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Why
We're
Polarized
Ezra
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What Didn't Happen

“I’ve spent part of nearly every day since November 8, 2016, wrestling with a single question,” writes Hillary Clinton in *What Happened*. “Why did I lose?”¹

What Happened is an unusual book. Published mere months after the 2016 presidential election, it is the defeated candidate’s effort to understand how she fell short. At its core is the belief that something extraordinary and bizarre occurred in 2016—an outcome beyond the boundaries of the normal give-and-take of American politics, an aberration that must be explained.

If Mitt Romney had won in 2012, Barack Obama would not have released a book entitled *What the Hell?* So, too, if John Kerry had swept to victory in 2004; George W. Bush would not be joined by millions in puzzling over the breach. In American politics, loss is part of life. Thrumming through Clinton’s book—and in the anguished flood of postelection commentary from liberals and never-Trumpers—is the belief that 2016 was not like 2012 or 2004. Reality had ruptured. We were owed answers.

To be fair, something strange had happened. Donald Trump won the election. There was a Maya Angelou quote that ricocheted

across social media during the 2016 election: “When someone shows you who they are, believe them.” Trump showed us who he was gleefully, constantly. He mocked John McCain for being captured in Vietnam and suggested Ted Cruz’s father had helped assassinate JFK; he bragged about the size of his penis and mused that his whole life had been motivated by greed; he made no mystery of his bigotry or sexism; he called himself a genius while retweeting conspiracy theories in caps lock.

Even Trump’s team didn’t believe he was going to win. Plans were afoot for him to start a television channel in the aftermath of his loss. And then came election night. He won the electoral college even though 61 percent of voters, in Election Day exit polls, said he was unqualified to hold the presidency; even though most voters had a higher opinion of Clinton and believed Trump lacked the temperament for the office he sought.² The US presidency is a sacred trust, its occupant the wielder of unimaginable destructive power, and here, we had handed it to a human hurricane. And we had done so knowingly, purposefully.

It is this affront that motivates *What Happened*. Clinton is trying to explain how Trump’s victory came to pass. She seeks exoneration, but the confusion is real. She is helped in this by the peculiar nature of Trump’s triumph. He lost the popular vote by millions of ballots, and his electoral college margin rested on a sliver of the population. As Clinton writes, “if just 40,000 people across Wisconsin, Michigan, and Pennsylvania had changed their minds,” she would have won.

With a margin that narrow—more than 136 million votes were cast in total—anything can explain the results. And that is where Clinton focuses her efforts, proving, convincingly, that everything from James Comey’s letter to Russia’s interference to deep-seated sexism could have, and probably did, account for the thin margin by which she lost.

But such analyses pose the easy question rather than the hard one. Rather than asking how Trump won, we should be asking how Trump was close enough to win. How did a candidate like Trump—a candidate who radiated contempt for the party he represented and unfitness for the job he sought—get within a few thousand votes of the presidency in the first place?

This was a question I posed in mid-2017 to Larry Bartels, a political scientist at Vanderbilt University. Over years of political reporting, I had come to value Bartels's unsentimental analysis of American politics. Speaking to him has the harrowing quality of feeding questions into a computer that doesn't care if you like the results. And as I poured out my theories of the election, he stared back with bemusement. After I had worn myself out, he replied in a way that has tormented me since: What if nothing unusual happened at all?

The premise of my questioning, Bartels calmly explained, was that the 2016 election was weird. And he was right, that was my premise. I had seen things happen in American politics that I would've rejected as laughable if they'd been on an episode of *House of Cards* and too dark to be funny if they'd been on *Veep*. And this wasn't a hysterical reaction unique to my anxious mind. Mine was a gentle version of the conventional wisdom. In the *New Yorker*, for instance, Adam Gopnik argued that Trump's victory offered support for the hypothesis that "we are living in a computer simulation and that something has recently gone haywire within it."³

But Bartels had been looking at the data and he disagreed. The 2016 election didn't look like a glitch, he said. It looked, for the most part, like every other election we've had recently. The simulation was, if anything, too stable, like we had unleashed tornadoes and meteors on our virtual city and only a few windows had shattered. It was the normalcy that was unnerving.

