ramifications for our country's political and social development. To quote the book, "The lesson for politics and culture is pretty clear. It doesn't matter if you're a frat boy, a French high school student, a petty criminal, or a federal appeals court judge. Mixed company moderates; like-minded company polarizes. Heterogeneous communities restrain group excesses; homogeneous communities march toward extremes." The fact that Republican strategists understood this well before the Democrats is detailed in a discussion with Matthew Dowd, George Bush's pollster in the 2000 election and chief strategist for the Bush campaign in 2004. According to Bishop's account, Dowd understood that "American communities were 'becoming very homogeneous'. He believed that to a large degree, this clustering was defensive, the general reaction to a society, a country, and a world that were largely beyond an individual's control or understanding. For generations, people had used their clubs, their trust in a national government, and long-established religious denominations to make sense of the world. But those old institutions no longer provided a safe harbor. 'What I think has happened,' Dowd told me early in 2005, 'is the general anxiety the country feels is building. We're no longer anchored'." Bishop decodes this further, saying "Unsurpassed prosperity had enriched Americans---and it had loosened long established social moorings. Americans were scrambling to find a secure place, to make a secure place...Most Americans have done that by seeking out(or perhaps gravitating toward)those who share their lifeworlds---made up of old, fundamental differences such as race, class, gender, and age, but also, now more than ever, personal tastes, beliefs, styles, opinions, and values." "The Big Sort" identifies 1965 as the beginning of the major shift in American political and social demographics. The result today, in a political sense, is underscored by the findings of Bishop and his sociologist/demographer contributor Robert Cushing. Statistics showed that in the 1976 presidential election only 20% of Americans lived in counties that voted for one candidate or the other by more than a 20% margin. By 2004, 48% of America's counties were this type of landslide county with 20% plus margins for one of the candidates. Big change. Bishop's book manages to deal with this subject comprehensively while being fluidly written, informative, insightful, and even entertaining. Somehow he pulls off the trick of letting us know of his participation in the "clustering" by living in a liberal Austin neighborhood where he fits in, without upsetting the balanced analytical perspective of the book. At least that's my take on it. It's an important book that seems to be gaining deserved recognition as we move toward November 4.

Bishop's book is a mix of voluminous in-depth research, interesting antidotes and sociological/historical case studies that explain the underlying forces which have led to increasing religious, social and political polarization. Recommended for anyone who wants to gain a greater understanding of why our political and moral debates are becoming much more contentious and strident and while there is increasing less compromise and moderation in our public and private conversations.

A lot of people pointed at this book as a good one to see when examining the current American political landscape. It plods on and on, with lots of data. It reminds me of Sandberg's Lean In - good message, but boring presentation of data. I'm not asking Bill Bishop to be Michael Lewis or Malcolm Gladwell, but even Peter Sims' level of writing ability would be good.

The Big Sort goes a long way toward explaining how America has broken into "Blue" enclaves and swaths of "Red." It is not a fast or easy read; in fact, it often feels like a sociology (or poli sci?) textbook. However, the author uses many, many fact-based charts and graphs to support his thesis that Americans began SELF-sorting into like-minded groups many years ago -- and that what we are seeing today in the politics-of-division is simply a much more polarized and much angrier evolution of a lengthy and troubling trend.

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