

Los Angeles Times Magazine

Over the Hedge

Belshire Way is like a lot of streets in suburban Orange County, except for one quirky fact: It's equally divided between Democrats and Republicans.

By Shawn Hubler

Shawn Hubler is a senior writer for West.

June 4, 2006

Belshire Way is a street in a subdivision in Orange County. ("Close to Irvine Spectrum!" the real estate ads say. "Open floor plans!") Drive by, and the view is of 14 one- and two-story tract houses. Some have red tile roofs. Some have pools in the backyards. Some get notices from the homeowners' association about garbage-can visibility and unsanctioned tetherball pole setups. In other words, it could be any suburban street in America but for something invisible from the curbside: For years, Belshire Way has been a cul-de-sac divided—exactly divided—between Democrats and Republicans.

Eleven apiece. That's how many voters on that one Lake Forest street were registered, as of this spring, with the two major political parties, along with an American Independent and five others who declined to state a partisan preference. Nationally, such "political integration," as it is called, is thought to be declining. Analyses of voting patterns over the last few decades have shown electoral districts increasingly dominated by one party or the other. Part of it is gerrymandering. Another part, though, appears to be obvious: Liberals and conservatives are becoming less and less likely to live side by side.

Who can blame them? On the Internet, on cable TV, on talk radio, on the nation's op-ed pages, polarization dominates the national discourse. Compromise and civility are as passé as Walter Cronkite. It's O'Reilly versus Franken, Drudge versus Kos, Rove versus Wilson, McCarthyites versus moonbats. We are a nation divided—nearly exactly divided. Or so we are told.

Which is why, with the 2006 primaries set for this week and the 2008 presidential race shaping up as a fight for the middle, it seemed instructive to visit one of those spots where the two sides still have to look across the hedge at each other, interact with each other. What has the intense political polarization of the last few years done to ordinary life in a place such as Belshire Way? Has anybody blinked? Has everybody stopped speaking? Have all but the apathetic moved to more like-minded quarters? Or has the great divide been worn down by proximity?

The answers, as it turns out, range from the sad to the surprising, from the confused to the subtly comic. But to the extent that one neighborhood can reflect any society, the people of Belshire Way suggest that there is a profound divide—not so much between voters but between the cul-de-sac and the Beltway, between average, fed-up Americans and the professional partisans and pundits who frame the dialogue and whip up political bases and see no harm in insisting that everybody, right down to you and your neighbor, pledge allegiance to somebody's side.

"The first couple of times I went to vote here," Kathleen Frankeny confessed, laughing, "I felt like the only registered Democrat."

Frankeny is 46, a blond, freckle-faced sales representative with a smile like Doris Day's and a chatty, welcoming manner. On the hot summer morning when I first knocked on her door—the one toward the back of the cul-de-sac with the patriotic little American Spirit wreath on it—she and her husband, Dave, also 46, were doing chores with their two teenage sons in their ample backyard.

Sun glinted off the swimming pool; a barbecue sat in one verdant corner. The Frankenys, raised in the Los Angeles suburbs, moved here 13 years ago for the proximity to their jobs and the excellent public schools. Over time, they have become friendly and, in some cases, friends with their neighbors. When Frankeny was diagnosed with early-stage breast cancer this year, nearly everyone on the block, regardless of party affiliation, rallied around with cards and casseroles and offers to drive her to doctor appointments. When one of the Republicans on the block—a 78-year-old man much beloved by his neighbors—died recently, it was Frankeny who sadly informed me.

But her assumption, at least at first, was that she had settled in hostile territory for someone of her political persuasion. One neighbor, long since gone, had been up in arms for months about same-sex marriage, she remembered. Another, a few streets over, "was just obsessed" with the Clinton-Lewinsky scandal.

"A lot of people around here belong to the Saddleback Church," Frankeny noted, referring to the 20,000-plus-member evangelical ministry on El Toro Road, where the Rev. Rick Warren, author of "The Purpose Driven Life," is the pastor. That, she said, "isn't a bad thing at all—but it's not my thing."