Take gender. Clinton was the first female candidate nominated by a major party for president. Trump was a male id in a suit, bragging about grabbing women by the pussy and offhandedly rating the sexual desirability of those who challenged him. This was, then, an election designed to split us more deeply by gender than any in recent history.

But turn to the exit polls. In 2004, the Republican candidate for president won 55 percent of men. In 2008, he won 48 percent of men. In 2012, 52 percent. And in 2016? Trump won 52 percent of men, precisely matching Romney's performance.

The story is similar among women. In 2004, the Republican won 48 percent of female voters. In 2008, he won 43 percent; in 2012, 44 percent. And in 2016? 41 percent. Lower, but only two percentage points beneath John McCain in 2008. No earthquake.

Let's look at it a different way. This was the white nationalism election, when the alt-right came into its own, when Trump promised to sweep in after the first black president in American history and put America back the way it was, to build a wall and make America great again. And yet, in 2004, the GOP candidate won 58 percent of white voters. In 2008, he won 55 percent of white voters. In 2012, he won 59 percent of white voters. Fast-forward to 2016: 57 percent.

Of course, there was no group Trump assailed more regularly than Hispanic immigrants. He launched his campaign by descending a golden escalator and proclaiming, "When Mexico sends its people, they're not sending their best. They're not sending you. . . . They're bringing drugs. They're bringing crime. They're rapists. And some, I assume, are good people." In 2004, the Republican candidate won 44 percent of Hispanic voters. In 2008, he won 31 percent. In 2012, 27 percent. And in 2016, 28 percent.

After the GOP's 2004 victory, the Republican Party's dominance was widely ascribed to Bush's deep, authentic bond with

white, born-again Christians, of whom 78 percent pulled the lever for his reelection. In 2008, the GOP candidate won 74 percent of these voters. In 2012, it was back up to 78 percent. But Trump was different. He was a morally louche adulterer who flaunted his wealth, and when asked, on the campaign trail, if he ever turned to God for forgiveness, he said, “I am not sure I have.” So how did he do among white, born-again voters? He won 80 percent.

Perhaps this is best viewed through the lens of partisanship. In 2016, Republicans nominated a thrice-married billionaire who had been a Democrat mere years before, who was dismissed in a *National Review* cover story as a threat to conservatism,⁴ who had few ties to the Republican Party and viewed its previous standard-bearers with contempt, who spoke openly about his affection for Social Security, Medicare, and Planned Parenthood. In 2004, the Republican candidate won 93 percent of self-identified Republicans. In 2008, he won 90 percent. In 2012, he won 93 percent. In 2016, he won 88 percent. A drop, to be sure, but nothing calamitous.

The popular vote margin is also telling. In 2004, the Republican candidate won by 3 million votes. In 2008, the Democrat won by more than 9 million votes. In 2012, the Democrat won by almost 5 million votes. And in 2016, the Democrat again won by almost 3 million votes. The intervention of the electoral college overturned this margin, of course, but if you’re just looking to the winds of popular support, 2016 isn’t an obvious aberration.

Here, then, is Bartels’s point: if you’d been given a printout of voter data from the past few elections and been asked to identify which campaign was the bizarre one, the one that would rock American politics and lead to book after book trying to explain the outcome, would you be able to do so? The results in 2016 mostly looked like 2012 and 2008 and 2004, even though the winning candidate is one of the most bizarre figures ever to crash into American politics.

What's surprising about the 2016 election results isn't what happened. It's what *didn't* happen. Trump didn't lose by 30 points or win by 20 points. Most people who voted chose the same party in 2016 that they'd chosen in 2012. That isn't to say there was nothing at all distinct or worthy of study. Crucially, white voters without college educations swung sharply toward Trump, and their overrepresentation in electorally key states won him the election.*⁵ But the campaign, by the numbers, was mostly a typical contest between a Republican and a Democrat.

The fact that voters ultimately treated Trump as if he were just another Republican speaks to the enormous weight party polarization now exerts on our politics—a weight so heavy that it can take an election as bizarre as 2016 and jam the result into the same grooves as Romney's contest with Obama or Bush's race against Kerry. We are so locked into our political identities that there is virtually no candidate, no information, no condition, that can force us to change our minds. We will justify almost anything or anyone so long as it helps our side, and the result is a politics devoid of guardrails, standards, persuasion, or accountability.

