

The past few presidential elections within the United States have begun to slowly show a divide between the two parties within America. While far from a scholarly source, in the science fiction game *Mass Effect 2*, a character states that if you "Put three humans in a room, there will be six opinions," and this divide between peoples' opinions bleeds into the political sphere. A Pew Research Center study conducted in 2014 showed the widening gap in beliefs of conservative-leaning and liberal-leaning people in America, with over 90% of people being more conservative or liberal than the median of the other compared to around 70% in 2004 (Pew 2014). This idea of polarization has grown more and more in recent years as the country divides more. While this is far from a new concept, the polarization of the candidates that led Donald Trump to a presidential victory in 2016 was used against him in 2020 by Joe Biden's campaign towards his own road to the office.

In 1971, two college professors, Andrew A King and Floyd Douglas Anderson, published a paper called "Nixon, Agnew and the 'Silent Majority': A Case Study in the Rhetoric of Polarization." In this paper, the two of them looked at, as they worded it, the Rhetoric of Polarization, used by Richard Nixon in his presidential campaign, which looked at the use of purposeful division in order to gain support through his "silent majority." In this, they identified two primary strategies - affirmation and subversion - which were prevalent in Nixon's campaign.

The strategy of affirmation primarily is the strategy of building up one side of voters, building their confidence in their competence in order to make them into a "self-justifying image"(245). This self-justifying image works similar to a placebo effect, where the created images one has will become true, such as with an example given of

an African American moving into a neighborhood and, with the neighborhood believing it would lower prices, it becomes true (246). By building up the image of the "silent majority," Richard Nixon began to garner a voter base of these people who identified as outcasts of society or the people who had become "pushed down" in their political lives.

The second primary strategy used was that of subversion. Unlike in affirmation, subversion is where a division is purposefully brought in. While affirmation can lead to division in itself, subversion is the test of the saying that "men who can unite on nothing else can unite on the basis of a foe shared by all"(248). Nixon in this began building up enemies for the silent majority to fight the "drug culture," "the merchants of crime and corruption in American society," "the pill peddlers and the narcotics peddlers who are corrupting the lives of the children", and the "radical faculty" (249) to unite this varied voter base of all the people who fit in this "silent majority" towards fighting these common foes that were a threat to America in Nixon's eyes. By creating a common enemy, politicians can successfully unite this group.

While this study was conducted regarding the Nixon campaign in 1971, this was still a common strategy used within the most recent presidential election in 2020, used both by Donald Trump and, as will be looked into, Joe Biden. The Living Room Candidate is a website that aggregates televised political ads since the Eisenhower / Stevenson race in 1952. Each ad has been given a title, and in this essay, the ads "Crossroads," "Mourning in America," and "Trump's Boycott - Goodyear OH" will be examined for their uses of polarization.

All three of these ads share several themes, both in terms of their visuals as well as their contents. One of the more common visual themes is that of grey-scaling Donald

Trump or America under his presidency. Allen Klein, former president of The Association for Applied and Therapeutic Humor, is quoted as saying "Your attitude is like a box of crayons that color your world. Constantly color your picture gray, and your picture will always be bleak." While this is primarily used in the context of therapy, this is also something that can be seen as impacting the mindset towards someone. By placing a bleak, grey filter on Donald Trump, it paints it as a bleaker, less vibrant world. A shared theme within these as well is the general use of the subversion strategy outlined by King and Anderson, painting the aforementioned Donald Trump as the common villain for his voter base to follow. Both of these themes appear in all three of these advertisements, but their implementations differ between them all.

In the first ad, titled "Crossroads," the narrator states that America is, as the title suggests, at a crossroads. Immediately, there is a quick use of both strategies of polarization within the first ten seconds of the thirty second ad. While it is not a particularly obvious one, there is an affirmation of a black voter base with a sign in the background stating "Listen to Black Voices," as there is a statement issuing subversion as it is stated that America has "seen what can happen when [they] elect a leader determined to divide us." As mentioned in the common themes, Donald Trump is also put into a greyscale, showing footage of police response to the Black Lives Matter protests. The advertisement's remaining runtime is an affirmation of more of Biden's voter base, focusing on the audience of small businesses and working families. Within the thirty second advertisement, Biden successfully affirms his voter base while pointing them towards a common enemy.

In the second advertisement, titled "Mourning in America," the narrator begins by chastising Donald Trump's handling of the COVID-19 Pandemic, further building that subversive strategy King and Anderson outline. However, a second enemy is brought in with China. While the King and Anderson study does not precisely have this meaning when it refers to an "external enemy" (249), by setting up a second, literally external enemy in another nation, Biden perhaps looks to bring in more of a conversion of moderates as opposed to affirming his own current voter base. This advertisement also brings in the exploration of fear as a method to dissuade others from voting, while further bolstering the status of an enemy that Trump has in this. Just as with the statements in Crossroads, this ad takes a focus on working families, stating that "With the economy in shambles, more than 30 million Americans are out of work, the worst economy in decades." By building this as the fault of this common enemy in Donald Trump, Joe Biden begins to bolster his base against Donald Trump.

The third ad, "Trump's Boycott - Goodyear OH," focuses on a domestic issue, one that further pounds in the point with the working class family that he is looking to achieve as a base, directly pulling a soundbite of Trump stating that he would not like people to buy from Goodyear. Once again, this focuses on building Trump as a villain going against the American domestic economy, shadowing the thoughts in Mourning in America, and putting him as someone who "is only looking out for his own job." By providing a direct example of Trump being against American business, Biden gathers a specific group, mostly those with jobs at Goodyear, and focuses their efforts against this common villain.

Through these three ads, Joe Biden attempts to get support towards his candidacy. By building up this fanbase and painting Donald Trump as a villain, he is seemingly only focused on the expansion of polarization. Pew Research Center did two follow-up studies on the 2014 report cited earlier in this report, one following the 2016 election and one following the 2020 election. The focus on setting the other candidate as a "villain" is explored in the 2016 report, particularly through the use of a "feeling thermometer," where participants were asked to rank different subjects on a scale of 0-100 of how warmly or coldly they felt towards a certain thing. This study saw that while Democrats found Republicans and the inverse were around 30% "cold," the primary presidential candidates, Hilary Clinton and Donald Trump, ranked around 10% "cold" on the opposing party (Pew 2016). The advertisements mentioned before seem to primarily focus on this side of polarization, turning the enemy into a single person in 2020 as opposed to Nixon turning establishments into the enemy in 1968.

While evidently these strategies in polarizing and balkanizing the general public have been successful for both Donald Trump in 2016 and Joe Biden in 2020, it becomes an issue of how much of a negative effect this has on the American democratic system. The 2020 study on political polarization that the Pew Research Center conducted showed that a majority of news sites have become either trusted or distrusted by different political leanings, in particular the conservative reliance on Fox News, which has been massively distrusted by the liberal siding (Jurkowitz et al). With sides only trusting a few news sources above all else, the impact of political polarization comes into question as for its negative effects.

Though intentional political polarization is an effective strategy, it can also lead to many issues for the future of American democracy. With sides becoming colder and colder on the other, then it becomes less important that there is a fair view of the American wants and needs for their elected officials to overview. Instead, by polarizing, it further leads to a case of the different political parties becoming more focused on fighting each other as opposed to working to build America to be a bastion of freedom that it can be.

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