Student Name

Professor’s Name

Course Number

Day Month Year

Losing Friendships in the Echo: Social Media and Political Divisions in the U.S.

1. **Introduction: Best Friend and Political Stranger**

Dear reader, I have a confession to make: I am afraid to ask my best friend about her political views. Katie and I have known each other since we were both in Mrs. Ramsey’s first grade class. My older cousin and her older sister – Abby and Abby – were already best friends, and so it felt destined that we would be best friends, too. Katie was a tomboy, and she got me playing softball. Later, as teenagers, we shared a love of Radiohead and show choir. We went on family vacations together, survived a (minor) car crash together, and would often find ourselves laughing until we cried together. But ever since we went to separate colleges, we began to grow apart. Katie had grown up in a conservative Christian home, and her views became reinforced by the new people she surrounded herself with at a big state university. Likewise, my lefty, agnostic worldview was deepened by my experience at a liberal arts college. With so many new friends, my social feeds became an echo chamber of articles and memes that strongly reinforced what I already believed. And from the look of it, Katie was experiencing the same thing. She shared and liked content that I had come to find downright hateful and offensive. These days, we don’t talk about anything real anymore. I miss her, but I feel like being divided from her is the only way to still love her while hating her views. This experience is likely familiar to many Americans these days, and it seems like our immersion in the echo chambers of social media has something to do with it. But is that true? Is social media deepening political divisions in the U.S.?

1. **Two Parties, Two Perspectives**

Since its founding, the United States government has been made up of two major political parties – or, groups of “individuals who organize to win elections, operate government, and influence public policy” (“Political Parties” para. 1). When the country was founded, our government was organized by white men who had roots in Europe, and particularly England. These “founding fathers” were most familiar with the system of government they had known in England, Parliament, which had been organized into two parties – the Whigs and the Tories – since the late 17th century (“Whigs and Tories” para. 3). When the founding fathers organized our government and wrote our Constitution, they borrowed heavily from the British model, and they imported the two-party system as a result (“About the Senate and the Constitution” para. 2). Around the year 1800, America’s two political parties were known as the Federalists and the Democratic-Republicans (“Republican Party” para. 1). Eventually the Democratic-Republicans shortened their name to Democrats, and the Federalists became known as Republicans (“Republican Party” para. 1). Interestingly, some political theorists believe that the two-party system of government is the best model for a democratic country such as England or the United States, because they see this model as the only way to guarantee that one party will hold a true majority (Grant para. 1). However, this system can also cause what political theorists refer to as “cleavage,” or “the splitting of a political system along ethnic or ideological lines” (“cleavage” para. 1).

In the United States, this phenomenon of “cleavage” has always existed, since the two major political parties have always held different ideologies regarding the best social and economic policies for the country. Initially, the Federalists represented the interests of businessmen who lived in early American cities such as New York and Philadelphia, and the Democratic-Republicans represented the interests of farmers in our still-mostly-rural country. That pattern has translated to today’s Republicans (formerly the Federalists) favoring business and opposing welfare (“Republican Party” para. 2). This means they focus a lot of effort on reducing taxes and giving businesses the freedom to become as profitable as possible, which translates to less tax revenue at the federal level to support the social and economic security of the general population through “pensions, social security benefits, free healthcare, and so forth” (“Who We Are” para. 1, Carpenter para. 1). On the other side of the aisle, today’s Democrats support welfare and other policies designed to create more social equality, such as labor unions (“Who We Are” para. 2).

Additionally, today’s Republican party has become more closely aligned with the conservative social movement known as Christian Fundamentalism (“Republican Party” para. 2). This association began during the presidency of Ronald Reagan in the 1980s and entails Republican lawmakers arguing against women’s reproductive rights and gay rights while favoring issues such as mandatory prayer and the teaching of creationism in public schools (Wood para. 2, Martin para. 1). They often call these “traditional” or “family” values.

Today, it is these social issues that seem to have caused the deepest political divisions in the United States. While social movements such as Black Lives Matter, #metoo, and LGBTQ advocacy are becoming more visible and raising awareness of social justice issues, there are opposing forces that are pushing back in the name of so-called traditional values – i.e., those held by Christian fundamentalists. For instance, lawmakers in conservative, majority Republican states such as Florida are banning books and threatening to fire teachers who introduce their students to “Critical Race Theory” – which is “an examination of racism and its impact through systems, such as legal, housing, and education” (Archie para. 4). Florida has also banned abortion after 15 weeks and implemented a “Don’t Say Gay” law that makes it illegal for teachers to teach students about sexual orientation and gender in public schools (Davis para. 1, Diaz para. 1). Governor DeSantis’s efforts represent a major conservative social force in the Republican party at the national level; in fact, he plans to run for president in 2024 and many consider him an even stronger candidate than former president Donald Trump (Allen para. 2).

