

9-6-2019

Uncivil Agreement: How Politics Became Our Identity Lilliana Mason, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2018, pp. 192.

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## **Abstract**

Lilliana Mason's *Uncivil Agreement: How Politics Became Our Identity* is easily the best book on American politics I have read in years. I mean this in two important ways. First, the book tackles what may be the most pressing question in politics: Why has the American public become increasingly polarized? The answer—that the increasing overlap between identities changes the way that citizens see themselves and others—provides a clear understanding of polarization. But this is not only an important book, it is a good book. Mason constructs a careful argument, grounded in social psychology, and each chapter in the book builds sequentially on the previous ones. The result is a book that is more than the sum of the parts and represents a major advance in the field. I lost count of the number of times where Mason demonstrates a point that clearly articulated some previously unintelligible hunch I had about politics. There are few books that make this type of contribution to a vital question in the way that *Uncivil Agreement* does.

## **Disciplines**

American Politics | Political Science | Political Theory | Social Psychology and Interaction | Sociology of Culture

## **Comments**

This accepted book review is published as Peterson, D.A.M. *Uncivil Agreement: How Politics Became Our Identity* Lilliana Mason, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2018, pp. 192. Doi: [10.1017/S0008423919000076](https://doi.org/10.1017/S0008423919000076). Posted with permission.

Uncivil Agreement: How Politics Became Our Identity Lilliana Mason, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2018, pp. 192. Review by David A.M. Peterson

Lilliana Mason's *Uncivil Agreement: How Politics Became Our Identity* is easily the best book on American politics I have read in years. I mean this in two important ways. First, the book tackles what may be the most pressing question in politics: Why has the American public become increasingly polarized? The answer—that the increasing overlap between identities changes the way that citizens see themselves and others—provides a clear understanding of polarization. But this is not only an important book, it is a good book. Mason constructs a careful argument, grounded in social psychology, and each chapter in the book builds sequentially on the previous ones. The result is a book that is more than the sum of the parts and represents a major advance in the field. I lost count of the number of times where Mason demonstrates a point that clearly articulated some previously unintelligible hunch I had about politics. There are few books that make this type of contribution to a vital question in the way that *Uncivil Agreement* does.

Democrats and Republicans have always been divided, and partisanship has always played a foundational role in shaping mass political behaviour. But something in American politics has changed. The differences between the parties no longer constitute a simple divide over the policies the government should pursue; instead, the disagreements have become more affectively charged. Partisans increasingly dislike members of the other party. Many Americans don't want their children to marry outside of party, choose to forge social connections with people who share their partisanship and will even choose to suffer individual losses if it means that someone from the other party suffers more. It is largely undeniable that something about partisanship or how partisanship matters has changed in ways that create serious concerns about the future of American politics.

Mason provides a compelling explanation for how we got here. Her starting place is social-identity theory, as she argues that partisanship is best understood as a social identity. A significant aspect of this idea of partisanship is how we define ourselves: our identity stems from seeing how we fit in key social groups and how others are similar or different from us. Thinking of party as a social identity also explains why partisanship is more important for shaping political behaviour than, say, simple policy preferences. If a person's identity is at stake, he or she will have strong emotional reactions to political outcomes, aside from the gains or losses one might face from a political outcome and even if the stakes are low. As long as that person's side wins, that person gains some reward.

This understanding of partisanship, however, is only the starting point for Mason. Party is not the only social identity we have; our faith, gender, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, occupation and a host of other things also shape who we are. When one of these identities is salient, it is piece of our sense of self that helps define how we interpret and react to our social world. Mason's key insight is to recognize

that because of the evolution of American politics, these other identities have frequently aligned with partisanship. Now when a person's partisan identity is engaged in something, many of that person's other identities are as well. This means that the pleasure from one side winning and the pain from one side losing are both amplified by other aspects of self-identity. As more Americans have sorted into parties that match their race, ideology and faith, more also hold openly hostile attitudes about people on the other side.

This is a powerful argument that helps the reader understand the growth in affective polarization. What makes the book stand out is the ways in which the evidence for the argument incrementally builds throughout the book. After outlining her nuanced theory, Mason documents the increasing partisan sorting in the United States and the power of partisanship in shaping perceptions—and also how this sorting has also expanded. One of the more interesting results is that partisans who are socially sorted have more negative emotions about members of the other party, even when accounting for differences in policy preferences. The implication is that it is the sorting into different groups, and not actual disagreements over politics, that is creating much of the animosity. In many ways, the lesson here is that all politics is identity politics.

Chapter 7 is probably my favourite chapter. In this final empirical chapter, Mason convincingly shows that the effects of partisan and social sorting go beyond just our thoughts and feelings about each other. Citizens whose identities are sorted are significantly more likely to be engaged in politics. To many, higher engagement and activism are generally considered normatively positive things. Mason points out, however, that much of this highly sorted activism is intended not to achieve a specific end but to express blind support for a particular side. The result is a reinforcing cycle where activism spurs more positive feelings about the group (and negative feelings about the other side), spurring more activism.

In the final chapter of the book, Mason suggests several possible ways forward. Given the chapter's title—"Can We Fix It?"—I was fearful that the chapter would consist of a single word: no. Mason is, thankfully, not that pessimistic, but her discussion of the possibilities for greater contact between the parties, for finding shared goals or for changes to the parties and leaders did not seem persuasive.

That lack of persuasiveness is the only thing that is even slightly unconvincing about her argument. *Uncivil Agreement* is a landmark book that helps the reader understand American politics. While the focus is on the United States, the logic of the argument provides a path forward for scholars of other countries as well. It is a book that will have a lasting effect on our understanding of political behaviour.