And yet, we have not changed so much, have we? We still coach Little League and care for our parents, we cry at romantic comedies and mow our lawns, we laugh at our eccentricities and apologize for harsh words, we want to be loved and wish for a better world. That is not to absolve us of responsibility for our politics, but to trace a lament oft heard when we step away from politics: Aren't we better than this?

* In an analysis published on Vox, political scientist and statistician Andrew Gelman and business and strategy professor Pierre-Antoine Kremp find that "per voter, whites have 16 percent more power than blacks once the Electoral College is taken into consideration, 28 percent more power than Latinos, and 57 percent more power than those who fall into the other category."

I think we are, or we can be. But toxic systems compromise good individuals with ease. They do so not by demanding we betray our values but by enlisting our values such that we betray each other. What is rational and even moral for us to do individually becomes destructive when done collectively.

How American politics became a toxic system, why we participate in it, and what it means for our future is the subject of this book.

Thinking in systems

Let me be clear from the beginning: This is not a book about people. This is a book about systems.

The story of American politics is typically told through the stories of individual political actors. We focus on their genius, their hubris, their decency, their deceit. We take you inside their feuds, their thoughts, the *bons mots* they deliver in private meetings and the agonies they quietly confide to friends. We locate the hinge moments of history in the decisions they make. And, in doing so, we suggest they could have made other decisions, or that other people, in their place, would have made different decisions. This assumption has the grace of truth, but not as much truth as we think, not as much truth as the breathless insider accounts of White House meetings and campaign machinations would have us believe.

As a journalist, I have studied American politics for the better part of twenty years. I have tried to understand it from the perspective of politicians, activists, political scientists, donors, voters, nonvoters, staffers, pundits—anyone who is affected by it or who is affecting it. In the course of that reporting, I have come across

political actors who strike me as cynics, fools, and villains. They are the broken parts of American politics, and it is tempting to blame our problems on their low morals or poor judgment. Indeed, we do exactly that in election years, when our dissatisfaction with the way the system is working leads us to fire some of the people and hire other people, and then a few years later, we find the system still broken, and we do it again, and again, and again.

As I have watched one election's heroes turn into the next election's scoundrels, as I have listened to rational people give me thoughtful reasons for doing ridiculous things, I have lost faith in these stories. We collapse systemic problems into personalized narratives, and when we do, we cloud our understanding of American politics and confuse our theories of repair. We try to fix the system by changing the people who run it, only to find that they become part of the system, too. I knew Republicans who, though they voted for McCain, were hopeful about Obama—only to discover he was just another Democrat. I knew Democrats who were glad Trump was going to remake the Republican Party along populist lines, only to be bitterly disappointed when he signed on to almost everything the congressional GOP wanted.

Every few years, a new crop of politicians emerges promising to put country over party, to govern on behalf of the people rather than the powerful, to listen to the better angels of our nature rather than the howling of our factions. And then the clock ticks forward, the insurgents become the establishment, public disillusionment sets in, the electorate swings a bit to the other side, and we start again. This cycle is a tributary feeding into the country's political rage—it is maddening to keep trying to fix a problem that only seems to get worse.

My intention in this book is to zoom out from the individuals to better see interlocking systems that surround them. I will use specific politicians as examples, but only insofar as they are

marionettes of broader forces. What I seek isn't a story but a blueprint, a map to the machine that shapes political decisions.

This is a mode of analysis common to other fields but often ignored in my own. In his book *Drift into Failure: From Hunting Broken Components to Understanding Complex Systems*, Sidney Dekker, founder of the Safety Science Innovation Lab at Australia's Griffith University, distinguishes between two different ways of diagnosing why a system is failing. The most traditional, and the most common, approach is we see a problem, hunt for the broken part, and try to replace it. Dekker studies accidents, so his examples are plane crashes and oil spills, where catastrophe is followed by an obsessive search for the nut that proved defective, the maintenance check that got missed, the wing flap that cracked in the cold. But much political analysis follows this model, too. American politics is broken, and the problem is money, political correctness, social media, political consultants, or Mitch McConnell. Fix the part, these analyses promise, and you fix the whole.

