Why cultural and political divides in the US seem to be getting worse

Segment 1:

Most families gather on Thanksgiving hoping that politics is not on the menu and this year is certainly no different. Amna Nawaz is back with a look at why cultural and political polarization seems to be getting worse in this country and what might be done to lower the temperature just a bit.

We're witnessing the newest evolution of the culture wars, a term first popularized 30 years ago in a book by James Davison Hunter. He's also the executive director of the Institute for Advanced Studies and Culture at the University of Virginia. And he joins me now. James Davison Hunter, welcome to the NewsHour. Thank you for making the time. So it was 30 years ago you used this phrase, "culture wars", you were trying to capture sort of the national divides and debates over issues like abortion rights and LGBTQ rights and the role of religion in schools. How have the culture wars from 30 years ago changed? What's different today.

Segment 2:

One of the most important differences the ways in which the culture wars have now become class culture wars. Progressives tend to predominate in the upper middle class, highly educated professionals and managers. And traditionalists, conservatives tend to clusted in the middle, lower-middle and working classes. The class differences are highlighting real differences in life chances and opportunities, the horizons of the future that mean so much to everyday life.

I guess, definitionally, too, maybe I can ask you to help us understand how you look at the phrase, what culture wars even mean today, because it feels almost as if the term is applied reflexively to any issue that people disagree on that's not purely a matter of

policy. You can talk about science or sports or education or anything, and it becomes a culture war issue. So, how do you see it?

Segment 3:

So, culture wars can be understood in two different ways. The main way in which people think about culture wars is in terms of the politics of culture. It's essentially about politics, but around cultural issues. So, it's the politics of abortion. It's the politics of gay rights, lesbian rights. It's the politics of race and the like. The second way in which the cultural war plays out is in terms of the culture of politics. It's the symbolic environment within which politics and our democracy unfolds. This is the difference between weather and climate. They're related to each other. They feed on each other. But they're ultimately reinforcing the same kinds of divisions in our society.

Segment 4:

You have also written about and talked about this idea of fear of extinction being sort of a central issue in some of these culture war issues as well. And polls actually show messaging like that really resonates among the American public. In one recent poll, 52% of Americans agree with the statement "Today, America is in danger of losing its culture and identity". We have just seen the largest and most diverse nationwide calls for racial justice and people more willing to see and recognize the racist history of this country. I'm curious what role you think race plays in all of this.

Well, my sense is that race is, for the most part, replacing abortion as the central issue of the culture war. Ever since the Roe v. Wade decision in 1973, abortion was really the main catalyst of conflict. Race was never really discussed as much through the 80s and 90s. It's now center stage.

There's also, we should point out, a really deep divide, a partisan divide on that one issue of whether or not America is in danger of losing its culture and identity.