

James J. Bacik

## **Introduction**

1. The depth and extent of the political divide today. A Pew Study indicated politics is today the most important divide in the U.S more so than religion, class, wealth.
2. Catholic Social Teaching has not made a big impact on politics but it has themes that could encourage responsible citizenship.

## **I. Partisan politics**

### **A. History**

1. The Constitution says nothing about political parties.
2. George Washington did not belong to a party and hoped they would not be formed.
3. James Madison warned about the “mischief of factions” (*Federalist Papers* n10).
4. In 1822 after Federalist and Republican parties (different from today) were established, President Monroe declared parties were “the curse of the country.”
5. In the 1828 election what became the Democratic party helped elect Andrew Jackson by grass roots campaigning (door-to-door canvassing, party picnics, and rallies) which produced record turnouts, as high as 90% in some states.
6. The modern Republican party was formed in 1854 and came to prominence with the election of Abraham Lincoln in 1860 and became the anti-slavery party while the Democratic party attracted white southerners.
7. By 1896 most states implemented the secret ballot that allowed citizens to split their vote and not just vote the party line.
8. Under President FDR in the 1930s the powers of the presidency expanded and the political parties located their control centers in Washington, weakening their local power.
9. President Eisenhower and Reagan won by emphasizing their own personal appeal and issue agenda more than party affiliation.
10. In the 1970s both parties moved away from caucuses controlled by party bosses to state primaries giving more power to ordinary citizens.
11. Today we have “candidate centered” campaigns that are less dependent on support of the party establishment. Modern social media make direct appeals to the public possible.

### **B. President Trump**

1. He epitomizes the candidate centered trend. He ran against the Republican establishment and has re-shaped the Republican party. John Boehner, former Republican House Speaker said “There’s no Republican Party; there is a Trump party.” Around 87% of Republicans approve of what Trump is doing. His overall job approval rating has been in the low 40s. Nothing he says or does upsets his core supporters (not clear how large this group is).
2. Some Trump critics have become supporters. Senator Cruz of Texas who spoke most vehemently has now praised him and has accepted his support in his Senate race. Senator

Lindsay Graham who was formerly very critical now says Trump is “growing into the job.” They have become friends, and he publicly supports his policies.

3. Some conservative Republicans have sharply criticized the president. In a Washington Post June 22, 2018 Op/Ed, conservative writer George Will urged citizens to vote Democratic in the midterms because Congressional Republicans have been so timid in resistance to the destructive policies (for example, separating children at the border) of the president, a “Vesuvius of mendacities.” He excoriates Paul Ryan who lost everything in the service of the president. He “traded his political soul for a tax cut.” The GOP has become “the president’s plaything.” Other conservative critics: George Weigel, Robert George, both Presidents Bush, Colin Powell, Condoleezza Rice, George Shultz, John Kasich, John McCain, Bill Kristol, Glen Beck, Max Boot, David Brooks, Ross Douthat, David From, Michael Gerson, Russel Moore.

C. Polarization in the Trump era has increased

1. Anecdotally, some spouses can no longer talk politics; some friendships have broken up; people are more reluctant to discuss politics in social settings; some demonize political opponents.
2. Pew Study: the high level of division during the Obama years between Democrats and Republicans grew even larger in the first year of the Trump administration. Public opinion is more divided along partisan lines than race, religion, age, gender, and education. Some 81% of Democrats and Republicans have an unfavorable view of the other side. Republicans (65%) prefer to live in rural areas in small towns (schools, stores, and restaurants are several miles away). While 61% of Democrats prefer city living (stores etc. in walking distance). In 2016 elections 59% of city dwellers (over 50,000 people) voted for Clinton while 62% of rural and small town dwellers voted for Trump. 67% of Democrats say a lot of their close friends are also Democrats while 57% Republicans say the same thing. Trump has influenced Republican voters on climate change (57% of Republican supporters of Trump say there is no evidence of climate change). In summary, Pew thinks Trump has intensified a divide that was already there and given the current dynamics will remain entrenched.
3. Pew Study October, 2017: today there is a 36 percentage point gap between Republicans and Democrats up from 15 points in 1994; on race – 64% of Democrats say racial discrimination is the main barrier to blacks getting ahead compared to 14% of Republicans; 71% of Democrats say government should do more to help the needy compared to 24% of Republicans; 56% of Dems favor U.S. taking active global role compared to 39% of Republicans; 82% of Dems say our economic system unfairly benefits powerful interests compared to 50% of Republicans; 49% of Dems say most people can get ahead by hard work compared to 77% of Republicans; 83% of Dems say homosexuality should be accepted compared to 54% of Republicans; 8% of Dems approve of Trump’s job performance compared to 88% (the biggest gap since polling going back to Eisenhower in 1953).
4. Why commentators were wrong about 2016 election: state polls were wrong because many Trump voters hid their intentions; Trump’s emphasis on large rallies rather than grassroots organizing contrary to expectations; he tapped into populist revolt against liberal immigration policies (build a wall) and strong public hostility to the political, media and business establishments; he played to one side of a deeply polarized country along racial,