The reality, Dekker says, is that complex systems often fail the public even as they're succeeding by their own logic. If you discover the screw that failed or the maintenance shift that was missed, you might think you've found the broken part. But if you miss the way the stock market was rewarding the company for cutting costs on maintenance, you've missed the cause of the crisis, and failed to prevent its recurrence. Systems thinking, he writes, "is about understanding how accidents can happen when no parts are broken, or no parts are seen as broken."⁶

That may not sound like American politics to you. It is, at this point, cliché to call it broken. But that is our mistake. The American political system—which includes everyone from voters to journalists to the president—is full of rational actors making rational decisions given the incentives they face. We are a collection of functional parts whose efforts combine into a dysfunctional whole.

That the worst actors are so often draped in success doesn't prove the system is broken; it proves that they understand the ways in which it truly works. That is knowledge the rest of us need, if we are to change it. This quote from Dekker describes much of what I have seen and much of how I intend to approach this investigation:

In stories of drift into failure, organizations fail precisely because they are doing well—on a narrow range of performance criteria, that is—the ones that they get rewarded on in their current political or economic or commercial configuration. In the drift into failure, accidents can happen without anything breaking, without anybody erring, without anybody violating the rules they consider relevant.

I am sensitive to these incentives because I live them. I am not outside the system looking in but inside the system looking out. I am a journalist, a pundit, and a cofounder of Vox, the explanatory news publication. I am a member of the political media, and I know that for all that we try to hide it, we are political actors, and the decisions we make are both cause and consequences of the broader forces that surround us. I am a voter, a news junkie, and a liberal. I am motivated in part by the radicalizing realization that I am often carrying out the biddings of a system I dislike, by the frustration that overcomes me when I realize I am acting more like American politics than like myself.

And I am not alone. I spend my days interviewing participants in the American political system, smart people doing their best, puzzling over the vast dysfunction that surrounds them and explaining away their own contributions to it. My background is in policy reporting, and over years of covering different issues, I have seen the same pattern play out again and again. Whatever the problem, it begins with meetings in which experts of all different

perspectives sit together on panels and discuss the many ways it can be solved. At this point, there is always a large zone of agreement, a belief that a compromise can be reached that will leave everyone better off compared to the status quo. But as the process wears on, as the politicians focus their attention and the media focuses its coverage, agreement dissolves. What once struck participants as reasonable compromises become unreasonable demands. What was once a positive-sum negotiation becomes a zero-sum war. And everyone involved believes every decision they made along the way was reasonable. Usually, from their perspective, they are right.

As such, I have found that American politics is best understood by braiding two forms of knowledge that are often left separate: the direct, on-the-ground insights shared by politicians, activists, government officials, and other subjects of my reporting, and the more systemic analyses conducted by political scientists, sociologists, historians, and others with the time, methods, and expertise to study American politics at scale. On their own, political actors often ignore the incentives shaping their decisions and academic researchers miss the human motivations that drive political decision-making. Together, however, they shine bright light on how and why American politics works the way it does.

There is much awry in American politics, and I won't, in this book, attempt to catalog all of it. But I've come to believe the master story—the one that drives almost all divides and most fundamentally shapes the behavior of participants—is the logic of polarization. That logic, put simply, is this: to appeal to a more polarized public, political institutions and political actors behave in more polarized ways. As political institutions and actors become more polarized, they further polarize the public. This sets off a feedback cycle: to appeal to a yet more polarized public, institutions must polarize further; when faced with yet more polarized institutions, the public polarizes further, and so on.

Understanding that we exist in relationship with our political institutions, that they are changed by us and we are changed by them, is the key to this story. We don't just use politics for our own ends. Politics uses us for its own ends.

Rescuing “identity politics”

There are many different types of polarization possible, and I'll discuss some of them later in the book. But the locus of polarization I will focus on is political identity. And that requires saying a few words about a term that should be very useful in American politics but that has become almost useless: identity politics.

A core argument of this book is that everyone engaged in American politics is engaged in identity politics. This is not an insult, and it's not controversial: we form and fold identities constantly, naturally. Identity is present in politics in the way gravity, evolution, or cognition is present in politics; that is to say, it is omnipresent in politics, because it is omnipresent in us. There is no way to read the literature on how humans form and protect their personal and group identities—literature I will survey in this book—and believe any of us is immune. It runs so deep in our psyches, is activated so easily by even weak cues and distant threats, that it is impossible to speak seriously about how we engage with one another without discussing how our identities shape that engagement.

