

Anthony Appiah

Polarization and the Politics of Identity

In the United States and Britain today, there is intense social polarization around identities defined by political positions: liberal, conservative, Democrat, Tory, Green, Labour, Republican, Brexiteer. (This is obviously not a phenomenon unique to those two anglophone societies, the two whose politics I know best, but I will focus on them.) On the one hand, this is not surprising. Some political issues are of very great importance for some citizens and it's natural that they should feel alienated from people who want to deny them an outcome that they think would greatly positively affect their lives. So why wouldn't those citizens regard partisan identities associated with those positions on those issues with hostility? On the other hand, a lot of political polarization seems, in fact, to float free of policy questions. It is, so to speak, more the political identity than the political policies that seem to generate division. That division threatens the functioning of democracies since it undermines the capacity of citizens to think of the whole political society as an "us." I'll argue that it's helpful to see partisan and purportedly ideological identifications as behaving, at least in some way and at some times, like other social identities. And, if that's so, then maybe some of the mechanisms that seem to reduce antagonism across other kinds of identity will work to reduce political polarization, too.