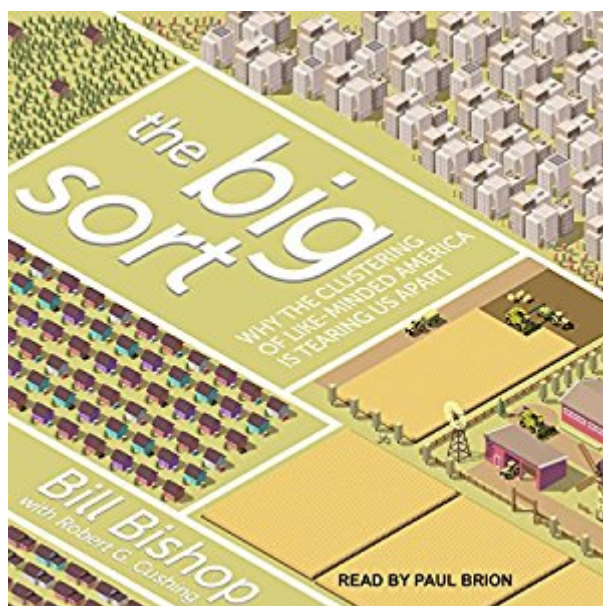


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The Big Sort: Why The Clustering Of Like-Minded America Is Tearing Us Apart



Synopsis

In 2004, journalist Bill Bishop coined the term "the big sort". Armed with startling new demographic data, he made national news in a series of articles showing how Americans have been sorting themselves into alarmingly homogeneous communities - not by region or by state but by city and even neighborhood. Over the past three decades, we have been choosing the neighborhoods (and churches and news shows) compatible with our lifestyles and beliefs. The result is a country that has become so polarized, so ideologically inbred, that people don't know and can't understand those who live a few miles away. How this came to be, and its dire implications for our country, is the subject of this groundbreaking work. In *The Big Sort*, Bishop has taken his analysis to a new level. He begins with stories about how we live today and then draws on history, economics, and our changing political landscape to create one of the most compelling big-picture accounts of America in recent memory.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

Bishop's book is a mix of voluminous in-depth research, interesting antidotes and sociological/historical case studies that explain the underlying forces which have led to increasing religious, social and political polarization. Recommended for anyone who wants to gain a greater understanding of why our political and moral debates are becoming much more contentious and strident and while there is increasing less compromise and moderation in our public and private conversations.

A lot of people pointed at this book as a good one to see when examining the current American political landscape. It plods on and on, with lots of data. It reminds me of Sandberg's Lean In - good message, but boring presentation of data. I'm not asking Bill Bishop to be Michael Lewis or Malcolm Gladwell, but even Peter Sims' level of writing ability would be good.

The Big Sort goes a long way toward explaining how America has broken into "Blue" enclaves and swaths of "Red." It is not a fast or easy read; in fact, it often feels like a sociology (or poli sci?) textbook. However, the author uses many, many fact-based charts and graphs to support his thesis that Americans began SELF-sorting into like-minded groups many years ago -- and that what we are seeing today in the politics-of-division is simply a much more polarized and much angrier evolution of a lengthy and troubling trend.

Bishop provides a really telling analysis of the social, economic, cultural and political dividing of America over the past several decades. A great read for those seeking to understand what has been driving trends beyond just the election of Trump and prescient in that it was written several years ago. Worth the read and written in a highly engaging and easy to read manner that makes the subject matter highly approachable.

I thoroughly enjoyed this book and I feel the author made a strong case for his proposition. The basic point seems to be this: 1). Americans are segregating themselves into communities of people who live and think alike. 2). In such homogeneous communities, people become increasingly more intensely committed to the values they hold and increasingly intolerant of anyone who does not share those same values. 3). This phenomenon could seriously jeopardize the ability of our society to constructively address the issues it faces. As to the first point, the strongest critique I think could be thrown at it would be to claim it is self-evident. Surprisingly, I don't see a lot of reviews here that make that assertion. It is a point I think I have been vaguely aware of already, but the book really put it into focus. The second point is a disturbing one and to me a very convincing one. Aside from everything that is covered in the book, from my own experience, I get a strong feeling in political discourse in recent years that most people have become rigid adherents to the entire agenda of either the Republican or Democratic party. As someone who agrees with the R's on some issues and with the D's on others, when I am contemplating expressing my opinion about a particular issue, I have the strong feeling that nearly everyone who hears my opinion will immediately assume