Though the famed Lake Forest church is known mostly for its mass community-service campaigns and its lack of formality—people wear shorts to services, and the goateed Warren hangs out with Bono and recently organized a massive campaign to fight poverty and AIDS in Africa—its tenets are uncompromisingly Southern Baptist, and Warren made no secret of his personal support for Bush in 2004.

Most people in the area voted that way as well. Though Republicans now hold only a plurality—48%—of the electorate in Orange County, the county voted by a 3-2 margin for Bush in the last election. At the high school that Frankeny's 16-year-old attends, a kid's car got keyed for displaying a John Kerry bumper sticker. After her first couple of elections, she said, she took to voting by absentee ballot in part because it made her feel less politically conspicuous.

Most of Belshire Way's Democrats told me that they've kept their profiles lower than ever with the ascendance of the Bush administration and the evangelical Christians who are now such a powerful part of the Republican base. But "don't-ask-don't-tell" has its disadvantages as a strategy for fitting in. Despite everyone's best efforts, the tension between liberal and conservative dogma can seem an everyday undercurrent, and if Belshire Way wasn't exactly at war when I visited, it didn't feel entirely at peace either.

The cul-de-sac liberals who didn't belong to Saddleback Church (one called it "a minor cult") said they were annoyed and oppressed by the little "40 Days of Purpose" placards that went up around the neighborhood during the congregation's campaigns to encourage public service.

Meanwhile, a conservative couple talked to me about the cognitive dissonance of learning last year that some friends down the street—people they'd entertained over the years on many occasions—were liberal Democrats who despised the president for whom they had voted. "I was

just so surprised," the wife said in a shocked tone. "I mean, they're so nice. I figured they were Republicans."

Each group felt slightly snubbed by the other.

"It's like there's a dotted line and people don't really cross it," explained Paul Shanahan, another Democrat who lives two houses down from the Frankenys. He and his wife, Anne, are 49, and have one son, who is 11. Paul has a small business replacing window and door screens; Anne does decorative house painting.

They, too, moved to the neighborhood for the big lots and good schools. She, too, was doing chores when I first visited their home, which she had repainted herself with sage green in the living room and a trompe l'oeil mural in one hallway. ("Laundry Again!" she'd painted in big black calligraphy over the washer and dryer.) It was Labor Day weekend and her television was tuned to CNN's coverage of Hurricane Katrina.

"I'd like to know how the Republicans are supporting President Bush's quick response to those people down South," she wisecracked, her smile dimpling as she leaned into my tape recorder. "Hey, Mister President, don't do me any favors if I ever get into a dilemma. We're hatin' Bush even more. Did you get that? WE'RE HATIN' BUSH EVEN MORE!"

Then she caught herself and, laughing, acknowledged that this was something she probably wouldn't say to most of her neighbors. Her concern, in particular, was the influence in Orange County of the religious right. Both Shanahans expressed that the injection of religion into politics had made garden-variety philosophical differences so personal and morally loaded that one wrong word might cost them—or their little boy—a friendship.

"I'm a John Lennon fan," Paul said. "'Imagine there's no countries, no religion.' But with a lot of people, you can't get past a certain point unless you share a certain belief with them."

In the Orange County neighborhood where they used to live, Anne said, her son had made friends with a child whose parents were conservative Christians. "One day the mother and I talked about religion, and I told her I used to be Roman Catholic," she said. "The next time I called to arrange a play date, she pretty much told me that, to avoid any more discomfort for her, it would be best if they didn't get together because she was a reborn Christian and I wasn't. And I thought, 'Wow.'"

She said she wants to assume that that experience was an aberration, and that the culture wars people talk about on the news shows are as disconnected from her life as most political rhetoric.

