# Cultural Narratives and Moral Circles: Mapping the Politics of Identity in Contemporary America

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***Abstract[2]:*** The paper delves into the socio-cultural political divide in the United States (U.S.), highlighted by the contradictions between the Democratic and Republican parties, particularly following the elections of President Donald J. Trump. By examining the conflict through the lens of values, symbols, and identity, the paper underscores the shifts in foreign policy stances, party alignment along identity lines, contentious political debates, media influence, symbolism in sports, and anti-immigrant sentiments. The foreign policy landscape, once characterized by bipartisan consensus, has been disrupted post-2016, highlighting unresolved historical and cultural issues within the U.S. The socio-cultural conflict is further explored through Hofstede's cultural theories and Ross's narrative analysis, elucidating how identity politics and cultural narratives perpetuate the divide. The media and sports are examined as arenas where ideological conflict is prominently displayed, with media coverage often polarized along party lines and sports becoming a battleground for symbolic nationalistic debates. Language and Latino experiences are discussed to illustrate the role of cultural traditions and discrimination in the broader socio-political context. Solutions are proposed, emphasizing the need for political analysis that respects individual narratives, cultural analysis to bridge divides, and fostering multilingualism to reduce political conflict. The paper concludes with a call for a paradigm shift in U.S. politics, advocating for collaboration between parties to address the deep-rooted cultural divides and promote a more inclusive and harmonious society.
***Keywords****:* Identity politics, Cultural divides, Polarization, Narrative analysis, Partisan Identity in U.S. Politics

## Introduction

In seeking to address the current socio-cultural conflict in the United States (U.S.), this paper focuses on the perceived divide between the two major political parties, specifically since the first and now the second election of the current President. In this paper, the Democratic Party is generally represented as left-leaning and the Republican Party as right-leaning. However, the authors acknowledge that within each political party, there exists a spectrum of political parties

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from moderate to extreme positions that will not be differentiated here. Bearing this in mind, the paper states that both parties have played a role in the political tensions but will focus on the differences that seem to be fueling the divide, specifically from a values and identity-driven perspective, with an emphasis on cultural and symbolic theories of conflict. As such, the paper will highlight shifts in foreign policy stances, the drawing of party lines along identity and values, the contentious political debates, the media, the symbolism of Americanism in sports, anti-immigrant sentiments, why people voted the way they did, and the politics of identity.

This paper contributes to scholarship by situating the socio-cultural divide within the broader literature on polarization, democratic backsliding, and identity politics (Abramowitz & McCoy, 2019; Dimock & Wike, 2020; Druckman & Levy, 2022). From a policy perspective, understanding how identity and values shape party conflict helps clarify how governance and foreign policy are impacted by domestic divides (Gidron et al., 2020). From a practice standpoint, these insights are critical for conflict resolution, political communication, and civic engagement strategies (Welker et al., 2023; Fowler et al., 2024). As such, the paper focuses on these central questions: 1) *How do political parties in the U.S. use cultural and symbolic narratives to reinforce the socio-cultural divide*? and 2) *In what ways do identity, media, and symbolic arenas (e.g., sports, language) contribute to the persistence of partisan polarization?*

**Foreign Policy**

Notwithstanding numerous differences in partisan approaches to domestic issues, there was always a consensus among the U.S. foreign policy establishment from both sides of the aisle. That had been the case until Donald Trump won the U.S. presidency on the GOP ticket both in 2016 and 2024, claiming to be an outsider. The notion of an outsider challenging the U.S. bipartisan foreign-policy consensus (Monbiot, 2016) emboldened what would be known post-2016 as "The Base" to turn out en masse to rallies, school board meetings, and the polls. The so-called Trump phenomenon was seen as an effigy of an anti-establishment amateur determined to drain the swamp, which appealed to very specific groups of anti-immigrants, Christian nationalists, and White Supremacists (Ricard, 2016; Langman, 2018; Gidron et al., 2020).

In a nation split between Democrats (Left) and Republicans (Right), "where cultural divides overlap with political divides," support for foreign policy issues often fell along party lines (Badger, 2018, para. 3). As Dimock and Wike (2020) surmise, Americans are more polarized within this Trumpism era than ever before. Support for either political party's policies is split along party lines on several key issues, like immigration, foreign aid, and trade. Identity and ideologically based topics like race, gender, and nationality are of utmost importance as they provoke sharper partisan divisions when framing choices that matter (Fowler et al., 2024).

Bearing this in mind, there is a clear distinction between nations and societies, with the latter being constituent units of the former (Hofstede et al., 2010). Common culture is inherent to societies that form organically, rather than nations. In the past, a coherent internationalist consensus on US foreign policy used to overlay the partisan divide on domestic issues. Not so much, since Trump's election and presidency, which has demonstrated the salience of homeostasis, and has defaulted to powerful inter-generational reproduction of culture. A culture forged in Christian ideals and a preservation of racial and gendered hierarchies.