cultural, gender and class lines (*cf* on-line publication *The Conversation* by Anthony Gaughan, professor of law at Duke and others.

5. Diane Mutz, University of Pennsylvania political scientist claims voters supported Trump not because they were hurting economically but because their position in society is threatened; Trump voters were more likely to say “the American way of life is threatened” and that men, Christians and whites are discriminated against; 79% of white working class voters who think the American way of life is threatened went for Trump; White evangelicals think there is more discrimination among Christians than Muslims in the U.S.; when dominant groups feel threatened they try to protect their positions and Trump promised to do this; Clinton actually won the majority of those making less than \$50,000 a year – an indication that cultural factors were more important than economics.

D. The Dangers of Polarization – Yale Conference, October, 2017 *cf* 20 top political scientists

1. Polarization threatens American democracy; the “social compact” which holds us together around the conviction that our institutions can make life better, is breaking down; the rise of tribalism; erosion of democratic norms such as commitment to the rule of law; 60% of Americans think their children will be worse off; our democracy is not collapsing but is deteriorating; we now have two “intolerant communities,” identity activists pushing racial and gender equality and a nativist coalition suspicious of immigration and cultural changes – both groups live separately and see the other as the mortal enemy; in 1960 4% of Dems and 5% of Republicans objected to their children marrying across political lines while in 2010 it was 33% of Dems and 46% of Republicans.
2. Some of the speakers (political affiliations of the 20 participants were not disclosed) blamed Trump for: attacking the free press; refusing to divest his business interests; firing Comey to undercut the investigation; Timothy Snyder, Yale historian, author of *On Tyranny* argues that Trump puts his emphasis on an ideal past that never existed; thus fostering anger and resentment but with no chance to actually retrieve the mythological past.

E. *One Nation After Trump* by Ornstein, Mann, and Dionne

1. In recent years the Republican party has moved to the right; war on the liberal media; delegitimizing of political opponents; appealing to racism and xenophobia; hostility to democratic norms.
2. Trump is less of an outsider than he seems; he built on recent trends in GOP.
3. This helps explain Republican support for Trump (also his electoral power).
4. Trump appeals to “two broad overlapping streams of discontent” one animated by race, immigration, religion and culture and the other by economic problems, loss of jobs.
5. The America First slogan brilliantly amalgamates “populism, nationalism, nativism and protectionism.”
6. Trump’s greatest threat is to democracy itself.
7. Trumpism involves “a dark pessimism about liberal democracy, an open society and the achievements of the American experiment.”

F. Conservatives claim Democrats are moving far left

1. Advocating Medicare for all, \$15.00 minimum wage, amnesty for illegal immigrants, free college tuition.
  2. Recent elections of progressive candidates.
  3. Influence of Bernie Sanders and his socialist policies.
  4. They think Trump will easily defeat a progressive candidate in 2020.
- G. *National Review* article by Don McLaughlin listing ten accomplishments of Trump's first year
1. Appointing conservative Federal judges at all levels especially Neil Gorsuch to replace Scalia on Supreme Court and now Brett Kavanaugh.
  2. Tax cuts – not a perfect bill but the business tax cuts will help the economy.
  3. Regulation Relief including on the environment.
  4. Strong defense posture that forced North Korea to a more conciliatory posture toward the South.
  5. Executive Modesty for example not using executive power on immigration and seeking a solution in Congress.
  6. Withdrawing from Paris Agreement – a sham that ill served American interests.
  7. Getting rid of Steve Bannon and his allies including Michael Flynn.
  8. Immigration policies that favor restrictionism.
  9. Culture war: pro-life and defending religious liberty.
  10. Moving U.S. embassy to Jerusalem.