Still, all politics are local. One afternoon she said she had seen a group of Saddleback Church kids head off to swim together. Some knew her son from school, but he wasn't invited. She hated to stereotype, she said, but she couldn't help but wonder: Why was her son so rarely invited to play by the Christian families? Was he left out because she and her husband had the "wrong" political and religious leanings?

"There they all went with their towels," she said. "It doesn't matter how hard we try to let them know we're fun people too. It doesn't seem to work."

The Democrats on Belshire Way aren't the only ones who, at times, imagine themselves outnumbered.

"Like at the coffees," said Holly Williams, a 45-year-old Republican marketing consultant. "There are coffees sometimes with some of the mothers on this street, and the people who go are

primarily Democrats." The mother of three sons, she was unloading In-N-Out burgers in her kitchen between baseball games on the weekend we met.

The Williamses are part of the Saddleback Church contingent; they've heard some non-church-members' rumblings, and chalk them up to a lack of information. "I think people like to talk about what they think it is, but they've never been there and don't know," Williams said. "People there are just searching for a more meaningful life."

The Williamses were among at least four families on Belshire Way (two from each party) who had checked out the church at some point. But, they said, they don't spend as much time socializing on the block as some of their neighbors; their family life mostly revolves around their kids' soccer, baseball and water-polo playmates who don't live on Belshire Way. And their politics are at the conservative end of the block's spectrum.

Williams' husband, Don, 50, a vice president with a commercial real-estate lending company, said he stopped reading most major newspapers two years ago because he felt they had a liberal agenda. He now gets most of his information from Fox News and conservative weblogs such as Town Hall and Little Green Footballs. "I'd probably rather get my news from someone who thinks the same as I do," he told me.

Williams said he was baffled that so many Democrats dislike President Bush "to the point of where they literally think the man is evil for some reason." He himself reserves such sentiments for the threat of terrorism. Regarding the U.S. involvement in Iraq, he said: "You have to ask yourself the question, 'Do you believe the people we're fighting are evil?' And I do."

Just like Anne Shanahan and Kathleen Frankeny, the Williamses said they watch what they utter in public and worry that their opinions might hurt their relationships with their neighbors. Holly Williams said the mothers' weekly coffee klatches are "just a Friday morning kind of thing, but I learned early on that there are certain topics that, well, you just don't go there, because I really like the women.

"Like during the whole Gore-Bush thing [with the Florida recount that decided the 2000 presidential election], it was funny because someone started talking about it. And at that point, I wasn't sure. I remember thinking, 'I wonder how they feel,' and then somebody came out with, 'Oh my God, it's got to be Gore.' And, you know, I'm thinking, 'What? Nooo!'

"But instead I just sat back and said, 'Weelllll. . . .' And then you just kind of distance yourself. Or not distance yourself but say, 'OK, we're not going to go there.' Because you know your feelings are strong and obviously their feelings are strong too."

Don Williams follows the same instinct. Not that he minds talking about politics. In fact, he said, he was pleasantly surprised to learn that a locally prominent social conservative had moved into a house on the next street. But with most people, he felt it wasn't neighborly to bring up the subject.

He did sport a pro-Bush bumper sticker in 2004, he said, but only on the vintage Mustang he mostly keeps behind his garage door.

"At work, we'll go into the [office] kitchen for a cup of coffee and there'll be some news story on the TV, and I know who the Democrats are and they know who I am," Williams said. "And it's almost comical, the extent to which we don't bring it up. We just stay good friends and get along great. And some of that probably stems from the fact that we all just keep our mouths shut."

Avoiding political confrontations has, of course, long been an unwritten rule of being a good neighbor, and not just on Belshire Way. But many on the block felt that the hard feelings left from the last several elections had made that rule especially important. After all, they asked, who doesn't know by now what to think of the other side?

"Uptight," more than one Belshire Way Democrat responded when I asked what they thought of when the word "Republican" was mentioned.

"Hippie types," several Republicans shot back at the word "Democrat."