The economic and social diverse characteristics of Trump supporters (although predominantly white) can be attached to unresolved historical cultural issues within the U.S. In an interview for *The New Yorker*, Paula Green, a peacebuilding and conflict resolution specialist stated that, "it is a fundamentally tragic four-hundred-year-old problem in this country that hasn't gone

away," she adds, "we're still fighting the Civil War, and we're certainly still fighting the wars of the nineteen-sixties" (Chotiner, 2019, paras. 25 – 32). When national identity breaks down, and the nation splits along cultural (religious, ethnic, gender, ideological, racial) lines, it has implications for international relations and foreign policy. Polarized nation-states often re-evaluate their foreign policies in order to distinguish their new friends from new enemies, a phenomenon not relegated to just the U.S. (Kowert, 2000; Gidron et al., 2020).

For the past nine years, the global order has been upended by Trump, the Republican Party's erratic foreign policy, and other state leaders with common goals. As *Foreign Policy* puts it, by disparaging America's closest allies and flattering its greatest adversary, Trump dismantled the liberal system of multilateral arrangements, alliances, and institutions built under U.S. stewardship (Kirchik, 2018; Gidron et al., 2020). In his efforts to secure support both at home and abroad, Trump continues to make the moral circle smaller by appealing to white supremacists nationwide and to authoritarian regimes around the world. Long-established alliances have been challenged, and surprising new ones have emerged.

Borders have become sites of ideological conflict, which mirror the broader partisan and cultural polarization of U.S. politics. During the last three presidential elections (2016, 2020, & 2024), the border wall narratives served as proxies for deeper socio-cultural political battles. Rodríguez and De Maio (2021) assert that the "build the wall" rhetoric mobilized both the Democrats and Republicans, turning policy into identity performance. The wall became more than just a physical boundary. It became a discursive tool for defining who belongs, who is excluded, and who is defined as American.

The Democrats positioned themselves as the party of human rights and inclusion, and the Republicans positioned themselves as the party of sovereignty, security, law and order, and American values. This piece of foreign policy had significant implications for international relations as the wall became a material manifestation of the U.S.'s internal divisions. It also had broader geopolitical implications regarding race, immigration, language, and globalization. Mexico and the Democrats wanted to amplify a sense of cross-border transnational solidarity and a celebration of shared multiculturalism, whereas the Republicans wanted more border security, less immigration, and protection of nationalist values (Restad, 2020; Martinez, 2022).

Both of Trump's presidencies have redefined American national identity and reshaped U.S. foreign policy through the lens of populist nationalism. Take, for instance, the popular campaign slogan now mantra, "Make America Great Again," which has not only become a movement, but it redefined the Republican party. This redefinition relied on cultural and ethnic nationalism that invoked a nostalgic and exclusionary vision of American identity. With tensions between civic and ethnic conceptions of American identity bubbling under the surface, values such as democracy and freedom took on varied meanings (Restad, 2020). Republicans viewed globalism, immigration, and multiculturalism as threats to "the real America," a stark departure from the democratic or liberal cosmopolitan identity the U.S. had been lauded for in the post-Cold War era of U.S. politics.

## A Conflict of Values – The Politics of Identity

*Partisan Socio-Cultural Conflict in the U.S.*

By adopting the definition of conflict as "perceived divergence of interest" (Pruitt & Kim, 2003, pp. 7-8) and as "an incompatibility of positions" (Bercovitch et al., 2008, p. 3), we will draw on the explanatory frameworks of Hofstede et al. (2010) and Ross (2007). Describing culture as "a collective phenomenon," Hofstede et al. (2010) underscore why a collection of different cultures in societal proximity to each other often results in we-vs-them distinctions (p. 6). We also build on Ross' (2007) analysis of the importance of narratives in terms of maintaining ethno-cultural conflicts and suggest that developing cooperative actions in those settings can mitigate conflict. We assert that politicians have institutional affiliations that draw attention to daily conflictual socio-cultural conflicts that stem from existing cultural narratives. These political affiliations provide them with an opportunity to create their own rituals and to make supporters practice them as well (Dimock & Wike, 2020; Fowler et al., 2024).

On the one hand, by promoting particular rituals of labeling, accusing, disrespecting, ignoring, dividing, provoking, and discriminating, President Trump embodies a particular discourse within the socio-cultural conflict in the U.S., and helps to reinforce conflicts among identity groups, which keep dividing the society. On the other hand, there are Democrats who bring light to important conflictual issues and social justice issues such as gender, religion, race, immigration and refugees, economics, and the environment. They defend overlooked values and push for new narratives to resolve socio-cultural conflicts as well as re-arrangements of institutions (Ross, 2007; Hofstede et al., 2010; Dimock & Wike, 2020). This contrast, as argued by Hofstede et al. (2010), is because cultural practices and values are also closely related to groups' moral circles. It could be argued, then, that how politicians speak when leveraging their party's perceived values can promote divisive rhetoric, furthering conflict, or promote collective dialogue that can mitigate conflict.

One only has to pick up a U.S. newspaper to see references to this conflict. Looking from the outside, the U.S. seems like a relatively unified culture that superficially shares many symbols, rituals, and heroes. However, beyond the surface fissures exist that stem from patterns of long-term structural violence, resulting in deep divides between race, gender, and the "haves" and the "have-nots." In many ways, U.S. politics today is at a crossroads, fueled by animus that has been building for decades, if not centuries (Chotiner, 2019). The conflict is particularly based on U.S. political parties' competing cultural values that have lent themselves to some bizarre outcomes. Hofstede et al. (2010) state that "culture consists of the unwritten rules of the social game. It is the collective programming of the mind that distinguishes the members of one group or category of people from others" (p. 6).