that I support the entire agenda of whichever party that stance on that particular issue is associated with. Something not really mentioned in the book that I think is also indicative of this, there are a lot of people who are so politically polarized that if you don't agree with them on a particular issue, it is not just an honest difference opinion, your position on the issue makes you a sociopath, unlike they who are on the side of moral virtue. It stands to reason when someone is absolutist in supporting a particular political agenda, that it is not grounded in reason but rather in a quasi-religious moral certitude, hence for me to not share any of that agenda makes me a sociopath. The author does at at least one point do a good job in pointing out that the intellectual inbreeding associated with self-segregation tends to stifle any genuine critical thinking about issues. If there is anything in the book I can take issue with I would say that the degree to which the views of Americans have become solidified into a binary pair of opposite ideological agendas is probably somewhat overstated. There are some factions of the political right that have some very fundamental disagreements. The most obvious would probably be the foreign policy views of Neocons versus Libertarians. And there is still a substantial faction among Republicans who do not agree with the prevailing stance of the party on the conservative side of social issues, i.e. abortion and gay rights. However, the author does make a good case that those who are liberal or agnostic on social issues are facing a lot more conflict from the conservative establishment. As to the Democratic Party, I would say there is a similar situation regarding diversity of views. There is a dominant "progressive" wing that is very monolithic in its ideological agenda, and is increasingly intolerant of accepting anyone as a "Democrat" who holds contrary views such as fiscal conservatism or a pro-life stance on abortion.-----I found the historical material in the book fascinating, some reviewers have found it superfluous and perhaps if I were more versed in sociology some of it would already be familiar to me, but since it was new to me, I thoroughly enjoyed it. I was not really familiar with the fact that the current split in the Christian religion in America of left wing and right wing denominations actually has a hundred years of history behind it. Other historical material that I found interesting was that on the textbook wars, the techniques the evangelical movement developed to grow their churches, the evolution of advertising philosophy (including political advertising). And some bizarre stories I found of particular interest were the Oxycontin problem in Kentucky and the big subdivision (in California?) that was divided into an enclave for right wingers and another for left wingers. All in all I thoroughly enjoyed this book, and I feel like I learned something from it.

This book provides valuable insight into something I've observed and thought about, but never examined empirically. On a recent ballot initiative, the state voted 60% in favor of a constitutional

amendment against gay marriage. In my town, I saw hundreds of lawn signs opposing the initiative and not a single lawn sign in favor. Bishop's thesis is that people are sorting according to cultural traits. He provides data showing increasing geographic clustering of households according to the way they vote, among other traits. The concept of households sorting by preferences over local government service provision has been an active topic in public finance and political economy since the 1950s. When one buys a house, one buys a bundle of local amenities, including the quality of the local schools, the tax rate, the crime rate, the attractiveness of the other houses in the neighborhood, and the rules of the homeowners' association. This book adds cultural factors to the mix and discusses the consequences. Bishop further discusses how these cultural factors are used to market other types of products besides housing. Political consultants identify hot-button "wedge" issues that can evoke strong responses in subsets of the population. Evangelical churches adopt rock music, coffee bars, and singles nights to attract younger congregants, and to make the church's seven-days-a-week activities the center of the congregants' social life. Bishop is concerned that this clustering enhances cleavages within society and reduces understanding and tolerance of people who differ. Bottom line: The book identifies a social phenomenon of potential importance and supports the observation with data. The book is thought-provoking and edifying. The book also seems somewhat padded. I found myself skipping through sections that repeated the thesis, or provided an opportunity to include material he'd already published even though it added little additional understanding. The information could have been provided in a book half the size, or maybe just a few chapters.

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