"Closed-minded."

"Thinking they're open-minded but they're not really open-minded."

"Staid."

"Stubborn."

"Anti pro-choice."

"Anti-business."

"Intrusive."

"Intrusive."

"Just out for themselves."

"Just wanting to give every penny away to social services."

But the more I probed, the more I discovered that there was a disconnect between what the two sides thought they should feel and what they actually did feel. On Belshire Way, the Democrats and Republicans knew they were supposed to despise each other but, somehow, they just . . . didn't. One reason: Close up, they were all far more moderate, far more thoughtful—and far more alike—than the partisan stereotypes let on. Plus, so many were so good at concealing their politics that no one could be entirely sure whom to hate.

For example, Chris and Tracy Ernst were pegged as full-on GOPers by neighbors of both parties after they moved in with their small children two years ago. Belshire Way's new kids were the block's only Gen-X couple, but they'd been sighted talking to the Williamses and attending Saddleback Church. Word traveled fast, and several Democrats confided to me that they'd love to get to know the Ernsts, but assumed they were probably not "conservative enough" or "Christian enough" for them.

As it happens, the Ernsts are "pretty liberal" Democratic transplants from Northern California.

"I'm probably not on the same page as the majority of people down here," Tracy, 36, said with a laugh as her husband, a 37-year-old events producer and sports commentator, tended to their three children. As the daughter of a public school teacher, she said, she disapproved strongly of Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger's educational policies, and when it came to Republican thinking, "I don't even talk about it because I don't have any room for understanding where they're coming from."

But politics was secondary, the Ernsts said, to developing a sense of community for their children. The Saddleback Church was the big family institution in town, so they tried it. Don Williams is their son's soccer coach and they liked him, so they occasionally hang out.

"We're not tremendously active politically," Chris said.

"And we're not arguers," added Tracy. "We can get along with whomever you put in front of us. We just want to, you know, have a good time."

The line between red and blue doesn't just run down Belshire Way; it cuts straight through several master bedrooms on the block.

In all, four couples on the street are in bipartisan marriages.

Sociologists say most couples marry within the same political party, but if four households out of 14 (or 29%) seems high, it isn't. A CNN/USA Today/Gallup poll taken just before the 2004 elections found that 74% of married couples would be voting for the same presidential candidate. The rest either disagreed, couldn't predict whom their spouse would vote for or said that only one spouse would be voting. In another Gallup Poll in which 1,000 unmarried Americans were surveyed for Match.com, the online dating service, 57% said they would be open to marrying someone with significantly different political views.

So how polarized can a street—or a nation—be when a substantial minority of the population has gone Arnold-and-Maria?

The answer, at least on Belshire Way, is that there isn't that much substantive distance between the bipartisan couples." About once a month, we agree to disagree," joked Democrat Sue Evans, a nurse whose husband, Pete, an appraiser, is a Republican. Their 19-year-old son, Brett, registered "decline to state" when he reached voting age.

Friendly and laid-back, the Evanses, both 49, are popular with the neighbors and have friends from both parties. Ditto for the Frankenys, who also have a mixed marriage. Dave Frankeny said he had been a registered Republican since he graduated from Occidental College and saw how much was being plucked from his paycheck for taxes.

But the couple also stressed that you can't tell a voter from his or her registration: Kathleen Frankeny said she'd been a Young Republican for a minute in college, and that her views on immigration and affirmative action had shifted to the right as she'd gotten older. Dave Frankeny confessed that his disapproval of entitlements had softened as he approached Social Security age, and that he hadn't voted for either major party candidate in the last election. His heart, he said, was with the Libertarian Party. "I just register Republican," he said, "because Libertarians will never be a majority."

Down the street in the Haygood household, party affiliation is also a mixed bag.

"We'll talk about stuff, but we don't have arguments," said Republican Patty Haygood, a 55-year-old legal secretary whose husband is a registered Democrat. Her partisanship, she said, doesn't run especially deep. Her inclination is to ask whether a candidate "is a good person, an honest person."