What is readily apparent to even the most casual observer is that the U.S. political system is in the middle of a cultural war, and it is split right down party lines. One of the great ironies of both elections of President Trump is that it seemed to give voice to one of the most voiceless and impoverished groups of Americans: rural white Americans living at or below the poverty line. This group, that felt disenfranchised and left behind by establishment politics, longed for and aligned with, privileging national sovereignty and economic self-interest as seen through fervor emitted toward the America First agenda (Badger, 2018; Restad, 2020). Partisan identity has now become moralized, where identities such as "Democrat" or "Republican" signal one's cultural worldview, gender ideology, racial alignment, inclusivity, and moral standing (Park, 2020; De Maio & Rodriguez, 2022; Maskell, 2024).

Even as the Democratic Party struggles mightily to become the party of inclusion, it too has excluded and isolated certain groups based on socio-cultural identities like socio-economic class and educational attainment (Stonecash, 2025). So how does division and conflict currently exist in a country with so many shared symbols and rituals and so much wealth? West and Iyengar (2022) argue that identity-based partisanship has fueled affective polarization, which is a tendency to dislike or distrust the opposing party and its members (Dimock & Wike, 2020; Druckman & Levy, 2022). This growing dislike between Democrats and Republicans is entrenched in the growing hostility and distrust of the out-group, and not necessarily about specific policies. Ideological disagreements represent a struggle between competing cultural communities that define who is American in fundamentally different ways (Restad, 2020).

Hofstede et al. (2010) speak very succinctly and directly regarding the "moral circle" that suggests that "People draw a mental line around those whom they consider to be their group. Only members of the moral circle thus delineated have full rights and full obligations" (Hofstede et al., 2010, p.12). In their ideological clash, the U.S. political parties have drawn a moral circle around their beliefs and values (Abramowitz & McCoy, 2019; Dimock & Wike, 2020; Parry-Giles et al., 2022; Stonecash, 2025). Both West and Iyengar's (2020) and Restad's (2020) work build on Hofstede et al.'s (2010) framework by highlighting that, as American partisanship becomes a core social identity, moral circles have become narrowed along party lines. Individuals reserve moral concern and empathy for those within their own groups but see outsiders from the opposing party as morally suspect.

Restad (2020) asserts that what occurred in both Trump 1.0 and 2.0 is not an anomaly but an expression of cultural grievance and political identity. Agendas like "America First," "a new way forward," and "we are not going back" are manifestations of the socio-cultural cleavages that now define U.S. politics. Ideological clashes that bring into question race, belonging, and identity are as central to international policy as they are to domestic political life. Moral boundaries and circles are deeply cultural and political. Who counts as part of "us" or "one of us" has contracted with moral worth being tied to national and cultural belonging rather than universal ideals and policy beliefs. Hence, academics, political strategists, and partisan affiliates must engage in socio-cultural dialogue that fosters conflict mitigation and management (Welker et al., 2023).

*The Politics of Identity (Identity Politics)*

One could claim that all politics are identities, and all identities, political. Ford (2005) posits that "identity politics suggests a political orientation built around a (pre-existing) social identity. That we begin with identities whose shape and character are, or at least could be, pre-political and then we opt to get political about them" (p. 53). This creates differences (cultural) and groupings within societies. Cultural differences tend to fuel identity politics, as both dominant and marginalized groups engage in politics based on their own values and identity. The racial resentment, gendered rhetoric, and negative partisanship between the 2016, 2020, and 2024 elections intensified political polarization. First in 2008 with the birtherism campaign, then in 2015 with the portrayal of racial groups as criminals, in 2016 "lock her up," and then in 2024 the questioning of VP Harris' race (Abramowitz & McCoy, 2019; Valenzuela & Reny, 2020; Parry-Giles et al., 2022).

Ross (2007) supports this claim by stating that "people battle over real interest and identities" and that culture, though not the real cause of conflict, is "the vehicle through which it is played out" (p. 318). Ross (2007) also asserts that rarely is it the case that people are willing to

give up their group identities in an effort to achieve peace, and though groups may have similar perceived identities, they don't all want the same things (p. 319). This continues to fuel conflict as individuals link their values and identity to how their politics are played out (Welker et al., 2023; Stonecash, 2025). The same is evident in the U.S., as demonstrated during the pandemic with mask mandates and the handling of the pandemic itself. How Trump or Biden handled the pandemic was also divided along party lines, with each party's constituents saying their party handled it better than the other (Dimock & Wike, 2020).

