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## Transcript

# Political Polarization in the US

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### **Xenia Dormandy:**

If I can call us all to order, thank you all very much for joining us today. Let me start by introducing myself. My name is Xenia Dormandy, I run the US programme here at Chatham House, and I'm acting dean of the Academy here at Chatham House, which if you haven't heard about, go and look on our website. Today's event is on the record, so not under the Chatham House rule. We're extraordinarily lucky to have with us Joe Klein.

Joe is the political columnist at *TIME* magazine, although he spent the last few months, fortunately for us, at Oxford as a visiting fellow, so we've been lucky enough to pull him in now and again. In 2004 he won the National Headliner Award for best magazine column. Before his time at *TIME*, if we can say that, he wrote the Letter from Washington column from *The New Yorker*, and he's the author of six books, of which for me the most memorable, and I clearly remember reading it, was *Primary Colors* in 2006, which I'm sure many of you have read, but many others besides. And sadly, Joe is leaving us shortly to go back to the US and cover the midterm elections coming up later this year in the United States, and I'm sure we can get him to talk a little bit about that.

As an on the record session, you can tweet to your heart's content. The Twitter hashtag is #CHEvents, and just before we get started, perhaps I can ask you, if you haven't already, can you please put your phones on silent or turn them off. They can be quite disruptive to the systems that we have here, and certainly to our speaker. With that I will do no further talking. We're very lucky to have Joe with us. He's going to talk for about 20 minutes, and then we're just going to open up for a discussion around the room. So thank you, Joe.

### **Joe Klein:**

Great, thank you Xenia. It's really a pleasure to be here, it's been a pleasure to be in England. We have many friends here, my wife and I do, and we also have really enjoyed the weather. As native New Yorkers, I'm telling you, this was not a winter. But I'd like to begin, and I am going to keep this brief, because the value in this for me is to hear your questions. Last September I was invited by Paul Volcker, the former head of the Federal Reserve in the United States, one of the most respected economic figures in the country, to a conference in Salzburg, Austria. That was under Chatham House rule, so it

was an off the record conference, and Volcker essentially wanted advice from a group of us about what to do with the rest of his career.

He was forming a foundation and wanted to know what he should focus on. And a great deal of it had, of the advice he got, and a great many of the talks that we heard had to do with polarization of the American electorate. And there was one very striking one, by a representative from the Pew Foundation, which does some of the best, most accurate and most comprehensive polling in the States, and since this data is on the record I could tell you about it. Alan Murray, who is the director of the Pew Foundation, former *Wall Street Journal* columnist, had two slides. One was the political attitudes of the American people, and it was a standard bell curve. It was a little bit on the left, an awful lot in the middle, and then a somewhat larger tail, maybe 15, 20 per cent on the right. Then he put a slide over it, which was attitudes of elected officials in Washington. And it was an inverse bell curve, with a larger group on the left, a very tiny group in the middle, and a large group on the right.

And so the most important thing that you should know is that the partisanship that you hear so much about in the States is a dysfunction. It is a disconnect between the American people, their politicians and, hate to say it, their media. This has been coming on for about 50 years. It is a, Nelson Polsby, the brilliant late political science professor at Berkeley, once said that the problem with America is that political science professors got their fondest wish, which was ideologically coherent political parties. Up until the 1970s, the parties were coalitions. The Democrats included southern Democrats and northern big city machines, the Republicans included north eastern liberals and main street Republicans from the Midwest, and so people had to talk to each other.

In the 1960s, and with the advent of computers, what we call gerrymandering, which is the drawing of district lines, became far more of a science and, to a certain extent, a scam. One of the things that liberals in America don't like to talk about is that the Voting Rights Act of 1965, which is one of our proudest achievements, also had in it a provision for majority, minority, congressional districts, especially in the south. And so you'd get a situation like Georgia in 1990 where the legislature turned Republican at that point and the state legislature redrew the district boundaries. Up until that point there had been, I think, seven Democrats, four Republicans. After that, there were seven Republicans and four Democrats; all the Republicans were white, all the Democrats were African American. The members of congress who were white or who had mixed districts, or who had to appeal to people of different

points of view, were eliminated, and that has happened very gradually in the States.

There are the beginnings of an outcropping of a reaction to that now. Thank god for Arnold Schwarzenegger. In California, redistricting has been taken out of the hands of politicians and put in the hands of a non-partisan, or bi-partisan commission. And that's one of the things I'm going to be looking at more closely this year in 2014, is the nature of the congressional delegation from California once this election is over. But in any case, since the mid-1960s, and with greater intensity as time has gone on, the extremists in both parties have held the whip hand. That's in part because those with the strongest views tend to turn out in primary elections, more so than other people do. It's also because those with the strongest views contribute the most money for television ads, which became very important over the last 50 years. And they came to dominate the congress.

There are also traditional reasons. For example, I mean our senate especially is tilted heavily towards the agrarian population which now represents two percent of the American population. For example, there are more people in Manhattan and Brooklyn than there are in North Dakota, South Dakota, Wyoming and Montana combined, and those four states have eight senators and we New Yorkers have two, and I think like six or seven of them are Republicans. The other thing that helped to heighten the partisanship in the States was desperation on the part of the media. When I was a kid, we had three TV networks and at 6:30 at night, you had a choice between the ABC, NBC, or CBS news. We also had three flavours of ice cream at that point. Now we have 1,000 channels of gobbledygook and you have to fight, if you're a news programme you have to fight for audience, and that has led to the same phenomenon you see in the primaries.