## II. Christian responses

- A. Christian discipleship calls for responsible citizenship *cf* Richard Gaillardetz
1. In the time of Jesus, religious convictions had political import; Give to Caesar (Mark 12:17) etc. does not mean a complete separation of religion and politics but the priority of allegiance to God – over any political system. Jesus called us to love even our enemies, he reached out to the marginalized. He came to transform the world by spreading the reign of God's justice and peace; the reign of God is already here but not yet complete.
  2. Application: we are called to do what we can to transform the political world and while realizing we can't make it perfect; the Cross remains judge of the flag.
- B. Four Commitments
1. To transcend selfish interests and to work for the common good (the sum total of conditions that promote human flourishing and the betterment of humanity as a whole). This involves protecting the dignity of every human being from conception to natural death and for providing fundamental human rights to nutrition, clothing, shelter, a just wage and humane working conditions. It rules out voting simply out of self-interest, although there is a proper care for ourselves and our families. In voting we are called to consider the common good and the needs of the most vulnerable.
    2. A commitment to prudential judgment. There is not one Christian policy on complex policy questions. The Church does not tell us which candidate to vote for. We are not obliged to create a Christian nation. Catholics can disagree on candidates and policies.

We are obliged to inform our conscience with Christian teachings and to discern the proper policies to work for the common good. The Church does not have a ready answer to all political issues (GS 33). We should vote intelligently examining the issues and making our best judgment on the best way to humanize our world.

3. Engage in genuine dialogue: We should not identify our opinions and agenda with Gospel teachings when there are other reasonable positions. In our pluralistic democracy, we have a right to speak in the public forum but should do so without claiming to have all the answers. We need open dialogue to discuss the best policies to serve the common good. Complex issues are not well discussed through slogans. As Bernard Lonergan insisted to move toward the truth by careful investigation, thoughtful introspection; reasonable judgment and courageous decision-making. David Tracy says conversation has hard rules: say what we mean as accurately as possible; respect what the other says; be willing to defend or correct our opinions; argue if necessary, confront if demanded, endure necessary conflicts; change our mind if evidence suggests.
  4. Act charitably and do not demonize opponents which is now so common on blogs, talk radio. Presume legitimate motivations of opponents. By modeling respectful conversation, we help overcome polarization.
- C. Bishop Robert McElroy of San Diego April, 2018 Bernardin Lecture for Common Ground Project
1. He has a doctorate in political science from Stanford and has become a major spokesperson for the positions of Pope Francis.
  2. He fears that the current political division with its nihilism, hypocrisy and anger will be accepted as normal.
  3. Catholic teaching has been hijacked by those who highlight one part of it for partisan purposes. Pope Francis encourages us to care for both the unborn and the poor.
  4. We should approach the problem not from applying abstract principles but from a “political-virtue ethic” as Francis did in his address to Congress referencing Lincoln, Day, King and Merton.
  5. Five political or civic virtues:
    - a. Solidarity – recognizing we are members of one human family with responsibilities to promote the common good. We are bound together as citizens of the country that nourishes us.
    - b. Compassion for those suffering - the poor young white males without college education feeling alienated; blacks fearing law enforcement; the millions facing deportation; parents who lost children to gun violence; women wounded by sexual assault; police who risk their lives every day. We must not politicize suffering.
    - c. Integrity - inclines us to let the Gospel influence not just our private lives but also our political views and actions.
    - d. Enduring hope - refuses to accept the current polarization as the new normal; rejects the notion that things can get better only if our side wins and the other loses; we could add that Christian hope trusts that God who is in charge promises final victory of good over evil which alerts us to small victories.
    - e. Peacemaking through encounters and dialogue - must face conflict, try to resolve it and make it a part of a new effort to overcome polarization.