Hofstede et al. (2010) assert that conflict among minoritized groups often intersects with the dominant culture of the nation-state and their own traditional group culture and identity (p. 45). In the current political divide, these differences are often used by some parties as rhetoric to incite fear of the other and fuel discrimination (Chotiner, 2019). Hofstede et al. (2010) suggest that when individuals from other cultures are met with resistance from the dominant culture, they do one of two things: assimilate or retaliate. If minoritized groups are met with discrimination, it is harder for them to assimilate. This, in turn, will present problems for many countries and their citizens (p. 45). These cultural battles result in societal tensions that are often drawn along political and ideological lines that seemingly compete against each other (Dimock & Wike, 2020; Welker et al., 2023).

Avruch and Black (2001) surmise that people use their own cultural identity as the lens through which they view the world. This helps them to bring the world into "logical" and "normal" perspectives and helps them in their thinking, feeling, and seeing. Given this perception, any threat to their perceived normalcy makes individuals feel at risk and go on the defensive. In the case of identity politics (in the Democrat and Republican divide), individuals align themselves with the party that best represents their values, which in turn gives the individual a sense of normalcy in acting out their own cultural identity (West & Iyengar, 2022; Stonecash, 2025).

Aligning personal values with political affiliations of who is left and who is right is not always clear in terms of all ethnic groups. Take, for example, the 2016 and 2024 elections. In CNN's exit polls for both elections, white voters voted the same for Trump at 57%, and Harris got a larger share at 42% than Clinton's 37%. Trump in 2024 did better than Harris among Black, Asian, and Hispanic voters, even though they all voted overwhelmingly for Harris (Wolf et al., 2024). The decrease in voting numbers is not what is under examination here, but the fact that among White voters, the Republican Party did relatively the same. It was the Democrats who lost ground.

Though the Republican party is often seen in the contemporary era as the party for conservatives, white Evangelicals, and males, 2024's results suggest there was something more that appealed to other demographics. The Democratic Party and its niche in multiculturalism did not prevent Black, Hispanic, and Asian voters from voting for the other party. It is also important to note that a large share of those who voted Republican in these groups were male and over 40 (Wolf et al., 2024). Hence, racialized, generational, and gendered identities were very present, especially on key issues such as immigration, abortion, and the economy.

Park's (2020) investigation into Asian Americans' attitudes toward immigration showed this variation, revealing the complex role racialized identity plays in shaping political behavior. Park found that first-generation immigrants tended to support more inclusive immigration policies that align with liberal or left-leaning ideology. This collective identity among first-generation immigrants and those with temporary status fosters a sense of solidarity and resistance (De Maio & Rodriguez, 2022). Whereas U.S.-born and conservative Asian Americans had more restrictive views and favored more assimilation and merit-based approaches. This, per Park (2020), is predicated on the negotiations Asian Americans make within self, between being accepted as

Americans or maintaining solidarity with other immigrant groups. This symbolic site of belonging also collides with the "model minority myth" that Asian Americans grapple with. Issues like immigration then situates Asian American political orientations as an extension of identity politics, reflecting both the racial positioning and civic aspirations this group navigates within an exclusionary ideological national discourse.

West and Iyengar (2022) assert that U.S. politics has moved beyond ideological disagreement and has become a core part of social identity. Americans, whether foreign-born or not, see their political affiliation as not simply something they believe, but as a reflection of who they are. This shift has transformed partisanship into social and cultural markers that shape interpersonal relationships, media consumption, morality, and patriotism. This results in erosions of cross-cutting identities that in the past might have moderated political differences. As moral circles become overlapped with cultural, racial, and religious ideologies, Americans perceive political opponents as not just wrong but fundamentally different. These tribal affiliations are reinforced by selective media choices, residential sorting, and Americans increasingly living in socially and symbolically segregated worlds (Stonecash, 2025).

Maskell (2023) provides an example of a symbolic battleground forged in identity politics that stemmed from local debates about renaming a Virginia stretch of road. The road in question, Lee Highway, which honored Confederate general Robert E. Lee, was to be renamed Langston Boulevard, honoring African American leader John Mercer Langston. The contrast in framing the name change invoked narratives of "heritage", "tradition," and "history" from mainly white, right-leaning residents. Framing from left, liberal, multiethnic residents employed anti-oppression counter frames that invoked liberty and justice. These competing frames map directly onto narratives of nationalism versus cosmopolitanism and economic protectionism versus global justice and inclusion. The left/right framing embodied the polarization of moral worldviews, where one side sees multiculturalism as the perceived loss of traditional values and the other side seeing it as inclusion and progress.

**The Case of American Symbolism**

*The Media*

It can be inferred that President Trump's political language creates a conflictual socio-cultural atmosphere in the U.S. between political parties and their affiliates. And nowhere is this more highlighted than in the media. The media is heralded as the ultimate symbol of freedom, especially freedom of speech, in the U.S. With the advent of the internet and social media, media personalities are now able to "widely disseminate their messages and, indeed, reach audiences as broad as those of established media organizations" (Fisher, 2001, para. 8). Based on this notion of freedom of speech, the media including social media has gone full steam ahead with furthering the divide (Kleinfeld, 2023). In their role as watchdogs, they appear to be either against Trump (Democratic leaning) or in support of Trump (Republican leaning). Hence, through their content, the ideological conflict is on full display for the public.

