

**Title: Julian Zelizer on Polarization and U.S. History**  
**Episode: 48**  
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### Transcript

[From Heterodox Academy, this is *Half Hour of Heterodoxy*, conversations with scholars and authors, ideas from diverse viewpoints and perspectives. Here's your host Chris Martin.]

**Chris Martin:** Thanks for tuning in. I'm joined today by Julian Zelizer, historian at Princeton University. He's the co-author with Kevin Kruse of *Fault Lines: A History of the United States Since 1974*. (Kevin appeared on an episode of this podcast earlier this year.) Julian is also the author and editor of several other books including *On Capitol Hill*, a book about the struggle to reform Congress from 1948 onwards, *Arsenal of Democracy*, a book on the politics of national security and *The Fierce Urgency of Now*, a book about Lyndon Johnson and the battle for the great society.

He's also a frequent commentator in the international and national media and he has a weekly column on [www.cnn.com](http://www.cnn.com). He joined me on the show to talk about political polarization and the history of polarization.

So we're here to talk about polarization. If you had to give a concise lecture on the history of polarization, you would have to pick a place to start and that's kind of tricky. So if you had to do that, where would you start in American history?

**Julian Zelizer:** Well, clearly if you were doing a long view, you could include the late 19<sup>th</sup> century when the parties were incredibly divided and the level of partisanship from roll call votes to interaction between members of congress was very intense. But I'm a 20<sup>th</sup> century historian. So I like to start in the 1970s. I think in terms of our modern polarization, the kinds of relationships and politics that we see in Washington, the '70s is really a takeoff decade for many reasons. But that's where the path to today really begins.

**Chris Martin:** So what was it about the '70s and who were the seminal figures there that caused some of this polarization to happen?

**Julian Zelizer:** Well, what we have to remember is in the '70s there were a lot of young Democrats and even some republicans who believed polarization was a good thing. Their main complaint about Washington was that bipartisanship had ruled the roost for many decades and the way Washington worked was you had these bipartisan coalitions of Southern Democrats and Republicans who worked behind the scenes, in committee rooms, in smoke-filled convention halls to basically prevent the democrats from doing anything on civil rights, on urban reform, on healthcare policy.

So in the '70s, they were very enthused about strengthening the parties. So there's a lot of reforms in the early '70s that Watergate babies, as they're called, come into office in 1974 in the aftermath of Nixon's resignation and many of them are very committed to making Washington a

more partisan place. They work with senior democrats like Richard Bolling of Missouri and Phil Burton of California and the main goal among Democrats is to strengthen the hand of party leaders, to make sure that leaders were strong enough, that they could get every member in their party to vote a certain way, to act according to a certain party logic and republicans will do the same thing in the 1970s.

People like Ronald Reagan are trying to make the Republican Party more united and more conservative as a whole.

**Chris Martin:** So on the issue of race, that has been an issue that's also brought up every time people talk about polarization and it has undoubtedly been a central topic in American history. But overall, do you think people overweigh or underweigh race as a cause of some of the political divisions throughout American history?

**Julian Zelizer:** Well, I think it's a big cause. It's a source of tension and division that never goes away. I don't think it's the sole reason that you either have polarization after the 1970s and it's not the sole explanation of modern conservatism.

There are lots of issues at work. If you're looking at the history of conservatism in the modern era, you have to take seriously national security and anti-communism. You have to take seriously the push to deregulate the economy and cut taxes. All of those were part of the mix as well and partisanship wasn't simply promoted in the '70s. Somehow it's part of a racial backlash.

There were people from different parts of the spectrum who really believed strong parties were a good thing in America, not a bad thing. But then there were parts of this political world that capitalized on racial division throughout, from the '70s right through today, as a way to secure more support and to solidify support among – within their party.

So if you're doing the history of the Republican Party, you can see this as early as 1968 and 1972 where Richard Nixon in his campaign is hammering away at law and order, which is about law and order. But it's also about the urban riots of the 1960s and a way to kind of mobilize support against what some Americans were seeing on television. You can fast forward to 1988 when Lee Atwater runs the famous campaign for George H.W. Bush who was running for president against Michael Dukakis and he runs a series of ads that are known as the Willy Horton ads that talk about a furlough program in Massachusetts where Dukakis was from that allowed an inmate, an African-American out, who then raped someone.