"He'll say things about how this one's a conservative, that one's a liberal, and I'll be kind of like, 'What does that mean again?'"

That actually isn't a bad question, according to the most recent surveys from the Pew Research Center for the People and the Press. In a 2005 report titled "Beyond Red vs. Blue," the Pew researchers found that, while America's political center appeared to shift rightward after the election, that picture was far more complex without the polarizing flashpoints of the Bush administration and the war in Iraq.

Environmentalism, immigration, welfare, taxes—on these and other issues, there were all sorts of strange bedfellows and fault lines, many of them within the two major parties. "Overall," the

report found, "there are many more shades to the American political landscape than just the red and blue dividing the Electoral College maps."

In California, this jumble has translated into another factor reflected on Belshire Way—the burgeoning trend toward registering to vote without choosing a political party at all.

One study, by the Public Policy Institute of California, found that "decline to state" voters have doubled statewide to about 18% of the electorate since 1990. Some are immigrants, some are young adults whose political identities are still forming. "I voted Republican in the last election," said Warren Chan, 20, a Belshire Way student home on break from UC San Diego. "But I registered 'declined to state' because I wasn't really sure if I had a political swing."

Many, however, just don't agree entirely with either major party.

"I never vote a ticket all the way down," said 58-year-old Donna Baker, who lives across the street from the Ernsts. Her views, she said, have for most of her life tilted conservative on some matters (she strongly supports a crackdown on illegal immigration, for instance), but she is no reflexive Bush backer ("That person they put in charge of FEMA should have had a background check").

Even among partisans, however, it quickly became clear that views line up less by ideology than by issue. On a striking number of topics, I realized, even those who imagined themselves to be far apart actually were reasonably close. One of the truest believers on the block described herself as "a tree-hugging Democrat, not a bleeding-heart Democrat." Translation: "I'm for the death penalty. Just don't be killing my trees." One of the most ardent, churchgoing Bush loyalists confessed that "you know, Roe vs. Wade isn't a live-or-die issue for me, I gotta be honest."

The Democrats on the block were as likely as the Republicans to complain about government inefficiency. Both groups (including the Saddleback Church members, who prior to the last election received a letter from the pastor listing five issues, including abortion and same-sex marriage, on which "God's Word is clear") said churches should stay out of the political arena. Nobody was for censorship. Nobody was against equal rights for women. No one wanted to entirely roll back legalized abortion. No one wanted to throw open the borders. No one wanted to reinstate the draft.

The war was a divider, but far less so as the months passed. The families on Belshire Way have nearly 30 children of draft age or younger among them, and by spring, a solid majority of the block, including at least four of the Republicans, wanted American troops withdrawn from Iraq. Donna Baker said she "nearly had a heart attack" after her youngest son recently tried—and failed—to join the U.S. Army. "I was so relieved," she said.

Similarly, on other hot button issues, including affirmative action and illegal immigration, opinions weren't so far from consensus. (Neither was wildly popular on the block, regardless of party.)

So is Belshire Way some sort of statistical quirk? Had I stumbled upon some weird locale where people occasionally mimic the divisive rhetoric they hear or read but, deep down, are a study in moderation?

As it turns out, they're not oddballs at all.

About half of Americans consistently describe themselves as "moderates" in surveys. The number of voters who refuse to align themselves with one of the two major parties increasingly seems greater than the registration in either. Depending on the survey, a little less than a third of

American adults now identify themselves as Republicans and only a slightly higher percentage consider themselves Democrats at the moment. The rest—about 34% if the poll numbers are averaged, but as high as 37% in the most recent Gallup Poll, which regularly tracks party affiliation—don't identify with either side.

