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America the Divided: Why the Great Melting Pot Is Having a Meltdown

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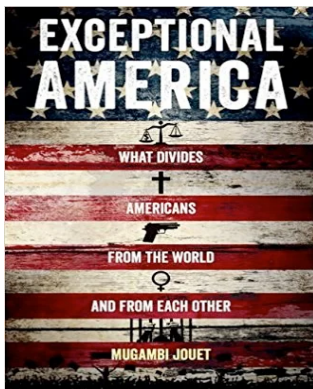


A deep distrust of government and media among some groups has created a chasm in American society. A new book explains why the gap is so wide.

WRITTEN BY

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Author Mugambi Jouet dissects the causes of deep chasms within American society from an outsider's viewpoint.



There's little doubt that the United States is experiencing more tension now than at any other time in the country's history. There's a deep antipathy toward the government and the media, and there's rising friction among various groups. Last decade's recession seems to have ramped up the animosity, as the gap between the have and have-nots grows. Mugambi Jouet, a fellow at Stanford Law School, sees what is happening in America with the keen eye of an intellectual and the ethos of an outsider. Jouet was born in Kenya, raised in France and came to the U.S. to attend college. He has practiced law in America and served as a judicial clerk for the United Nations war crimes tribunal. Jouet brings his global

perspective to his new book, Exceptional America: What Divides Americans from the World and from Each Other.

An edited version of the interview transcript appears below.

Knowledge at Wharton: There are many different answers to the question of what divides us, correct?

Mugambi Jouet: Yes, what's intriguing is that American society is extraordinarily polarized today by both U.S. historical standards and international standards. Leaving aside a few other periods like the Civil War, for example, there are not many phases of American history where we see such a big clash over fundamental issues. **Americans are routinely clashing over matters that are either not controversial or much less controversial elsewhere in the modern Western world, such as whether people should have basic rights to health care, whether special interests should be allowed to spend unlimited money on elections and lobbying, whether climate change is a hoax, a myth or scientific reality.** The list goes on and on, from abortion to contraception, gay rights, gun control, theory of evolution, the death penalty, mass incarceration, even torture.

Knowledge at Wharton: You grew up in Paris, so to a degree you take a look at this as an outsider. But you've been here for quite some time, and this topic has been an interest of yours for a while now.

Jouet: Yes, unlike Barack Obama, I was actually born in Kenya. My father is Kenyan, and my mother is French. After growing up in Paris, I moved to the U.S. for college, and one thing that struck me living in the U.S. was not only that the major divide between America as a whole and France with other Western nations, but the huge contrasts within the United States.

That may sound obvious at first. Of course, there's a long-standing regional divide in America going back all the way to the Civil War, but the magnitude of the regional divide in the U.S. is striking by international standards. I saw that living in blue states like New York and Illinois and red states like Texas. People are clashing over issues that are, again, atypical. But what we see if we look more closely is that liberal Americans are usually much closer to other Westerners than they are to conservative Americans when it comes to big-picture issues like health care, climate change or abortion.

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Knowledge at Wharton: It's a daily battle between the two sides right now. It's not the same in other countries.

Jouet: Yes, there are far fewer sources and forces of polarization in modern Western Europe. The two main forces of polarization there are the anti-immigrant sentiment, including issues relating to Islam, and resentment towards the European Union. But the two are intertwined because the European Union is accused of opening up borders and enabling immigration and undermining national sovereignty.

We see some of the same things in the U.S. with the rise of Donald Trump's anti-immigrant populist movement and clashes over, say, whether Muslims should be barred from entering America. But again, if we look more closely, we see that there is a much broader range of issues that are very divisive in America. Health care is a perfect example because it has been such a major source of divide during the Obama presidency and because of attempts to repeal the Affordable Care Act. But in modern Europe, in Canada, Australia, New Zealand, other industrialized nations like Japan, universal health care is supported by both liberals and conservatives.

Knowledge at Wharton: Regarding some of the examples in the book: A big one surrounds Christianity.

Jouet: What's interesting is that American society has long been divided by different conceptions of Christianity. The conventional wisdom is that today America is mainly divided between nonbelievers and believers. It's true that nonbelievers have risen in number in recent years, but they're still a quite small proportion of Americans. The main divide today and historically has been among Christians, especially between Christian fundamentalists who have resisted modernity and focused on interpreting the Bible literally, and liberal or moderate Christians who have embraced modernity and taken much more moderate positions.

But the role of religion is not only limited to standard culture war issues like the theory of evolution or contraception, abortion and gay rights. It also extends beyond that. If we look closely, we see that many of the people who would tend to be Christian fundamentalists are also market fundamentalists, the term that Joseph Stiglitz, the Nobel Prize in economics winner, used to describe people who are convinced that big government, taxes, and regulation are essentially at the root of all economic problems. There's a syncretism between Christian fundamentalism and market fundamentalism in that both stress ideological purity. Christian fundamentalists think it is immoral to depend on big government for health care or other issues.

Knowledge at Wharton: You're saying the differences in the United States surrounding Christianity are enhanced and will grow even further because of the political problems that we have?

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Jouet: Yes, so there are many Christians, for example, who advocate for universal health care and tolerance towards LGBTQ, and there are others who interpret Christianity very differently. That’s why religion has long been a source of polarization in American society.

Knowledge at Wharton: Is it the biggest source of conflict, in your mind?

Jouet: No, there’s not one source that explains everything. We have to look at a broad range of factors. In my book, the four main factors in this nexus of polarization are fervent Christian fundamentalism, profound anti-intellectualism, visceral suspicion of government and racial resentment. Put together, they create a very hard-line, anti-rational ideology that is hostile to compromise. They help explain what political scientists have called asymmetric polarization, which is that in the last 30 years or so, the Republican Party has moved far more to the right than the Democratic Party has moved to the left. And they’ve moved toward a peculiar conception of conservatism by both U.S. historical standards and international standards.