Local, national, and social media spaces then operate as powerful tools in both perpetuating and contesting hegemonic racial identity. Debates about ideological positions and partisan framing are often amplified in digital communication. Recalling Maskell's (2023) study on the renaming of Lee Highway illustrates how social media, in this case Nextdoor, provided insights on how everyday digital interactions can reflect deep identity-based conflicts. Nextdoor is a hyperlocal

social media platform founded in 2010 that connects people within defined neighborhoods. Unlike its competitors, Twitter (now X), Facebook, and Instagram, it requires user verification, tying online participation to real names and home addresses. Maskell (2023) suggests that through Nextdoor, the socio-cultural divide is continuously reinforced through geographically bounded, classed, and racialized communities. The debates on renaming the highway provided a clear distinction between liberal civic nationalism and conservative cultural nationalism.

De Maio and Rodriguez (2022), in their examination of digital identity politics through the #DefendDACA movement, provided a counternarrative to digital spaces and partisanship. The movement, which was in response to President Trump's attempt at ending the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program in 2017, utilized Twitter (Now X) as its activism platform. In this digital space, activists, allies, DREAMers, and protesters displayed clear partisan alignment. Tweets that included #DefendDACA were relatively positive, inclusive, and supportive came from progressive or pro-immigrant users. These individuals framed the issues as humanitarian, moral, and economic imperatives, emphasizing diversity, empathy, and justice. However, counter hashtags such as #DefundDACA and #DACAshame were rooted in conservative partisan identity, nationalism, legality, and the rule of law.

Ultimately, De Maio and Rodriguez (2022) argue that the #DefendDACA movement and subsequent counter hashtags demonstrated how partisan identity has transcended into a moral signal. Partisanship in the U.S. has evolved into being a core part of social identity, and a way for people to define themselves and their moral circles. Thus, digital spaces, whether geographically bound or not, become political moral battlegrounds where users can express racialized, gendered, and moralized belonging. Digital spaces also become sites of identity formation and social belonging, where shared identity replaces deliberation and reinforces ideological in-group solidarity or division rather than cross-group dialogue. This deepening division fosters affective polarization and affective contempt, resulting in distrust and hostility toward those in the out-group.

Any perceived challenges to "traditional American values" that defend tradition and history are met with pushback framed as moral overreach or cancel culture (West & Iyengar, 2020; Maskell, 2024). Hence, identity-based conflict is not just political, it is moral. Where partisans perceive their side as morally superior, and justify their political disagreements as a struggle for moral legitimacy and cultural survival. Moralized partisan boundaries are now expressed emotionally, symbolically, and digitally through online activism or protest. The media ecosystems, whether they be cable news or local apps, transform digital and social spaces into partisan arenas, furthering the socio-cultural divide. One of the most covered symbolic socio-cultural conflicts of this conflictual period occurred in the sports realm.

*Sport*

Sport and politics are often intertwined, and in the U.S., it has been historically used to tackle gender, racial, and economic injustice and discrimination. It also reflects society at a micro level. Hofstede's onion model provides a crucial entry point to describing the cultural phenomena experienced in sport. The model differentiates between four types of cultural phenomena: values, rituals, heroes, and symbols, layered from the inside to the outside. Values are at the core of the model while also being the underlying reason for sport engagement (Hofstede et al., 2010). A crucial value observed and respected in sport is fairness. In sport, the narrative is that all that matters is your actions on the field. Under the guise of fair play, the focus tends to be on how you play the sport with little or no connections to broader arguments related to systemic oppression (Collins & Bilge, 2020).

The assumption then is that once teams get on the playing field, rules will be applied fairly, regulated by a third party of referees or umpires, depending on the sport, and the results of winners and losers will be determined fairly through strategy, skill, and talent. Thus, all aspects of inequality get neutralized, and since athletes compete separately by gender, the gender binary is reinforced, and all supposed differences (class, orientation, race, ability) also get neutralized. This value of fairness assumes equality and merit, so even as some fans may complain about biased referees and poor organization management, they respect the value of fairness in sport as a guiding principle and will continue to support their teams, favorite athletes, and sport in the hope that the biases may be implicit and won't affect their teams adversely or for too long so they can score a win (Collins & Bilge, 2020).

Along with the value of fairness is the assumption that sport is devoid of all social and political implications. This is especially important within American society, which views sport as an escape from political and social disagreements. Sport then acts as a form of entertainment, a respite from larger socio-cultural conversations that may require more intellectual engagement. This has significant implications in terms of values and practices, especially during periods of political rifts in the U.S., where polarizing sentiments can travel across the country in real time. As stated by Hofstede et al. (2010), practices and values are learned during one's lifetime and can shift, especially at the individual level. In applying this perspective to sport practices, it can be argued that because of the intertwined nature of sport and society, social practices of rituals, sport hero worship, and symbols get legitimized. The rituals and practices at sports events are produced through the reaction of the population, whether fans or not, and the values they espouse.

One such ritual in the U.S. is the playing of the national anthem before any professional sports activity or public event. This practice is not universal, with other countries reserving this ritual for national team competitions only. Alexander (1997) defines rituals as "a performance, planned or improvised, that affects a transition from everyday life to an alternative context" (p. 139). The singing of the national anthem or the blowing of a whistle by the referee are rituals performed at the start of a sporting event and can be viewed as a transition into an alternative context. That ritual temporarily removes viewers and participants from their daily routines to a simulation of the sport, where everyone assumes their role as athletes, viewers, reporters, officials, etc.