You see this constant use of race throughout the period. So I think it's important in that way. I also think as we shifted in the '70s away from questions of explicit racism, meaning segregation or explicit denial of voting rights towards questions of institutional racism, how race impacted criminal justice, residential patterns and more, the partisan gridlock that you will see in Washington really prevented any kind of serious progress on dealing with these issues.

**Chris Martin:** And another divisive issue is the New Deal. You can see even prior to the 1970s, some Republican leaders being angry about the New Deal and framing their policies around

pushing back against that. How significant do you think the new deal was in pushing polarization?

**Julian Zelizer:** Well, that's a massive moment meaning this is the 1930s. Franklin Roosevelt is president and he undertakes a pretty bold set of policies to get the country of the Great Depression but also to create a new kind of social safety net and regulatory framework to guide American life and the government is much bigger when we leave the FDR years than it was when we started.

What people forget is this was not accepted by everyone in the country. It was a real struggle and one main opponent for FDR, it wasn't just the Republican Party. Part of the opposition comes from Southern Democrats who in the late 1930s are increasingly concerned that the president is going to shift from economic issues to issues that explicitly deal with race relations in the south.

There's an anti-lynching bill for example that they're very concerned about or when Congress passes a minimum wage law. They're very worried that new federal standards will allow the government to deal with racial segregation in the south.

You have many business leaders in the 30s and 40s who are staunchly against what the president is doing. They see the threat he poses to their economic freedom and interest and they mobilize against them funding conservative causes and figures to fight the new deal.

So it's a very contentious moment and I think the kind of groundwork that is laid by the new deal of a big strong federal government has become a central point of tension in our politics.

Again it wasn't pure polarization like we know it today because the parties in the '30s were deeply divided. So you had bipartisan coalitions against FDR as opposed to pure partisanship that we see today.

**Chris Martin:** And during the Cold War, people sometimes say that the common enemy of the Soviet Union was one thing that perhaps united the parties and perhaps that did. But one effect it had outside the United States is that it caused both parties to be quite aggressive in pushing proxy wars on other countries. Maybe trying to outdo each other and showing how strongly they hated the Soviet Union.

So in a way that lack of partisanship may have turned out badly for some countries outside the United States. So do you think there's a double-edged sword to this?

**Julian Zelizer:** Oh, absolutely. Again the reason there are so many people enthused with creating stronger parties in the '70s because of – it was because of the problems that had existed and the policy outcomes that had been produced by that earlier period, that earlier era of bipartisanship. So the Cold War is a perfect example.

You had both parties and different coalitions in both parties here in the United States throughout the '40s and '50s in a political arms race, so to speak, to show that they were tougher on national security. What happened is this constantly led to all sorts of interventions overseas and support

for accelerations of military conflict like Vietnam because of the political pressures in part that had disastrous consequences all over the world.

When I teach about Lyndon Johnson, this is a central theme for me in terms of how did we get into Vietnam and why did we escalate a war in '65 that most Americans didn't even know about.

So part of the answer is the standard domino theory, this fear among US policy makers that if one country no matter how small felt that communism, others would follow. But another was this intense political pressure that existed in the US to show that you are a hawk and Lyndon Johnson always thought about this.

Even when he was hearing privately about why Vietnam would be a disaster and he himself understood the higher risks of getting into the war, he was politically terrified of looking weak on defense. He thought he would undercut all his domestic reforms. It would make him vulnerable and we actually accelerate our involvement in Vietnam with the Gulf of Tonkin resolution in August of '64 right in the middle of the presidential campaign when Barry Goldwater, a Republican, is attacking Johnson for being too weak and for not dealing assertively with communism.

So that era kind of – from our – how we dealt with issues like race relations to our policies overseas is highly problematic and we shouldn't look nostalgically to the period before the '70s.

**Chris Martin:** And I think Joe McCarthy also represents some of that where he was a tool for the Republicans to appear strong as anti-communists and then he also became a nuisance for the party once Eisenhower won.

**Julian Zelizer:** Very important. For a long time, McCarthy was always discussed as something of an outlier. He was this extreme part of American politics that emerges and does ugly things and destroys people's lives and finally you have the heroic moment when the Republicans and Joseph Welch combined with some journalists and democrats all stand him down.

But in reality, the more we've studied about it, we see the Republicans tolerated this. He was their attack dog and many Republicans in congress and even in the Eisenhower administration, they didn't like what he was doing but they let him do it and they unleashed him because he was part of an effort, which we forget in the early '50s of republicans trying to rebuild their party.