Knowledge at Wharton: I don’t think there are many Americans out there that would disagree that the potential for a suspicion of government is there. It goes back to the Nixon Watergate days — there is a healthy suspicion of the government, all the lobbying and politicians not truly being there for the people they’re representing. They are there more for themselves.

Jouet: There is, indeed, a healthy skepticism of government in America or in any other democracy, but for that skepticism to be healthy, it has to be based on facts. What we see in the evolution of the American political and legal and social discourse is the normalization of conspiracy theories about the evils of the federal government, such as Sarah Palin’s claim about death panels or the claims about Obamacare destroying the American economy. It’s in that context that it shapes a visceral, gut reaction about how the federal government’s role in the economy is always negative. And it leads a lot of people to vote against their self-economic interests, such as by opposing financial regulation after the 2008 major financial crisis or by opposing efforts to improve access to health care.

Knowledge at Wharton: We could be in a much better situation if we could resolve some of these divisions.

Jouet: Yes, a highly polarized American society is neither in its own interest nor in the interest of the world. There would be greater economic prosperity, arguably, if there were less gridlock in Washington and among the general public. It’s worth noting that there were periods in American history when there was greater consensus over economic issues, especially during the New Deal era. Franklin Roosevelt’s program and big-picture ideas

about how the government had the responsibility to provide for the basic economic well-being of the American people and to reduce wealth inequality came to be embraced by many Republicans, including Dwight Eisenhower. Actually, the top income tax rate under Eisenhower was approximately 90%, yet under Obama it was 35% in his first term, 39% in his second term, and Obama was accused of raising taxes towards all-time highs. That speaks to the unhealthy skepticism of government, these conspiracy theories about the oppression from Washington.

Knowledge at Wharton: There's also the element of skepticism about our judicial system, specifically the number of people who are incarcerated and the death penalty. How does that play out?

Jouet: It's important to understand that today America not only has mass incarceration of a scale unprecedented in American history, but also practically unprecedented in the history of humankind. The U.S. has over two million prisoners. We have seen in the last 30 years the normalization of draconian punishments. America is also the only Western democracy to still have the death penalty. Mass incarceration is easier to speak of in the U.S. as a whole because even though incarceration rates vary by states, the system is extraordinarily punitive nationwide. The death penalty is more complex because it's primarily a Southern phenomenon. Even within the South, only a few counties are primarily responsible for the death penalty. But these are aspects of a very harsh penal system by international standards.

Knowledge at Wharton: In the scope of what you are writing about, how big of an issue is racism?

Jouet: Race is a big part of the equation. It's not the only factor when it comes to criminal justice or other aspects of society, but it factors into a lot of divisions because of another major dimension of American exceptionalism historically, which is that America has long been the Western nation with by far the highest proportion of racial and ethnic minorities. As a result, these racial divisions have played a bigger role in American society than in, say, European nations. There were few people of color in Western Europe until the surge of immigration from former colonies in the post-World War II era.

We see that in many chapters of American history, such as the Civil War or the Civil Rights Movement, were shaped by racial animus. Here in the U.S. today, we see that played a role in the hostility towards Barack Obama's presidency, the rise of conspiracy theories about how he was not really American because he had a forged U.S. birth certificate, and how he was a covert Muslim.

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Knowledge at Wharton: This partly sheds light on what America is right now in terms of Donald Trump’s election.

Jouet: Yes, because Donald Trump promoted these conspiracy theories about Obama’s forged birth certificate, and he also insinuated that Obama was potentially a covert Muslim with jihadi sympathies. I related two of the main themes of his presidential campaign, not only the call to ban Muslims from entering America, but also his targeting of undocumented immigrants. Because if Obama were to have a forged U.S. birth certificate, that would mean that Obama himself is an undocumented immigrant.

... One of the main obstacles to bridging polarization is not only that there’s a major divide among Americans about their values, but also there’s a major factual divide about a lot of these issues. For example, if people believe that climate change is a hoax or a myth, it’s not possible to genuinely discuss solutions to the problem.

If people widely believe that undocumented immigrants are massively flowing into the country, that they are responsible for illegal voting in the millions — which is completely false — there can’t be a more rational discussion about issues like immigration. Unless there is more of a common nucleus of facts over which to debate, it is going to be very difficult to bridge the divide. We see that’s also a big factor in the current debate over health care reform, given the magnitude of falsehoods about the oppression of Obamacare and shaping ideas about the need for eviscerating the legislation entirely.

Knowledge at Wharton: Gender also is one of the issues you look at in this book. But how much of a role does it play here in the United States?

Jouet: There is a debate among experts about the influence of culture war issues like abortion, contraception and gay rights over U.S. polarization, but at the very least, these types of issues are far more polarizing in the U.S. than in other Western nations. Leaving aside, say, Ireland and Poland, abortion tends to be widely accepted by both liberals and conservatives in other Western nations. So is contraception. These types of issues are again part of the cocktail that intensifies a polarization for many citizens in the U.S.

Knowledge at Wharton: Is this to be expected because the United States is the great melting pot?

Jouet: It’s true that America is a land of extraordinary diversity in every sense of the word, not just racially or ethnically, but also diversity of religious beliefs, including within the

Christian religion with a multitude of different denominations. America is also a continent-sized country with many different regions and different cultures within these regions. But at the same time, if you look at U.S. history, there were periods when there was much less polarization over many of these issues.