Accordingly, Turner (1969) suggests that the meaning and significance of a particular symbol can exclusively be determined in and for the context of a selected socio-cultural context. Ritcher (2016) explains further that rituals can be divided into two groups: those that involve the whole society and those that are related to particular events carried out on demand, and not for the whole society (Alexander, 1997; Bellah, 2003). In the case of sport, the second group of rituals applies, and this creates an attachment that demands respect for these rituals. These include standing up, removing hats, or even placing one's hands across the chest whenever the national anthem is played. When these rituals are disrupted, the disruption is questioned, especially when that disruption is by an athlete. When an athlete disrupts these predefined rituals, it becomes magnified by the media, which creates ripple effects through society and beyond the sports world.

This is because, as illustrated by Hofstede et al.'s (2010) onion model, athletes fall under the category of heroes. Hofstede et al. (2010) describe heroes as persons whose characteristics are highly valued in a culture, and thus they serve as role models. This emulation placed upon athletes is the reason their behavior is often critiqued beyond the playing field. The role of an athlete then is to uphold the belief of fairness, abhor cheating, and champion the belief that through their hard work and outstanding physical abilities, they will succeed in their careers and have country or even

worldwide esteem. Hence, when athletes disrupt the ritual of sport in the U.S., they are heavily criticized. This criticism, as outlined by Collins and Blige (2020), breaks the rules of fair play and brings to the forefront systemic issues that often intersect with race and gender.

History is littered with athletes, particularly from marginalized groups, who have disrupted sport rituals to bring attention to injustice and discrimination. Athletes like Tommie Smith and John Carlos who lifted their fists with black gloves and stood on the medal podium with their bare feet during the 1968 Mexico City Olympics. Standing in solidarity with them was Peter Norman of Australia, wearing a protest pin, who, it is alleged, suggested the black gloves. Four decades later, during a televised National Football League (NFL) game, San Francisco 49ers quarterback Colin Kaepernick caused one of the most distinctive disruptions when, along with his teammate Eric Reid knelt during the national anthem (Coastone, 2018; Doehler, 2021). Kaepernick and other athletes' refusal to stand spurred a national debate about patriotism. They were called "unpatriotic" and were also told they were disrespecting the flag and all those military personnel who fought for it (Coastone, 2018; Doehler, 2021; Brewer, 2024).

However, these athletes recognized their role as 'heroes' and leveraged their visibility and massive audience to make a political statement that transcended the game itself. The protest by athletes kneeling spread beyond football to basketball and even soccer, resulting in commentary by political actors who leveraged the opportunity to push their own political values beyond sport, creating a political divide in sport that has transcended time. For those paying attention to the disruption, multiple value-based arguments started to arise. On one hand, some viewed kneeling during the anthem as disrespectful to the country, and on the other hand, some took it as an opportunity to support the athletes. What often gets lost in the debates about the protest is the aim, a call to acknowledge systemic police brutality in the wake of George Floyd's murder, at the hands of a police officer (Coastone, 2018; Doehler, 2021; Brewer, 2024).

This viral disruption led to the exile of Kaepernick from football and further comments from media and political personalities that all athletes should "shut up and dribble!" (Sullivan, 2018). Party lines became starkly drawn when Trump, who was President at the time, both called athletes who knelt derogatory names and stated that when the national anthem is played, and the flag raised, no one should be kneeling, signaling the beginning of the anti-woke era (LeBlanc & Spielmaker, 2020; Brewer, 2024). The disruption to sports rituals with the kneeling of athletes was so polarizing in an already tense political climate that the very gesture invoked comments about symbols of nationalism and patriotism (Sullivan, 2018; LeBlanc & Spielmaker, 2020). The left/right fracture that occurred in various sporting arenas was seen as a furtherance of political ideologies. Where the right stood in solidarity with the president about respecting the flag, tying it to patriotism, and the left stood in solidarity with those protesting systemic injustice, tying it to the constitutional right, freedom of expression.

The U.S. flag is seen as a symbol of national pride and, more importantly, military support, and this support is often extended to police, a focal group of the disruption. Sports, when viewed through the lens of the state, present a patriotic space that is promoted through flag-waving, playing national anthems, and coveted medal ceremonies that celebrate winners. These symbols, Ritcher (2016) suggests, are manifested in "words, gestures, pictures, or objects that carry a particular meaning that is recognized as such only by those who share the culture" (p.4). In the U.S., playing the national anthem at the start of sporting events goes hand in hand with the physical symbols of the country, namely the flag and the military. Symbols that supersede the simulation of sporting activity. Thus, when these rituals and symbols are disrupted, athletes are rebuked for taking spectators back to reality, reintroducing them to the discriminatory world they chose to escape, though temporarily through sport.