Many political professionals believe that a substantial number of those independents will, if pressed, vote reliably for one side or the other. But the fact that they must be pressed may be a message in itself. A growing body of social science research has found the actual views of most Americans are converging toward the middle. One of the most provocative calls in the wake of the 2000 election has come from so-called radical centrist Ted Halstead, a former environmental activist and founder of the New America Foundation, who favors a platform drawing from a variety of ideologies (a strong military, for one, and universal health insurance that would make it easier for workers to change jobs and entrepreneurs to start new businesses).

"The activist cadres who are so polarizing are just not representative of the country at large," said Morris P. Fiorina, a senior fellow at the Hoover Institution and professor of political science at Stanford University. In his 2005 book, "Culture War? The Myth of a Polarized America," which he wrote with Samuel J. Abrams and Jeremy C. Pope, Fiorina mustered reams of national surveys to argue that "the hatreds and battles [of the political classes] are not shared by the great mass of the American people . . . who are for the most part moderate in their views and tolerant in their manner."

Fiorina's book, which among other things surveyed the national polling done around the 2000 and 2004 elections, found little or no statistical difference between red states and blue states on the vast majority of so-called culture war issues. Solid majorities in both places supported the death penalty and stricter gun control and felt gays shouldn't be discriminated against in the workplace.

People in the red states and the blue states were, in general, equally likely to feel favorably toward various religions, to believe that big companies have too much power, to put the environment ahead of jobs, to oppose hiring preferences for minorities—and, perhaps most impressively, to respect others' opinions. Even on the contentious subject of abortion, Fiorina found, the majority view nationwide has remained fairly stable for nearly two decades: It should remain legal, albeit with some restrictions.

Voters have seemed polarized, he says, not because they're ideologically estranged but because the partisans who frame the debate are. These political players and pundits—who rely on conflict to generate turnout and mouse clicks and viewers and listeners and readers—"talk to interest groups, to fundraisers, to activists, but they don't talk to normal people," said Fiorina. "There's so little contact between the political classes and the people they claim to represent."

On a Friday morning at the Sycamore Plaza Shopping Center in Lake Forest, I found about a dozen moms gathered for coffee at the local Starbucks café.

Here was Kathleen Frankeny, the blond Democrat mom in jeans, sunglasses and a black sweater. There came Holly Williams, the blond Republican mom in jeans, sunglasses and a pink jacket. Some, like Williams, were stopping by on the way to work; others, such as Frankeny, happened to have the day off. Everyone knew everyone. The women get together almost weekly, and they agreed to let me sit in on their klatch. Around the black metal patio table, they scooped their chairs to make room for each other.

"So do you have an agenda?" Williams asked me. "Or . . ."

The group cracked up.

"No! I didn't mean—" Williams said, her face reddening. She meant the sort of agenda that would guide a meeting, not a political agenda. But she is, after all, a conservative and I am, after all, with the supposedly liberal media and we weren't supposed to like each other. "I just meant, because I have to leave soon . . ."

No, she was assured. No agenda. Of either kind.

For the next hour or so, the conversation danced from topic to topic: Botox, tutoring, avian flu, a cinnamon cookie recipe, church services.

Someone teasingly asked Williams whether the inspirational quote on her Starbucks cup was culled from her pastor's bestseller, "The Purpose Driven Life."

"Well, it should be!" Williams gamely teased back.

Someone else explained that "they put inspirational quotes on the cups here . . . and quotes [from 'The Purpose Driven Life'] were submitted and it's been a little controversial."

"Well," Williams said with a smile, "but it's equal time . . ."

Then, almost instantly, the group switched subjects. No opinion—whatever the subject—was allowed to become too personal or too prickly.

At one point, someone made a reference to red and blue states and asked Williams which color she was.

"Which one's what?" she asked. "Look at me—I don't even know what color is what. Isn't that awful?"

"Reds are Republicans and blues are Democrats," the woman next to her, a Democrat who works as the local school crossing guard, told her.

"Oh. OK, yeah. Well, we're red. Blindingly red," she said, laughing, and the group laughed with her.

