

According to Hill's Manual of Social and Business Forms, a guide to writing and etiquette from 1879, we should "...not discuss politics or religion in general company. You probably would not convert your opponent, and he will not convert you. To discuss those topics is to arouse feeling without any good result."

Today's program will test the wisdom of this time-honored adage.

The truth is that most of us don't discuss politics at all, and when we do it's with people that share similar ideological views.

These like-minded conversations can lead to ideological amplification, where there is even less diversity in political opinions on the issues of the day post-deliberation.

Consider an experiment conducted in Colorado where liberal residents of Boulder and conservative residents of Colorado Springs were assembled to discuss global warming, affirmative action, and civil unions for same-sex couples. Not only was there more consensus on these issues within groups, anonymous statements by individual members reflected more extreme views.

And these scenarios are liked replicated every day in the 47<sup>th</sup> Ward, City of Chicago, selected suburbs, and most certainly downstate.

Bill Bishop first made the case that we're sorting ourselves ideologically by where we choose to live in a widely cited 2008 book, *The Big Sort*. There he documented the growth in landslide counties that favored one presidential candidate over the other by more than 20 percentage points. While they were scant in the fiercely fought 1976 election between Carter and Ford, they multiplied seven cycles later in the narrow 2004 Bush victory over Kerry.

Landslide counties have proliferated over the last quarter century; and it won't surprise you that these trends only continued in 2016, where a full 60% of all counties now fall in this category.

Republicans won 9 times as many of these counties as Democrats, but the latter have an iron grip on big cities like Chicago.

And Illinois is not immune from these trends in ideological polarization. Previously you count on diehard Democrats in Chicago and rock-ribbed Republicans in the surrounding suburbs, with statewide elections swinging on the up-for-grabs downstate vote. Chicago remains a constant and downstate is now bright red with the exception of university towns and East St. Louis. The suburbs are the one place where there's a politically heterogeneous population.

Scholars have debated the extent to which polarization is a reflection of a two party system that offers choices among candidates that increasingly represent the ideological poles of the political spectrum. More specifically, is polarization elite-driven or a bottom-up reflection of the populace.

It's arguably both. A team of political scientists has quantified the ideological placement of every member of Congress since 1789, and we are in a period of intense polarization not seen in at least a century if not since the Civil War.

One complicating factor is the regional sorting that has happened among parties. Democrats were formerly a coalition of liberal big cities and the conservative, rural south. Republicans, on the

other hand, wove together the Northeast, Midwest, and West, uniting free range libertarians and Rockefeller Republicans.

This ideological heterogeneity within parties necessitated internal compromises, lent to the election of moderates, and made bi-partisan compromise convenient given transcendent ideological cleavages. For example, Reagan delivered tax cuts and a defense build-up with a Democratic House that teamed southern boll weevils with Republican foot soldiers in his revolution.

Nowadays, members of Congress are more fearful of a primary challenge from their own parties than an opponent across the aisle. They are punished for compromising with the other party as ideological purity is held high.

In a closely divided county in aggregate, gridlock prevails and institutional paralysis cripples our ability to address wicked problems like underfunded entitlement programs, crumbling infrastructure, and climate change.

Systemic reforms like legislative redistricting, public financing of campaigns, and jungle primaries may help, but the most promising solutions lie with us.

We must learn how to engage in dialogue across difference with the goal of developing consensus.

We must learn to work in diverse groups to solve collective problems in our communities.

We must reward, not punish, elected officials that do the same.

And we must demand the aforementioned reforms and others be considered by those in power as a means of repairing our fractured republic.

Thank you.