What Hofstede et al. (2010) model offered then is the ability to describe the socio-cultural reality presented within sport and the influence of the U.S. political environment on the value structure of participants and observers. More importantly, it described the interesting position of sport in society that evokes a myriad of emotions culturally, politically, and socially. Whether one believes that standing for the national anthem is an act of patriotism and a symbolic representation of respecting the flag, those who have fought for it and the country, or that one can both respect the flag and acknowledge injustices within the country, these values and rituals allow citizens some measure of freedom. It is these freedoms that allow citizens the ability to make meaning of values, rituals, heroes, and symbols, especially those values and symbols that delineate who belongs or who is a patriot, who is American.

*Language*

In the last few decades, Latino communities have become an important political force in the U.S. with growing numbers of registrations and voting (Barreto & Woods, 2005). Huddy et al. (2016) posit that Latino communities tend to vote and belong to the Democratic Party, although the Republican Party has gained more Latino support, especially in 2024 (Corral & Leal, 2024). Per Newman et al.'s (2018) analysis, however, the growing presence and influence of Latinos, Afro-Americans and other groups in politics caused many white Americans to feel that the racial hierarchy was under threat, propelling a white backlash that has had lasting consequences post the 2016 election cycle. As Sadhwani & Mendez (2018) suggest, race and ethnicity play a central role among Latino voters, and as such, their communities are feeling the effects of that backlash.

A PEW Research Center poll revealed that Latinos have been questioning their place in the U.S. society regarding both political parties (Lopez et al., 2018; Corral & Leal, 2024). This speaks to the racialized implications not only of being Black and White, but also of anyone considered the other (Valenzuela & Reny, 2020; Corral & Leal, 2024). Martinez (2022) asserts that language is both a marker of identity and a site for socio-cultural political struggle. Latino Americans consider speaking Spanish as an essential part of their identity, but also view English as the vehicle to economic mobility. Language then becomes a cultural divide within American political rhetoric, which has repeatedly politicized language. This politicization is not exclusive to any political party, though it has been exacerbated in the contemporary period since the 2016 presidential elections. Language, Martinez (2022) argues, became a tool of political exclusion and a target for white nationalist backlash.

Similarly, Rodríguez and De Maio (2021), in their study of the border wall debates in U.S. and Mexican newspapers, highlighted that language functions as both a cultural and political border. The comparisons between how the two countries framed the narratives around the border wall highlight the tensions around linguistic identities. Trump's border wall narratives epitomized identity-based politics. The U.S. framed the crisis at the border as a defense against criminals and illegals who would threaten white, Christian, English-speaking identity, which resonated with the republican base. Mexico framed the border wall as a violation of their dignity and collective identity, as well as an imposition of foreign power and a symbol of humiliation. These narratives had lasting implications within the U.S. news cycle, often echoing the partisan framing of the wall as a moral crusade for safety and sovereignty, thus reinforcing the polarization of U.S. identity politics and moral exclusivity (Hofstede et al., 2010; Restad, 2020).

Even though many members of the Latino community hold U.S. citizenship, they face discrimination daily. Even with shared citizenship, cultural traditions play a significant role as

Latinos have particular traditions and a language that broadens the cultural difference between them and other U.S. citizens (Rodríguez & De Maio, 2021; Martinez, 2022). Schwartz (2012) sees tradition as a value that has a myriad of practices, specifically for Latinos, as their parents often have strong connections to their respective countries of origin. Hence, the current political climate that often puts Latinos dead center in partisan politics can be assessed from the symbolic and value-driven level. Linguistic identity, racism, and politics intersect to reproduce racialized ideologies of belonging. Multiculturalism and bilingualism are seen as threats to national identity, and the "English only" or the U.S. is "a country where we speak English, not Spanish," rhetoric signals a narrowing of the moral circle (Hofstede et al., 2010; Restad, 2020; Martinez, 2022).

As explained by Ross (2007), "language serves as an obvious symbolic and ritual expression of group differences and can be a focal point for bitter ethnic conflict when groups make demands that their language should be the state's official language or have privileged status in the public domain" (Ross, 2007, p. 322). Language has placed many Latino voters and their families in a predicament, as merely speaking Spanish in public may be grounds for detention, as outlined in the September 2025 decision in Noem v. Vasquez-Perdomo (Jones, 2025). The use of racial profiling based on perceived nationality and language has made anyone within the Latino community a target, regardless of citizenship or legal status. Language then becomes performative resistance and a way to claim space, mediating access to political legitimacy that favors assimilation (Park, 2020; Rodríguez & De Maio, 2021; Martinez, 2022; De Maio & Rodríguez, 2022). Hence, language is central to understanding the socio-cultural divide because language shapes perceptions of both belonging and exclusion within the contemporary U.S. political polarization debate.

**Discussion**

So why are people voting the way they do, and why is this contributing to the socio-cultural political divide? Mutz (2018) asserts that it is because dominant groups felt threatened and triggered their defense by creating emphasis on conformity to group norms, thus voting for Trump not once, twice, but for some three times. After all, he acted as a protector of their beliefs. Alternatively, as stated previously, some working-class poor and ethnic groups also felt neglected by the elitist Democrats who failed to visit their constituency (Corral & Leal, 2024; Stonecash, 2025). But regardless of how the problem occurred, it is important to assess how the conflict can potentially be mitigated. The literature provides some solutions.