Unfortunately, the term “identity politics” has been weaponized. It is most often used by speakers to describe politics as practiced by members of historically marginalized groups. If you're black and you're worried about police brutality, that's

identity politics. If you're a woman and you're worried about the male-female pay gap, that's identity politics. But if you're a rural gun owner decrying universal background checks as tyranny, or a billionaire CEO complaining that high tax rates demonize success, or a Christian insisting on Nativity scenes in public squares—well, that's just good, old-fashioned politics. With a quick sleight of hand, identity becomes something that only marginalized groups have.

The term “identity politics,” in this usage, obscures rather than illuminates; it's used to diminish and discredit the concerns of weaker groups by making them look like self-interested, special pleading in order to clear the agenda for the concerns of stronger groups, which are framed as more rational, proper topics for political debate. But in wielding identity as a blade, we have lost it as a lens, blinding ourselves in a bid for political advantage. We are left searching in vain for what we refuse to allow ourselves to see.*⁷

All politics is influenced by identity. Those identities are most powerful when they are so pervasive as to be either invisible or

* In her book *How We Get Free*, Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor traces the first usage of the term “identity politics” to the Combahee River Collective's 1977 statement of principles, which read:

This focusing upon our own oppression is embodied in the concept of identity politics. We believe that the most profound and potentially most radical politics come directly out of our own identity, as opposed to working to end somebody else's oppression. In the case of Black women this is a particularly repugnant, dangerous, threatening, and therefore revolutionary concept because it is obvious from looking at all the political movements that have preceded us that anyone is more worthy of liberation than ourselves. We reject pedestals, queenhood, and walking ten paces behind. To be recognized as human, levelly human, is enough.

As Barbara Smith, one of the founding members of the collective, tells Taylor, “What we were saying is that we have a right as people who are not just female, who are not solely Black, who are not just lesbians, who are not just working class, or workers—that we are people who embody all of these identities, and we have a right to build and define political theory and practice based upon that reality.”

uncontroversial. “American” is an identity. So, too, is “Christian.” When politicians, including the irreligious, end speeches with “God bless America,” it is not because they are making an appeal to a higher power, but because they are making an appeal to our bedrock identities. If you don’t believe me, ask yourself why there are so few open atheists or even agnostics in national politics.

This does not mean that politics is an equation solved by locating identity. Identity shapes our worldview, but it does not mechanistically decide it. And while we often speak of identity as a singular, it is always a dizzying plural—we have countless identities, some of them in active conflict with each other, others lying dormant until activated by threat or fortune. Much that happens in political campaigns is best understood as a struggle over which identities voters will inhabit come Election Day: Will they feel like workers exploited by their bosses, or heartlanders dismissed by coastal elites? Will they vote as patriotic traditionalists offended by NFL players who kneel during the national anthem, or as parents worried about the climate their children will inhabit?

What we are often fighting over in American politics is group identity and status—fights that express themselves in debates over policy and power but cannot be truly reconciled by either. Health policy is positive-sum, but identity conflict is zero-sum.

Identity, of course, is nothing new. So how can it explain the changes in our politics? The answer is that our political identities are changing—and strengthening. The most powerful identities in modern politics are our political identities, which have come, in recent decades, to encompass and amplify a range of other central identities as well. Over the past fifty years, our partisan identities have merged with our racial, religious, geographic, ideological, and cultural identities. Those merged identities have attained a weight that is breaking our institutions and tearing

at the bonds that hold this country together. This is the form of identity politics most prevalent in our country, and most in need of interrogation.

The first part of this book will tell the story of how and why American politics polarized around identity in the twentieth century and what that polarization did to the way we see the world and each other. The second half of the book is about the feedback loops between polarized political identities and polarized political institutions that are driving our political system toward crisis.

What I am trying to develop here isn't so much an answer for the problems of American politics as a framework for understanding them. If I've done my job well, this book will offer a model that helps make sense of an era in American politics that can seem senseless.

Let's get started.