Then, as they quieted down, Frankeny remarked, a little wistfully: "Red. Blue. Like, how'd that happen? Ten years ago, we didn't describe each other that way."

I arrived at the last house on the cul-de-sac, the home of Paul and Caroline Ponte and their four daughters, shortly before Christmas. Caroline, 50, was hosting an ornament exchange party in their living room. A pile of lavishly wrapped Christmas ornaments filled a side table. Friends from the neighborhood and Caroline's old workplace nibbled homemade hors d'oeuvres and clinked wineglasses.

A quick look around the room revealed a mélange of party affiliations. Kathleen Frankeny was cracking up Paul's Democrat sister with a rendition of "Everybody Loves Somebody Sometime" as she opened an ornament shaped like Dean Martin. Sue Evans sat by the Christmas tree with her oldest girlfriend, a conservative Republican.

Ponte, 51, a tall general contractor with a salt-and-pepper mustache, is an exception on Belshire Way: Unlike his neighbors, he openly relishes a good, knockdown discussion about current events. In fact, he spent most of the party on the back patio with Frankeny's Republican husband, talking golf—and politics.

At least some of the reticence on his block, he suspected, comes from a feeling of helplessness among voters. "Face it," he said. "There's nothing we can do that is going to change what these people in Washington are going to do about Iraq or healthcare or No Child Left Behind, which in my opinion is a joke. So most people don't talk about it.

"In the end, for most people, it's more important at the grass-roots level to get along with your neighbor than to discuss" the issues of the day, he added, "unless you're so passionate as to be pathological."

But with the possible exception of engaging his brother-in-law—a conservative Republican with whom he says he stopped "jawboning" because it began to become too heated—Ponte, a committed Democrat, welcomes the chance to exchange views. He even sees such talk as a kind of civic duty. He has gone so far as to start listening to Rush Limbaugh, whom he views as a "fascinating manipulator of half-truths," just to better understand the continuing enmity of his Republican friends toward Bill Clinton and to counter the catchphrases he feels Limbaugh's listeners mindlessly parrot.

Once, he said, he spent most of a housewarming debating a real estate agent on the next block. The man had told him he had become a Republican after immigrating to this country because Republicans were "the people who work hard."

"This guy thought that if you're in business, you should be a Republican," said Ponte. "Then I told him I'm in business. He said, 'I was told all the Democrats work for the government.'"

Holly Fischer and Debra Greyn live next door to each other, mid-block on Belshire Way. Greyn's house has a big coral tree; Fischer's house has the tree shaped like the one in the children's book, "Go, Dog, Go!", where the dogs have a party. By all accounts, they hit it off soon after Greyn and her husband, a computer engineer, moved to the block six years ago from Silicon Valley. Both homemakers, both nature lovers, both mothers of three adolescent sons, they seemed to be the best of next-door neighbors.

"We were in and out of each other's houses on a daily basis," Greyn, a tall, outspoken woman with long, dark hair and exotic-looking Cleopatra bangs, remembered. Even their homes were the same model, the No. 4, with three bedrooms up and one down. "Coffees, drinks, dinners. Shopping on a daily basis for a couple of years."

Greyn is a 44-year-old Democrat with a Democratic husband. Fischer, 40, is an American Independent whose husband is a Republican from a conservative family. But for the two women, politics wasn't a tender topic until the 2003 invasion of Iraq. As Greyn recalls it, Fischer said something about "how exciting it was" and Greyn bristled. "I said something like, 'I don't consider this exciting.' And she said something like, 'Well, maybe that wasn't the right word. Interesting?' And I said, 'Sorry, I don't find it interesting either.'"

Greyn wasn't the only one on the block who opposed the Iraq war, but her politics were a degree more apparent than those of the other Democrats. The day we spoke, a mirror in her crowded home office was decorated with cartoons of Bush and Vice President Dick Cheney dressed as the Scarecrow and the Tin Man in "The Wizard of Oz."