They were still pretty devastated after the '30s and '40s. FDR had really just changed American politics and created this very politically awesome coalition and one of the issues they felt Democrats were vulnerable was the anti-communist issue.

So McCarthy might have done it in a way many Republicans thought was distasteful or unfair but they really let them do it until their own partisan interests no longer fit with the kinds of stuff he was doing.

**Chris Martin:** Since we're on the topic of foreign policy, one of the things that didn't make it extensively into Fault Lines is the issue of foreign policy. I believe you had to keep the book

concise. But let's say you had the opportunity to add another 100 or 200 pages to the book about foreign policy during the period from Watergate to the present. What would you want to add to the book?

**Julian Zelizer:** Well, I mean we do have a lot in there and we're not unhappy, Kevin and I, with some of the issues we highlighted. So the ones we did get in are the politics of détente in the 1970s and how you can see some of the political divisions domestically starting to line up with the tensions over foreign policy. We have on the '80s for example on Ronald Reagan firing the huge military build-up and importantly the opposition to that build-up was something we really wanted to talk about. The Nuclear Freeze Movement which helped push Reagan toward the late '80s toward some kind of detente and we have about the war in Iraq. You know, obviously 9/11 and its aftermath.

So we have a lot in there and I think we're pleased with how much we could get. But there's always more that you can do. Certainly, I would – I think Kevin and I would love to do more on the 1990s, which is really a transitional period as the Cold War comes to an end. But we're not quite yet in the War on Terror post-9/11 period and really unpack what was going on in American foreign policy and different directions that we could have taken. I think that would have been fantastic.

Obviously, we have a bunch on the end of Vietnam and the fall of Saigon to communism, but to do even more about concrete impacts on foreign policy and the years that followed would be great.

So the good thing is there are always future editions where we can expand. But we did try to connect the story of foreign policy to the story of domestic politics as best we could.

**Chris Martin:** And one of the issues that has become salient now is Russia – when you teach this course at this point in time, do you include more material on Russia and how Russia has become more powerful than we thought it would be?

**Julian Zelizer:** Yeah. So Kevin and I, we used to teach this class and then I teach it now myself just pragmatically. We couldn't – we had to split things up. So I taught it about a year and a half ago. I'm on sabbatical this year. So I've been thinking about that. When I come back next year, how do we include – how will I include Russia in the current, very current period? My treatment of Russia usually really revolves around the 1980s and that's a highlight of my course in terms of both the build-up – as we have in the book, the build-up of the Cold War, the next phase in the early '80s where things seemed really dangerous and by '83 it looks like we might even go to war to the gradual collapse of the Soviet Union and the INF agreement.

So that's usually what I talk about and then after that, I have Russia either in or out of alliances in different military conflicts. But it's not a theme and even when I – the last time I taught it and I talked about President Trump's initial months as president, I talked about the scandal. But I do want next year I think to include a little more on the evolution of Russia both on the international stage and in US foreign policy relations because I think we're all waking up to this new stage we are in, the new kinds of threats Russia is trying to provoke and the different political, weird

political alliances you see unfolding in the US over this issue. I don't even think the parties have figured out exactly what position they want to take.

But I'm going to put more of it just for the reason you're saying.

**Chris Martin:** Now which historians right now do you think are doing some interesting work in that area or Russia specifically, whether it's historical books or academic papers?

**Julian Zelizer:** Yeah. My colleague Steve Kotkin is really the best. He has been writing about Stalin. So he goes back earlier. But his understanding of the roots of the Soviet Union and Russia and political society I think are hard to beat. So a lot of what I learn, I learn either through his writing or by walking across the hall and schmoozing with them a little bit about what's going on in the news.

Another person – two people have done good work, both Tim Naftali and Jeff Engel who wrote a lot about George H.W. Bush and both of them were really interested in the end of the Cold War and the transition and how George H.W. Bush handled that.

So Naftali has a short book on Bush for the Times presidential series and Engel has a lengthier book that came out I think last year about Bush and I think they're really useful. In terms of the very contemporary developments, I'm really like everyone else, learning through a lot of the news and contemporary journalistic analysis about it. I don't know who the historians are who are best capturing this yet.

**Chris Martin:** And at the end of *Fault Lines*, you say—this is about the Donald Trump campaign—“For many Republicans, the simple fact that Trump enrages Democrats prove to be enough reason to rally around him.”

