**Polarisation in America**

S Qaisar Shareef January 30, 2020

Extreme polarization in American society is a rapidly emerging phenomenon, both in how people assess the performance of their elected leaders as well as in how much they trust or distrust various media sources.

A recent survey shows that 89 percent of all Republicans say President Trump is doing a good job, while only seven percent of Democrats approve of his performance. This is the largest gap in a president’s approval rating between supporters of the two parties in the last 50 years or so since such data has been reported.

It is a wonder that a president who openly disparages fundamental institutions of democracy such as a free press and a free judiciary, attacks opponents with racist and threatening language, and has been proven to have said thousands of lies would have such widespread support from such a large majority in his party.

In addition, none of his major electoral promises has been delivered. He promised to provide better health care coverage at a fraction of current cost. Not even a single proposal has been presented by him. He promised to invest heavily in improving US infrastructure; nothing has been done on this front either. His supposed middle-class tax cut has turned out to be a giveaway to the super rich, like himself. The list of broken promises goes on and on. Yet he continues to enjoy rock solid support among Republicans. How can this be?

Trump has thrived on exploiting fear and hatred among his followers. He was elected because his divisive message resonated with a certain segment of the society – mostly white, older, rural voters. He is the only US president in recent memory who has not only continued to cater to the most extreme views in his so-called base of supporters, but also has made no effort to reach out to those who did not vote for him – which is the vast majority of non white voters, as well as a third of whites, who are mostly urban and educated.

So, what accounts for his continued support among Republicans? The altered media landscape in America has played a big role in this. Donald Trump’s Republican supporters almost exclusively get their news and views from the Fox network. Not only that, they do not trust almost any other source of news.

Democrats, on the other hand, get their news from at least a dozen media outlets, including major TV networks and print publications. A recent Pew Research study shows a dozen media sources are trusted by 35-67 percent of Democrats. While Republicans trust Fox News (65 percent) and ABC network (33 percent) and not much else.

If we step back in time, we see that over the past two decades or so conservatives in the Republican Party have spent much energy undermining trust in what they call mainstream media, preparing the ground for emergence of a single trusted source like Fox News. Close collaboration between Donald Trump and those who call the shots at Fox has turned this network into the official mouthpiece of this administration, quite unique in American history. Finally, Republicans have in effect achieved their desired control of media.

This is not too different from how official media was used in the former Soviet Union. The government decided the messages to be delivered to its citizens and, having no other source of information, people’s views were moulded by a single government-controlled media source.

The difference in the US is that with widespread demonization of mainstream media outlets, the Republican base has voluntarily chosen to tune out all media sources except one. The damage to society and the country from this polarization will be long lasting.

The writer is a freelance contributor based in Washington DC.

Website: www.sqshareef.com/ blogs