



The Splintered Society

SUMMARY: Americans are self-segregating along multiple divides, both online and offline: politics, economic status, educational attainment, social life, consumer spending, media choices, and geography. This is being fueled as much by political polarization as by economic and social inequality.

Forecasts

- Political polarization could be exacerbated as more issues are labeled partisan or assigned to a particular divide. This could strengthen segregation and filter bubbles and increase their effects—shaping even more whom people socialize with and where they live, among other factors.
- A splintered society will drive social instability and insecurity, as it is the result of corrosive processes that undermine existing institutions and social structures.
- As people self-segregate into like-minded communities, or around shared ideas, it could spark the rise of new social, commercial, and civic institutions that partially duplicate existing institutions but better mirror the ideas and values of their supporters and users.
- As splintering spreads, the danger of people further disengaging from political and social institutions is rising due to lack of trust or a failure to believe in efficacy.

Key Uncertainties

Whether some kind of breaking point will occur

The potential for restoration of trust in media

Varying levels of trust decline across different institutions and social groups

Potential for re-engagement in shared civic discourse

The speed at which polarization grows

Effects of a potential external unifying event, such as war or terror attack



Supporting Trends

- **The politicization of American lifestyles.** Americans' political values are shaping their lifestyle choices.
- **Millennials the most liberal generation.** Pew Research Center has consistently found that millennials (people age 20-36 in 2017) are "considerably more liberal" than all other living U.S. generations. These liberal values may be a lasting generational trait, not merely youthful idealism.
- **Politicized commerce.** Political polarization is spilling over into commerce, with companies increasingly taking sides on divisive political issues.
- **Partisanship more bitter.** The partisan divide among U.S. voters is sharper and more bitter than in decades.
- **"Alt tech" social media.** American political polarization is affecting technology with the rise of an "alt tech" ecosystem that is creating alternatives to popular social-media platforms.
- **Political polarization and class.** In the United States, political polarization between the college-educated and those with a high school degree is becoming more extreme.
- **Algorithmic manipulation effects.** Researchers have found that subtle changes to the ranking of search engine results can have significant—and hard-to-detect—impacts on public political preferences.
- **Job polarization.** High-skill and low-skill jobs are growing, while middle-skill jobs decline.

Related Drivers of Change

- Declining Trust
- Ethical Consumption
- Rejection of Expertise
- Reputation by the Numbers

Notable Data Points

JOB POLARIZATION

Between 2007 and 2014,
high-skill occupations
grew at 1.2 % per year,
middle-skill occupations
declined by 1.3% per year,
and **low-skill occupations**
grew an average of
1% per year.

*Source: Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis,
Economic Synopses*

PARTISANSHIP GROWING

In 2016, for the first time since 1992, a majority of Americans in both major parties expressed not merely unfavorable, but very unfavorable, views of the other party. Moreover,
55% of Democrats
and 49% of Republicans
said they are "afraid"
of the other party.

Source: Pew Research Center



Strategic Insights

- By dint of their size and purpose, associations can serve as a positive force for consensus and as a safer arena for members with differing ideas to come together to discuss and debate.
- Associations and organizations will need to be aware that more and more of the internal and external activities of associations will be viewed by some as “political” in a broad sense.
- Any issue can be infected by polarization—particularly in science and in related industries—whatever the intentions of organizations and companies. A neutral stance itself can be labeled political. Competing interests will attempt to use associations as chits in polarized battles. Sometimes associations will be forced to take sides—and sometimes this could be desirable.
- Associations will be affected by internal segregation and polarization issues, many with potential splintering effects. Associations and organizations will need to develop policies and procedures to mediate these potential splits to mitigate negative effects.
- Associations will need to be aware of the potential impacts of polarization and splintering on funding. In particular, government funding could be affected due to divergent views and seesawing policies.

Timing

- **Stage:** Growth, though it has continued for decades
- **Speed:** Moderate, but trend and its effects are accelerating

Potential Alternative Futures

- **Meetings in the matrix:** Personal avatars and a shared online environment re-create real-world meetings in purely digital forms.
- **The return of the “most trusted man in America”:** New media personalities arise who are able to capture viewers from multiple points of view, allowing for a rebuilding of basic civil consensus.
- **Millennials hold sway:** The size of the millennial generation and the values its members hold spark a civic renaissance.
- **Popping the bubbles:** Citizen, corporate, and journalistic efforts to counter filter bubbles pay off, raising comprehension and civility across divides.



Take Action

- **Prepare for more intense issues management.** What political, economic, and social issues could draw you into public debate and potentially splinter your association? Prepare to act quickly: Delay and waffling only make a difficult situation worse.
- **Revisit whether staying neutral remains a viable option.** Regardless of what your governance documents require or how carefully you avoid lobbying, some members will push you to get involved in issues beyond your traditional mission. If they perceive neutrality as inaction or indifference, they may leave.
- **Strengthen your leaders' facilitation skills.** Association leaders could be naturals for leading the difficult conversations ahead in local communities and national forums. Start equipping them now with strong facilitation skills and processes that enable people to act together to create solutions.
- **Turn staff into healers of the breach.** Every point of contact among staff and members can be an opportunity to heal or do harm. Polarizing conversations also occur in the workplace. Hire for empathy and a diversity of experience and perspectives.
- **Enable self-organization to voice different perspectives.** Associations historically have enabled special interest groups to form within their ranks. Giving people the opportunity to work from within your organization may forestall the desire to find or form other associations better aligned with their views.
- **Anticipate political risk in conference site selections.** You could be only one election cycle away from potential trouble with a future conference site choice. Discuss these concerns as cause for cancellation and relocation in contracts and insurance agreements.

Keyword Search

To continue researching this change driver, use these search terms: *political polarization, economic polarization, immigration, partisanship, media filters, media bubbles, fake news, social segmentation, cold civil war, red blue divide*

Who Will Be Affected

Associations that represent members with a significant public interface have been the first to be drawn into issues of social, economic, and political difference—that is, education, healthcare, youth development, communications and media, entertainment. Ultimately a splintering society creates a difficult social and business climate for all organizations.

About ASAE ForesightWorks

ASAE ForesightWorks is a deliberate, evidence-based research program and emerging line of products to provide association professionals with a *continual* stream of intelligence about the changes facing the association industry, including:

- regularly updated action briefs;
- tools for applying insights from the research in your association;
- guidance in performing environmental scans; and
- opportunities to engage with peers around the research.

Ultimately, the program's mission is to empower association leaders to create a culture of foresight in their associations and to lead their organizations confidently into the future.

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