It is safe to say that political divisions have been a part of American history since its inception. However, is social media deepening them? In the next section, I will explore this question.

1. **Measuring the Echo**

Although in its earliest years many people were excited about social media’s potential to spread information and bring enlightenment to the public, Duke University Professor of Sociology Chris Bail writes that such early optimism was naïve (45-46). Bail founded the Polarization Lab – a group of experts who study problems arising from new technology and suggest solutions. In his 2021 book *Breaking the Social Media Prism*, Bail interprets social media as a tool to cultivate an all-important human trait: self-worth (49). According to Bail, instead of trying to educate one another, we use social media to present idealized versions of ourselves to the world, to compare ourselves with others, and to gain instantaneous feedback about who we are and how successful we are through likes, shares, followers, and other markers of social media status (50-52). This, he says, is “the great tragedy of social media”:

[I]t makes our tendency to misread our social environment even worse. We use social media platforms as if they were a giant mirror that can help us understand our place within society. But they are more like prisms that bend and refract our social environment—distorting our sense of ourselves, and each other. (53)

Bail claims the social media prism has dire effects on our political polarization. For those on the most extreme ends of the spectrum – people who often find themselves socially isolated in real life – aggressive political posting on social media provides a sense of self-worth and belonging with others who share their radical beliefs (Bail 66-67). Some of the examples of such aggressive posting that Bail describes include creating and sharing photoshopped images of female politicians from the opposing side performing sexual acts, or posting comments that attack members of their *own* party who fall closer to the center of the political spectrum (60-63). Such behavior brought praise from other like-minded extremists and similarly aggressive responses from extremists on the opposing side. Bail found that this negative loop gave the posters a distorted sense of their own importance and also made those on the other side of the spectrum seem *more* extreme to them. As Bail puts it, “at the same time that the prism makes one’s own extremism seem reasonable—or even normal—it makes the other side seem more aggressive, extreme, and uncivil” (67).

Besides political extremists who delight in trolling the “other side,” social media also leads to polarization among those with more moderate political views. As Bail points out, we are prone to cultivate social media feeds that just reinforce our own worldview, creating an echo chamber (3). He cites a 2015 study that found only about 25% of the content we post on social media will ever be seen by members of the opposing political party, and another from 2018 that reveals social media is the most popular source for 18- to 29-year-olds to get their news (Bail 5). And even when we are exposed to opposing viewpoints, they are often the more extreme and aggressive ones that make us think “there is little to be gained by discussing politics on social media” and give us “profound misgivings about those on the other side” (Bail 10). In the end, after collecting millions of data points from social media users across the spectrum for multiple years, Bail has come to believe that “the growing gap between social media and real life is one of the most powerful sources of political polarization in our era” (8).

1. **Conclusion**

From the evidence, it seems clear that social media *is,* in fact, deepening political divisions in the U.S. So, what can be done about it?

Chris Bail offers three suggestions. First, we need to recognize that the “prism” of social media is distorting our views of ourselves, those who disagree with us politically, and how polarized our country is as a whole (Bail 102). Bail claims that one of the key takeaways from his studies at the Polarization Lab is that social media has “sent false polarization into hyperdrive” (101). What this means is that people on opposite sides of the political spectrum actually disagree much less than they *think* they do, and in reality, polarization of real views hasn’t increased very much since the 1970s (Bail 99-100). What *has* increased is our *perception* of polarization, which is what Bail refers to as false polarization. And according to Bail’s research, social media has made that problem much worse.

Besides recognizing the effects of the prism, Bail also suggests we should learn to see how it distorts the way we present ourselves on social media. Do the things we like, post, and share accurately reflect our true political beliefs? More often than not, the answer is no (Bail 105). If we stay silent about what we truly believe – what Bail calls “mute moderates” – then we’re still part of the problem, because we create more space for the extremists to fill (106). Finally, Bail encourages us to “break the prism” by trying to meet those on the opposing side somewhere in the middle by finding common ground (109). He recommends following *non*-extreme accounts that spread views we disagree with but are still within our “latitude of existence” and trying to adopt language that resonates with the other side when we try to persuade them (Bail 109-110).