Do you feel like that trend is now something that can conceivably be reversed now that a precedent has been set? Because even during the dire polarization of the 1990s, you didn't quite see presidential candidates like Bob Dole doing anything like that.

**Julian Zelizer:** Yeah, I don't know. I think one of the key points that we try to make and I've tried to make in my writing, my op-eds is that it's important to understand President Trump very much as a product of our era and his strategy isn't simply to play to the base of his party. It's to play to the party. He counts and depends on the fact that polarization will hold Republicans in the Republican camp regardless of what the person up top does and that you're not going to see defections. He has tested this beyond anyone I've seen in terms of how he acts and what he says and his willingness to go against certain orthodoxies of this party.

What he knows is time and time again, he will just provide some red meat to the party and they will vote for him. I think that's what he's counting on in 2020. I don't know if that will hold. I still think it will. I think it's a very reasonable and actually rational understanding of how American politics works.

The question is, is, “Is the party, as he envisions it, just shrinking and is the Democratic party capable of just building a better coalition because of numbers, because of appeal?” and I don’t have an answer at this point in terms of where we will be. But I do think Republicans in that strategy are vulnerable. Not because people are going to defect. Just because the party is actually shrinking.

**Chris Martin:** And one book people are talking about nowadays on this issue is *How Democracies Die* by Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt. They’ve suggested that the way democracies die is slowly through the erosion of democratic norms that have never been coded into law. We can see Mitch McConnell specifically eroding several norms that have once held several people and political science and history have written about this. Norm Ornstein, E. J. Dionne.

When you look at this erosion of norms, where do you see that going? Do you see that continuing or do you feel like those norms can somehow be restored in the next decade?

**Julian Zelizer:** Not right now. The erosion of norms has been really pretty striking and once again, this is not something that starts with President Trump. I’ve been writing about this now for many years. Actually for much of my career, this has been a theme, looking at Congress and how those norms and how those procedures and how the rules that once helped keep this very unwieldy institution intact have fallen apart.

You see this at the presidential level as well and each time you have a serious moment of erosion, it’s very hard to undo. It’s like public policy. Once they’re in place, they’re not easily dismantled and the same holds true that when you take away certain norms that people followed, even in the most contentious moments of American politics – I’m finishing another book that’s coming out next year on Newt Gingrich and the downfall of speaker Jim Wright in 1989, which was when Gingrich really rises to power and that’s for example a key moment when a norm, in terms of how far you would go with political attacks, is broken.

We never really get back from that in terms of thinking of leadership and thinking of what’s legitimate partisan warfare and what’s illegitimate and President Trump now has simply taken this broken system, a system where the norms were frail, and totally not only exposed it by showing how far you can go, but also made it much, much worse by doing this at the presidential level.

I don’t think we’re anywhere close to a period of restoration. You really are going to need something like the 1970s when after Watergate and after Vietnam and after all the scandals we went through, you had a coalition of reformers from groups like Common Cause and individuals like Ralph Nader to the class of ’74, the “Watergate babies” who devoted a lot of time to trying to fix the way that politics work, passing institutional reforms, legislation, that changed the ways we do business. They weren’t always successful and we’re now living with many of their failures. But they did devote a decade to that and I think we’re going to need a moment like that to really fix where we are because right now, every incentive in American politics points in the wrong direction and it’s very hard for even the best meaning politician to act differently because the incentives are to play into the broken norms that we have today.

**Chris Martin:** And one of the trends you point to is the change in the 1970s of newspaper reporters becoming celebrities because of covering Watergate and then the drive to be a celebrity if you're a reporter. In addition to that, you see the end of the Fairness Doctrine. Do you also see that trend worsening or do you see any hope for maybe something like the Fairness Doctrine coming back?

**Julian Zelizer:** Yeah. Generally, in part because I'm a historian, I'm never very optimistic about short term fixes. So that is a good example. In *Fault Lines*, we really look at the changes in the media as a long-term transformation first with the advent of cable news, starting – we argue in the early '80s where you have your 24-hour news cycle. You also have cable television stations devoted exclusively to news, which changes the commercial incentives that surround the news business. You have the 1990s then with the advent of partisan news and new norms of journalism. We are open partisanship in reporting, are normalized. Talk about Fox News in 1996 and then the world of social media in the early 2000s with everything from Facebook to Twitter where a lot of the editorial restraints and gatekeepers on the production of information about news fall away and anyone can get out there and go viral and put out information that might be right, might not be accurate.

