

Political Polarization over Time

A Concept Development Lesson

AP US History Standards:

- Skill: Making Connections
- Reasoning Process: Continuities and Changes over Time
- Theme: Politics and Power

Hook:

- Ask students to write down 10 words that describe politics today.
- Show the students this quote from Washington's Farewell Address without attribution.
 - "However [political parties] may now and then answer popular ends, they are likely in the course of time and things, to become potent engines, by which cunning, ambitious, and unprincipled men will be enabled to subvert the power of the people and to usurp for themselves the reins of government, destroying afterwards the very engines which have lifted them to unjust dominion."
- Ask the students, do you agree with this statement? Why or why not? Be sure to cite specific historical evidence.
- Reveal to them that the quote was not made today. Ask them when in US history they think it was written.
- Reveal to them that it is from George Washington's Farewell Address in 1796.

Define:

- Define polarization: concentration about opposing extremes of groups or interests formerly ranged on a continuum (Merriam-Webster)
- Brainstorm as a class what causes politics to become polarized.
- Share that Darrell M. West of the Brookings Institute believes three factors drive modern political polarization:
 - Economic divides
 - Geographic and demographic changes
 - Social media creating echo chambers
- As a class, brainstorm specific examples of each of those factors in today's political polarization.
- Share with students that you can see those same three tensions throughout American political history.

Assessment

- Students create a mind map defining political polarization that could be used to analyze polarization throughout each era of American politics.

Extension:

- Throughout the year, as you look at politics, return to those factors driving economic divides, geographic and demographic changes, and partisan media.

- Discuss continuities and changes to those factors driving political polarization.
- Make connections to modern political polarization.