When it comes to reconnecting with Katie, finding common ground and speaking the same language will be key. While I understand where her conservative viewpoints came from, I don’t understand how they’re being reinforced. Maybe I can find a way to follow some of the accounts I see her sharing content from and see if I can find a way to engage her on something I agree with. Maybe I could invite her to follow some of the more moderate political content I appreciate from my side of the aisle, and we could talk more openly about the things we disagree about. I’m sure she would be glad to hear how much I value our friendship and how much I don’t want our political differences to ruin it. If I’ve learned anything from this research project, it’s that we overestimate how much people on the opposite side of the aisle disagree with us and dislike us because of our views. I’d prefer not to give social media the power to take away my best friend from me. I think it’s time I step out of the echo chamber.

Works Cited

“About the Senate and the Constitution.” *Senate.gov*, United States Senate, <https://www.senate.gov/reference/reference_index_subjects/Political_Parties_vrd.htm>. Accessed 6 November 2022.

Allen, Greg. “Eyeing a run for president, Ron DeSantis wants to ‘Make America Florida.’” *NPR.org*, 6 March 2022, <https://www.npr.org/2023/03/06/1160724251/florida-governor-ron-desantis-president>. Accessed 9 November 2022.

Archie, Ayana. “Florida rejects 54 math books, claiming critical race theory appeared in some.” *NPR.org*, 18 April 2022, <https://www.npr.org/2022/04/18/1093277449/florida-mathematics-textbooks>. Accessed 9 November 2022.

Bail, Chris. *Breaking the Social Media Prism*, Princeton UP, 2021.

“cleavage.” *A Concise Dictionary of Politics and International Relations*, E-book, edited by Garrett W. Brown, Iain McLean, and Alistair McMillan, Oxford University Press, 2018, n.p.

Carpenter, Mick. “Welfare State.” *A Concise Dictionary of Politics and International Relations*, E-book, edited by Garrett W. Brown, Iain McLean, and Alistair McMillan, Oxford University Press, 2018, n.p.

Davis, Wynne. “Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis signs a bill banning abortions after 15 weeks.” 14 *NPR.org*, April 2022, <https://www.npr.org/2022/04/14/1084485963/florida-abortion-law-15-weeks>. Accessed 9 November 2022.

Diaz, Jaclyn. “Florida’s governor signs controversial law opponents dubbed ‘Don’t Say Gay.’” *NPR.org*, 28 March 2022, <https://www.npr.org/2022/03/28/1089221657/dont-say-gay-florida-desantis>. Accessed 9 November 2022.

Grant, Wyn. “Two-Party Systems.” *A Concise Dictionary of Politics and International Relations*, E-book, edited by Garrett W. Brown, Iain McLean, and Alistair McMillan, Oxford University Press, 2018, n.p.

Martin, Paul. “Moral Majority.” *A Concise Dictionary of Politics and International Relations*, E-book, edited by Garrett W. Brown, Iain McLean, and Alistair McMillan, Oxford University Press, 2018, n.p.

“Republican Party.” *A Concise Dictionary of Politics and International Relations*, E-book, edited by Garrett W. Brown, Iain McLean, and Alistair McMillan, Oxford University Press, 2018, n.p.

“Political Parties.” *Senate.gov*, United States Senate, <https://www.senate.gov/reference/reference_index_subjects/Political_Parties_vrd.htm>. Accessed 6 November 2022.

“Whigs and Tories.” *UK Parliament*, UK Parliament, 2023, <https://www.parliament.uk/about/living-heritage/evolutionofparliament/parliamentaryauthority/revolution/overview/whigstories/>. Accessed 6 November 2022.

“Who We Are.” *Democrats.org*, DNC Services Corporation, 2023, <https://democrats.org/who-we-are/about-the-democratic-party/>. Accessed 8 November 2022.

“Who We Are.” *The Republican National Committee*, Republican National Committee, 2023, <https://gop.com/about-our-party/>. Accessed 8 November 2022.

Wood, Stewart. “Christian fundamentalism.” *A Concise Dictionary of Politics and International Relations*, E-book, edited by Garrett W. Brown, Iain McLean, and Alistair McMillan, Oxford University Press, 2018, n.p.