As Ross (2007) states, political analysis tends to ignore or dismiss the role that identity framing plays in long-term conflicts. To get to the crux of the matter, there needs to be an understanding that everyone's narrative is important, not from a right or wrong perspective, but as important to that individual. It is imperative, then, to find common ground between both sides of the political spectrum, so that there is a shared understanding of why a person's identity and values frame how they operate in society (Chotiner, 2019). If people feel like their identity is being threatened, the problem will persist.

Hence, the parties need to find sufficient shared ground and be willing to negotiate their differences amicably. This can be achieved by willingly coming to the table and dialogue, not arguing ideological positions (Ross, 2007). When this occurs, policymakers can then integrate cultural analysis into strategies for reducing polarization (Restad, 2020; Welker et al., 2023). This can be done through culturally sensitive surveys and focus groups to test the current socio-cultural issues facing the electorate and allow the citizenry to find collective solutions.

Avruch and Black (2001) also assert that for people to reach across the political divide, they

need to employ a cultural analysis. Avruch and Black (2001) also posit that when conflicting parties can attach meaning to things from both their own lens and the other person's lens, then they are not as quick to explain away things based on their own perceived values and identities. The authors also suggest that an analysis of the underlying cultural differences needs to be performed in an effort to solve problems. In their summation, Avruch and Black (2001) suggest that a cultural analysis demands that during conflicts, one first needs to stop, and then, second, one needs to resist deflecting or dismissing the other based on moral terms.

Scholars should further investigate the intersection of identity politics and the use of symbolic practices as a tool of democratic resilience. The shocking election of Trump in 2016 and his re-election in 2024 have severely disappointed those who had hoped the U.S. was in a post-racial political era. Many had hoped that instead of the democratic backsliding they were witnessing now, there would be progress (Abramowitz & McCoy, 2019; Welker et al., 2023). In the case of language as a symbol of group identity and English being seen as American and all other languages being seen as un-American, multilingualism can be seen as a bridge between the different cultural divides.

Deploying a strategy that seeks to foster a multilingual America might reduce political conflict, as the promotion of proficiency in multiple languages can improve governance and trust (Nickson, 2009). Disenfranchised voters (in both parties) might also rethink some of their core values and see Spanish and other languages as a means of reducing conflicts by exploring them for educational and recreational purposes. But for this to occur, both Republican and Democratic parties would need to foster greater diversity and inclusion and become intercultural spaces that focus on conflict reduction between themselves and their constituents (Chotiner, 2019).

Politicians then need to consider the power of these narratives and usher in new institutional arrangements, new narratives of cooperation, respect for others, and pave the way for developing fruitful dialogues among different groups (Ross, 2007). Political rhetoric would need to recognize the inherent cultural and linguistic discrimination that has arisen, especially rhetoric that centers on white, conservative political identity, and instead champion multiculturalism and multilingualism, which is more reflective of the population (Martinez, 2022). Media practitioners can help mitigate divides by highlighting shared values rather than reinforcing political echo chambers (Kleinfeld, 2023). Alternatively, civic organizations could promote intersectionality and symbolic inclusivity to bridge partisan and cultural gaps.

## Conclusion

This paper aimed to explore how values, identity, and symbolic practices shape the socio-cultural political divide in the U.S. The findings demonstrate that partisan conflict is not only rooted in policy disagreements but also in deeper cultural narratives, rituals, values, and symbolic representations. Foreign policy divergences, identity politics, media framing, and symbolic arenas such as sports and language reveal how narratives of inclusion versus exclusion continue to reinforce divides. Themes of racial resentment, party identity, and rhetorical strategies have become explicit, with racial, gendered, and cultural insults becoming more common and less electorally costly.

These findings align with recent research on affective polarization, which shows that partisan animosity is increasingly tied to cultural identity rather than policy preferences (Dimock & Wike, 2020; Druckman & Levy, 2022). Hence, this paper highlights the symbolic dimensions of, for example, sports protests and language politics that are often overlooked in mainstream political science. While prior studies emphasize media echo chambers (Kleinfeld, 2023) and racial resentment (Valenzuela & Reny, 2020; Parry-Giles et al., 2022), this paper underscores the integrative role of cultural practices in sustaining divides. Taken together, the analysis shows that socio-cultural conflict is a multifaceted phenomenon requiring policy, communication, and cultural approaches to resolution.

In conclusion, this paper revisited the initial claim that U.S. politics are shaped as much by cultural identity and symbolic practices as by policy disagreements. The analysis confirms that the socio-cultural divide between Democrats and Republicans continues to widen, driven by foreign policy stances, identity politics, media narratives, symbolism (sports), ideology, and the politics of language. Returning to the research questions, the authors found that political parties actively deploy cultural and symbolic narratives to reinforce in-group/out-group distinctions, and that arenas such as media and sports amplify these divides. Addressing these issues will require a paradigm shift in U.S. politics. Thus, as suggested by Ross (2007), Hofstede et al. (2010), and Restad (2020), polarized societies should be examined from a multicausality and cultural analysis lens. By acknowledging both shared and divergent narratives, political leaders and community members may better foster dialogue and reduce partisan conflict.

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