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How Long Can Polarization Continue Among Americans?

By Matt A. Mayer

Three years ago, I wrote a column for U.S. News & World Report titled “America’s Civic War” in which I discussed the growing polarization of America. I ended that column stating: “The question isn’t whether we are divided. We most certainly are; rather, it is how long can our house stand if our division persists?”

Our division has persisted and by every measure it has gotten worse, especially as our political partisanship reaches new heights in the march to the 2020 presidential election.

Though it is a silly anecdote, female dating app profiles routinely use precious space to warn: “If you are a Trump supporter, swipe left!” A majority of men are turned away simply because they voted for Donald Trump. They may not like the man or approve of his personal conduct or Twitter feed, but they run a small business and like his tax cuts and regulatory reforms or they’re military veterans and like his foreign policy actions.

It doesn’t matter — mere support renders you an untouchable in which an hour for coffee is simply out of the question!

On a more serious note, the governor of West Virginia is openly appealing to southern Virginians to consider seceding from Virginia and becoming part of West Virginia because northern Virginia progressives have taken over the state and are pushing far left measures.

This isn’t some fringe effort like we’ve seen to divide California. This is the top elected official in a state trying to get another state’s people to secede.

With the acquittal of Trump in the U.S. Senate by as partisan a vote as the impeachment articles against him were passed in the U.S. House, both parties now have their talking points to use to bludgeon each other over the coming nine months in the fight for the small sliver of voters who actually can still be swayed. The rhetoric will only get hotter.

Similarly, with the results of the Iowa caucus and New Hampshire primary in which progressive socialist Bernie Sanders triumphed over the establishment Democratic favorite former Vice President Joe Biden, the left will spend the next five months in a vicious intraparty fight for the nomination. Sanders and his loyal followers felt the Democratic National Committee sabotaged his efforts in 2016. With the appointment of Hillary Clinton loyalists to key convention positions and the move to get moderate Michael Bloomberg into the next debate, Sanders and his squad increasingly fear

the fix is in to stop him from getting the nomination again.

Depending on what happens, enough Sanders voters could sit out the 2020 election in protest, thereby making Trump’s reelection easier.

With the tensions boiling ever higher, where does it end? In many ways, the hatred and animosity between the left and the right is no less palpable than other major schisms in history. The Catholic-Protestant battles in Europe contained two sides who fervently believed in their causes.

Communities fractured over the issue. Rulers were toppled over it. It took decades of bloody wars and much death before a stalemate arrived, with each side claiming victory as countries went one way or the other way. Echoes of that fight remain in places like Northern Ireland.

The Civil War is another example of what happens when believers in a cause become willing (or forced) to die over an issue. Like today, that tragic war resulted in family members fighting one another.

The various officers leading the war for each side had just fought together in Mexico a little over a decade before shots were fired at Fort Sumter. The fighting ended in 1865, but the war continued to be fought for another 100 years until the passage of the Civil Rights Act in 1964.

Historically, the divisions we face today were settled on battlefields when one side finally prevailed violently over the other side. Thankfully, that likely won’t be our fate, but how will America come back together? How many more years will we remain divided?

Perhaps Brexit will be our model with one side finally prevailing in an overwhelming fashion at the ballot box forcing the losing side to accept the outcome. It is unlikely that will happen in 2020, but a Trump-Sanders election would give voters such a policy contrast that one side could sweep the presidency and Congress.

Even if it does, the tensions will not subside. An outcome that clearly won’t help is a divided government in which each side can continue to attack and get payback on the other side for four years.

This civic war we are fighting is weakening the structure of our house. It seems outlandish to believe it could really fall, but at some point what divides us will outweigh what unites

us.

Should that day arrive, perhaps our civic war will become another bloody civil war.

Matt A. Mayer is President of Opportunity Ohio.