"If I only had a brain," said the Bush caption. "If I only had a heart," said the Cheney caption. On another wall, she had posted a quote from Ben Franklin: "They that can give up essential liberty to obtain a little temporary safety deserve neither liberty nor safety." She once had to apologize to another close friend on the block, a Republican homemaker two doors down, after one of her sons had told the friend's little boy that "Republicans will kill anything for money."

"I'm not positive, but I'm pretty sure she couldn't handle my opinions," Greyn concluded of Fischer. "All I know is, after that happened, our friendship seemed to deteriorate."

Fischer, a soft-spoken woman whose hobby is rescuing abused greyhounds, had a dramatically different recollection. Not only did she not recall the conversation, she didn't remember talking about the war with anyone, including her husband. If she had seemed distant with her friend, she said, it wasn't intentional. At that time, she said, she was preoccupied with family obligations and had temporarily retreated from social involvements.

"I think she misunderstood," Fischer said. "My feelings never changed for her—other things were going on, though, and time just went by I guess." She did allow that Greyn was right on one count: "I'm not interested in talking about politics."

Others in Fischer's family do have strong opinions. At one point, she introduced her 16-year-old son, Elliott, a bright, dark-eyed boy who spoke with intensity about the war in Iraq (he's in favor), the media (he watches Fox) and taxes (he's studied the issue and advocates a conservative fiscal policy). But Fischer said she lacks her son's confidence when it comes to talking about political topics.

"I'm not an arguing person. I'm not a debating person. It's like somebody talking football to me."

On the afternoon I paid a visit, Fischer and Greyn stood side by side in their look-alike driveways and scarcely exchanged more than a nod of greeting. But over the weeks and months that ensued, the dynamic changed.

They bumped into each other on an evening walk and found themselves chatting again (but only about hair lasering and garden spiders). By January, they were carpooling.

"Come in, Debra!" Fischer called out when Greyn knocked one winter morning, interrupting our telephone conversation. By March, they were heading off to a gem show with another neighbor—Greyn's Republican friend.

In other words, the closest thing on the block to political polarization was being trumped by the desire for fellowship. ("Actually," Fischer confessed, "I had to finally ask Debra the other day, 'What's the actual definition of polarized?' ") "She's like a sister to me," said Greyn's Republican friend, Rhonda Lumsdaine, 50, who added that the cutting remark passed to her little boy, then 10, was no problem. "Anything each other needs, we're there for one another. So if she wants to spout off about politics, most of what she says doesn't bother me. That's what I love about America."

Of course, that's not the sort of sentiment likely to fill talk radio stations and cable talk shows and op-ed pages and political weblogs as the election season approaches, with its attendant claims that common ground—because it is so complex, so un-red and un-blue, so normal—no longer exists.

But then, as Debra Greyn put it the other day, while heading out to carpool for her Republican friends after expressing her disdain for the administration they'd put into the White House: "There's a helluva lot more to life than politics."

One Nation and How It Divides on a Sampling of Hot Button Issues

Politics by the numbers, from the book *Culture War? The Myth of A Polarized America* by Morris P. Fiorina, based on polling by the Pew Research Center for the People and the Press and the 2000 National Election Study

Churches should keep out of politics:

Red states 43% Blue states 46%

Environment over jobs:

Red states 42% Blue states 43%

Favor death penalty:

Red states 77% Blue states 70%

Blacks should get preferences in hiring:

Red states 14% Blue states 13%

Stricter gun control:

Red states 52% Blue states 64%

Make English official language:

Red states 66% Blue states 70%

Immigration should decrease:

Red states 43% Blue states 41%

Favor school vouchers:

Red states 54% Blue states 51%

Equal women's role:

Red states 82% Blue states 83%

Corporations make too much profit*:

Red states 43% Blue states 44%

Tolerate others' moral views:

Red states 62% Blue states 62%

*percent strongly supporting statement