So all three of those have combined into creating this Wild West of news coverage that I think we live in today and it won't be easy to undo. The government doesn't have the strongest hand. As you said, the Fairness Doctrine was eliminated in 1987. Probably wouldn't work today anyway just because of the way we receive information from so many outlets.

So a lot of this will require the producers of information, meaning television networks, online sites and social media providers who have a huge amount of muscle right now thinking of at least alternatives to news supporting efforts that provide us better information, more analytical information and at this point, there's not a lot of people doing that. It's hard to do. There's a reason. It doesn't – it's not easy to make money doing that. But I think that's where the solution is going to have to come and I hope we get there.

I mean the best effect of what we've seen in the last few years would be the soul-searching and need for better news emerges out of the rubble of what has happened with President Trump and a lot of the breakdown of our public square.

**Chris Martin:** One of the things I really liked about *Fault Lines* is you draw on these movies that capture the zeitgeist. You mentioned *Nashville*, which is one of my favorite movies and *Network* and *War Games*. I actually saw *War Games* recently thanks to the book. I haven't seen it since I was nine years old and it's a different movie when you're a nine-year-old for sure.

Are there any other movies you show your class or you recommend to your class when you're teaching this course about history since 1974?

**Julian Zelizer:** Sure. I show clips to the class when I teach it. It's a lecture course. But there are lots of multimedia and so I like to show clips from different films. One year I showed a little bit of *Wag the Dog*, I remember, which was a film that came out in 1997 and in retrospect, it's

pretty amazing to watch. It's about a presidential team that manufactures a fake war for television to cover up a sex scandal of the president, which comes out right in the middle of Clinton's impeachment.

So as a famous – I show clips of that. I show clips of *All the President's Men* to talk about the changing role of journalism and the attraction in the '70s of investigative journalism. I show television shows. I show clips for example of *24* when I'm teaching about post 9/11 and both – some of the increased usage and acceptance of methods of interrogation like torture that had been off limits and some of the synergy that starts to emerge between pop culture and actual practice, which that show often encourage CIA operatives we've learned to handle problems in a certain way. So those are a few of the clips. I've shown more. But those are some of the ones that I remember.

**Chris Martin:** And to wrap up, I want to come back to the syllabus. We talked about Russia. What other ways do you see the syllabus of this course maybe changing over the next decade?

**Julian Zelizer:** Well, so far for me, I won't transform it. I'm pretty happy with the – not happy. But I'm pretty – I feel good about the structure in that it really helps me and I hope my students understand where we are today. This class, like the book, had been structured and developed long before Trump became president, long before the world we're living in today was evident.

It kind of explains how we got here. So I don't want to tamper with it too much. But there are things I would like to add. I would love to add much more – I have a little on criminal justice and race for example from how policing has emerged as a center point of debate over how race plays out to the private prison system.

I would love to kind of carve out time to do more about the development of that and how it unfolded. I would love to do more and I don't know how yet on what's going on in the states in terms of party politics and policy. That's hard to do always in a big class. You're always focused on the national level. But I think the story of the states is really quite important and I would like to do more about that and then I would like to – one last thing that I think about all the time with President Trump is how so many of our norms among leaders are voluntary, meaning one of the most striking parts of President Trump is he always just does things that you think aren't acceptable or that someone is going to respond. But you can get away with a lot and I want to look back at presidents as I teach them to think about that a little more.

Even our most contentious presidents about where they were willing to go and where they weren't willing to go and why that has broken down so much. If that's just about President Trump or has this erosion of presidential restraint also included not just their formal power but their willingness to go anywhere they need to go to win and to secure support.

So those are the big issues and then obviously themes like Russia's cyber security. Cyber warfare is something I'm really interested in but I haven't yet really included in the course. There will be lots of places I think I can expand both the syllabus and the lectures.

**Chris Martin:** Well, it has been great having you on the show. Thanks for joining us.

**Julian Zelizer:** Thanks so much for having me.

[Music]

**Chris Martin:** You can find links to Julian Zelizer's website and several of his books including *Fault Lines* in the show notes for today's episode.

My next episode features Jeffrey A. Sachs. He's a lecturer at Acadia University in Nova Scotia and he writes about issues related to free speech on campus and whether there is indeed a free speech crisis.

If you enjoyed this episode, please leave us a review on iTunes. It helps other people find out about the show. Thanks for tuning in.

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