6. We are all called to evangelize the political world that requires virtuous people being involved.
7. Critics: Cathleen Kaveny says we need more emphasis on the virtue of prudence and speaking prophetically without demonizing the opponent.

#### D. Faithful Citizenship

1. American bishops have issued moral advice on voting in “Faithful Citizenship,” every five years since 1976 with modifications in 2007, 2011 and 2015.
2. They decided not to rewrite it in 2018 adding a note that the teachings of Pope Francis should be kept in mind.
3. The Francis bishops Blase Cupich, John Stowe, Robert McElroy wanted a revision to include more on the poor, and environment, race, plight of working class men and women, specific events like Charlottesville, Paris Agreement, Iran Nuclear Deal, etc. (final vote 144 to 41 against large revisions).

#### E. Abortion

1. Many Catholics voted for Trump because he said he was pro-life and would appoint judges who would overturn Roe while Clinton ran on a pro-choice position that was in favor of overturning the Hyde Amendment that does not allow federal funding of abortion.
2. The fight over Judge Kavanaugh included whether he would overturn Roe.
3. Cardinal Bernardin representing Catholic tradition: While church-state questions call for separation, church and society questions call for engagement. In other words, religious communities have a right and an obligation to make their views known on public policy questions which effect the common good; the abortion question should be discussed under the general heading of a consistent ethic of life. It is consistent in terms of caring about life from the first moment of conception to natural death. It is also consistent in not only trying to defend life against attacks but also trying to nourish life; Consistent life ethic deals with the questions of abortions, assisted suicide, euthanasia and capital punishment; We do need to worry about a “culture of death” which sees death as the solution to problems; Abortion and the other life questions are not merely a matter of private morality but have a public character. It hurts the quality of life in the United States as a whole if we do not care for the very young, the sick, disabled; Opposition to abortion would gain credibility if we are willing to sacrifice to help women materially, emotionally and spiritually to bear their children to term and to provide support systems to care for young children; The policy positions of the United States Bishops reflects the consistent life ethic—they have come out against abortion, euthanasia, assisted suicide and capital punishment. They have also written on improving our economy, providing more jobs and increasing the standard of living; Bernardin insisted that we carry out the debate on abortion with civility. Catholics have an obligation to explain how they arrive at their opposition to abortion. It is crucial to see it as a moral question, to show that abortion is against the natural law and that reason can discern its immorality. If the church is going to enter the public debate, then we must use language that others can understand; The opposition to abortion is rooted in the dignity

of every human person; There is a difference between the moral principle opposed to abortion and the practical political questions of how to formulate good public policy; We have a responsibility to build a societal consensus in favor of the consistent ethic of life. We can contrast the prohibition laws which had no real consensus with the civil rights legislation which did reflect the growing consensus; It makes no sense for someone to say they are personally against abortion, but this has no ramifications in the public realm. Those who think there is no public consensus in favor of stricter laws have an obligation to try to form that public opinion more in accord with the natural law; The consistent life ethic is opposed to single issue politics which says we should make judgments about candidates based solely on their position on abortion.

### **III. John McCain**

- A. Life - heroism, not returning out of order, torture, service to Congress, funeral.
- B. Events – no to the woman who said Obama is an Arab; voting no on repeal of Affordable Care Act because regular order not followed; no to U.S. torturing (water boarding); no to big money in election campaigns (McCain/Feingold).

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If you would like to receive Father James Bacik's Weekly Meditations and Monthly Reflection, send your request to [jamesjbacik@gmail.com](mailto:jamesjbacik@gmail.com)

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**Father Bacik's 2018 Lecture Dates at the Franciscan Center**

**Thursday, November 8: Bridging the Economic Divide: Christian Perspectives**

*The latest data from the U.S. Census Bureau shows that the wealthiest Americans have benefitted more from the recent economic recovery than average working families. In this lecture, Fr. Bacik will explore relevant themes in Catholic social teaching, indicating that greater wealth equality will benefit the whole country.*

**Thursday, December 13: Advent Reflection**

**Thursdays, 5:30 p.m. – 7:00 p.m. in the Franciscan Center**

**\$10 Pre-registered; \$15 at the door**

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