You have a left wing cable network, MSNBC, you have a right wing cable network, Fox News, you have the centrist cable network, CNN, where over the last few years viewership has just been plummeting, in part because CNN is an incredibly vapid operation, especially one of the things I really love about being here is watching the news and also when I'm back home watching the BBC World Service. And I would also thank you as a journalist for BBC Persia. I was in Iran during the 2009 elections and, after having spent a day being chased through the streets by the religious police, I went to a friend's house in north Tehran and the only place that you could get accurate coverage of what happened during the day was BBC Persia, so thanks for that.

But the media desperation was a consequence of something else that I think is the most important thing of all and the toughest to deal with. And I named a character in *Primary Colors* after it, Orlando Ozio, the governor of New York. I made him the governor of New York because the then governor of New York, Mario Cuomo, was Italian and he would know what ozio means. Machiavelli said that ozio is the greatest enemy of a republic. Ozio is indolence. And what Machiavelli was concerned about was how you keep a republic coherent when it's not at war. And we have had in the States, and I would imagine here as well, the greatest experiment in ozio in human history since the end of World War II. Non-stop prosperity, up until recently, no existential threats to our security except for the Cold War, which was a distant abstraction, it was unimaginable that we would actually ever launch on each other, and, as a consequence of that, the news and citizenship took a backseat to having a great time in the eternal sunshine of American life.

Politics was a distant, tiny little cloud on the horizon, and there were elections that I covered, like 1988, where I could understand people not bothering to come out and vote because the choices were both sane moderate sports, Michael Dukakis and George HW Bush. And there really wasn't much of a choice on offer. The consequence is that during that time, the media have become far more sensationalist, especially the TV media, and they've become far more atomized, because of the new technology, and most people don't have a mediating force to tell you when one side or the other is blowing smoke. Much of the debate over the Affordable Care Act, Obamacare, was driven by untruths, things that weren't even in the bill, like death panels, famously introduced by that noted intellectual Sarah Palin, that were going to determine who lived and who died. Those weren't in the bill. But it has become increasingly difficult to have a serious, proper, detailed conversation about policy in the United States, about almost anything, because people aren't interested, and because the issues have become increasingly so technical and complicated.

So during that time, the media oversimplified, as I said, but we also lost the habits of citizenship. And it seems to me that we're going to have to figure out how to build citizens again. Citizenship, in my mind, isn't just residency. It's a more active thing. I'm completing a book now about the US military and about this generation of veterans, and it occurred to me, if you look at the political spectrum not as a left right axis but a libertarian, communitarian axis, we have slid drastically towards libertarianism over the past 60 years, during my lifetime. And the last, the military turns out to be the last, and the veterans by the way, turn out to be the last communitarian tribe where they value being

part of something larger than themselves, where they feel that they have a duty to others in their community, where they feel that they have a duty to the larger community. They feel that they have a duty to be informed.

This was especially true in Iraq and Afghanistan, where our military for the first time did the things that your military did during the colonial era, which was to govern towns. This generation of military are all volunteers, and a great many of them volunteered on 12 September 2001. And so they're coming back with a sense of idealism and a desire to do public service. And it occurred to me in the course of covering those wars and embedding with those troops that the values they embodied, and sadly I mean both wars I thought were ridiculous, and in fact I thought the war in Iraq was obscene and almost every high ranking member of the US uniform military agreed with me. But I think that even though the wars were disastrous for the United States, and for the region in so many ways, the example of those troops are something that I've been able to take with me, and to think about as we try to transcend the partisanship which to my mind has been largely a function of the diminution of citizenship and the lack of interest in the complicated public issues that are before us.

So we're going to find out a lot this year about this. This is where I'll close. I'm going to go home in three weeks and start travelling through the south, where the tea party is put up a range of candidates challenging establishment conservative Republicans. We'll see how they do. From what I'm sensing back in the States is that the tide may have crested and it's going to begin to fall off. On the Democratic side, Democrats are very smug because they believe that the demographics will favour them into the future as more and more, as the United States becomes a majority minority country, which I think is very short sighted. And it also assumes that the Republican party will remain as absolutely stupid as it's been in recent history. But for now we're looking at a congress that will have one or maybe two houses that are Republican, and we're looking at a presidential system where the favourites, where the balance will tilt toward the Democrats for the foreseeable future. And with that, I'll be happy to take any of your questions and tell you why what I just said won't be true.

### **Xenia Dormandy:**

Joe, thank you very much indeed. You've put out a lot of interesting kind of causal arguments as to what's causing, how the, what is apparent to everybody, I think, an increasing partisanship in the United States and all

sorts of evidence that supports this. But what's causing it? I noticed that you didn't actually give us terribly many solutions to it, and I'm hoping somebody's going to ask, and if they don't then I will take the liberty of asking myself.

**Joe Klein:**

There is only one. There is only one, citizenship. There's no shortcut here. Everybody, I mean you could do what Schwarzenegger did in California, and I hope more states do that, but ultimately you can't have a democracy without citizens. We've been trying to do that.

**Xenia Dormandy:**

I will push you on that, but I am going to push you after I've taken some questions from the floor, and perhaps other people will push also.