

Published on: December 22, 2015

STATE OF THE UNION

Why Polarization Matters

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Polarization is more our problem than our politicians'. The success of the nation requires that we, the people, overcome it.

What do we mean when we talk about polarization in American politics? It depends who's doing the talking, but two basic guidelines can help us clarify the problem.

First, don't imagine that polarization refers mainly to politicians behaving badly. Polarization is less a "them" problem than an "us" problem. The political scientist Larry Sabato of the University of Virginia puts it well: "So often blamed just on the politicians, polarization actually has its roots in us, the electorate." It's true that party activists are more polarized than average voters.¹ But that fact doesn't mean that polarization is simply or even primarily an elite or Washington, D.C.-centric phenomenon. It isn't.

And second, please don't imagine that polarization is the same as strong disagreement. In a free society, people naturally have diverse and strongly held views. That's normal and even desirable. Polarization involves something else, such that a good slogan is "Don't polarize my disagreement!"

So what exactly *is* polarization and why does it matter? Former *TAI* editorial board member James Q. Wilson once put it this way:

By polarization I mean . . . an intense commitment to a candidate, a culture, or an ideology that sets people in one group definitively apart from people in another, rival group. Such a condition is revealed when a candidate for public office is regarded by a competitor and his supporters not simply as wrong but as corrupt or wicked; when one way of thinking about the world is assumed to be morally superior to any other way; when one set of political beliefs is considered to be entirely correct and a rival set wholly wrong.

This phenomenon—having strong, personal, and emotionally charged negative feelings about those in the other political camp, or what scholars call affective polarization—has risen sharply in the United States in recent decades. For example,

one study reports that the proportion of Americans who think members of the other party are “selfish” has more than doubled, from 21 percent in 1960 to 47 percent in 2008. Compared to 1960, Americans today are also far less likely to describe those in the other political party as “intelligent” and far more likely to say they would be displeased or unhappy if they had a child who married a member of the other party.² Remarkably, a Pew survey in 2014 found that 27 percent of Democrats and 36 percent of Republicans currently view the other party as “a threat to the nation’s well-being.”

Americans are also now voting for an ideology with their feet. For example, a recent study suggests that rising rates of “ideological migration”—Americans relocating to areas where most other people share their political views—is contributing to both ideological segregation and polarization in U.S. society.³ For that and other reasons, we Americans are increasingly living in more ideologically homogeneous environments, in which both the people with whom we regularly interact and the media we regularly consume reflect and reinforce our political perspectives and biases. For example, in 1976, only about a quarter of U.S. voters lived in a county which a presidential candidate had won by a landslide margin. By 2004, that figure was nearly half.⁴

In addition, research suggests that people in homogenous communities grow both more extreme and more certain in their political beliefs. As Bill Bishop and Robert Cushing put it in their 2008 book, *The Big Sort*, summarizing the results of a significant body of research on what scholars call “group polarization”:

Mixed company moderates; like-minded company polarizes. Heterogeneous communities restrain group excesses; homogeneous communities march toward the extremes.

Finally, whereas in previous high-conflict eras in the United States polarization tended to be rooted in only a few and often related issues—disputes over foreign alliances and the size of government around 1800, the National Bank in the 1830s, the split over slavery in the 1850s, the agrarian revolt and related currency disputes in the 1890s, the struggles over the New Deal in the 1930s and over Vietnam and civil rights in the 1960s—today’s polarization (in a trend that some scholars call “conflict extension”) appears to be much broader and more comprehensive, such that it seems to draw almost all issues (from educational standards to guns to climate research to foreign policy to church-state issues) into its maw. In short, political polarization in the United States today has become, by historical standards, less issue-specific and more generalized.

Critics of polarization, however, must recognize that it does have its advantages—and its defenders.

Fundamentally, humans form in-groups (“us” in opposition to “them”) for purposes of protection and community, which in human evolutionary terms are adaptive—that is, they enhance chances of survival and success. And there is an arguably unavoidable price to pay for this adaptive strategy: Forming beneficial in-groups tends to foster intellectual habits such as binary thinking (consistently dividing phenomena into two

mutually opposing categories) and negatively exaggerating and stereotyping the views of outsiders.

Relatedly, being part of an in-group that defines itself at least in part as being against an out-group provides individuals with definite psychological benefits. It helps to create and intensify in-group friendships and provide a sense of belonging and status security. It can help to give life meaning and a sense of purpose. For these and other reasons, in-group solidarity can help reduce loneliness, stress, and anxiety. These are powerful and understandable attractions.

Second, and from a different vantage point, recent research suggests that the degree of partisan animus in the U.S. now exceeds the degree of racial hostility.⁵ Isn't that fact likely a sign of progress? Related to the apparently universal tendency to form in-groups, Edward O. Wilson observes that in all human groups there seems to be a "powerful urge to dichotomize, to classify other human beings into two artificially sharpened categories." This urge should be consciously criticized and resisted, yet perhaps dichotomizing on the basis of political views is less socially harmful than dichotomizing on the basis of skin color or religion.

Third, observers as far back as Tocqueville have complained of the ideological fuzziness and even incoherence that in many eras have characterized our two main political parties. When the effective choice facing voters is between Tweedledum and Tweedledee—when, as Alabama governor George Wallace famously put it decades ago, "there isn't a dime's worth of difference" between the two main parties—politics arguably becomes less meaningful. Conversely, coherent ideological frameworks competing with one another and sharply clashing issue agendas—which almost certainly foster polarization—might produce election results that more accurately reflect voter preferences, make it easier to hold politicians and parties accountable, and perhaps at times even unfreeze certain policy domains and make positive change more likely.

Fourth, polarization can be a great mobilizing strategy. As one recent study concludes: "Increased negativity toward political opponents among the mass public is a promising development for those eager to mobilize the base of either party."⁶

Finally, if you are a strong proponent of unpopular views on issues that you view as critically important, what others fretfully call "polarization" may be exactly what you think the country needs most. Anti-slavery leaders in the 1830s and 1840s were widely viewed, in the North as well as in the South, as intemperate extremists and what we would now call polarizers. John Brown was viewed essentially as a terrorist, not without some justification. The same is true of numerous other expressions of American radicalism across the decades, from early calls for women's suffrage to early calls for the right to bargain collectively, many of which today are widely lauded by respectable moderates as having helped to produce important social progress.

Polarization has had its advocates on the Left and the Right, and it still does. On the Left, Saul Alinsky, the famous community organizer of the 1950s and 1960s who

worked to “comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable,” taught polarization as a core goal and strategy of community organizing. Similarly, many social and religious conservatives today, given what they view as a choice between being called an extremist by liberal elites and being either co-opted or ignored, are more than willing to engage in polarization tactics as one of the necessary costs of being heard. A 2012 book by the conservative leader and writer Jeffrey Bell is entitled *The Case for Polarized Politics*.

But to whatever degree we can tolerate and even at times have sympathy for the usages of polarization, it’s clear that polarization today in the United States—and in particular mass affective polarization—has become a major problem. We have far too much of it. It is crippling our politics, coarsening our culture, weakening our intellects, and making it harder to be good neighbors and good citizens. Let’s briefly enumerate its major harms.

1. It produces policy gridlock.

Especially at the national level, partisan rancor now dominates nearly every public policy issue and consideration. As a result, less and less gets done, as the actual work of legislating and policymaking is increasingly subordinated to the demands of permanent political warfare. One example: Each of the last two Congresses passed fewer than 300 laws, the fewest in modern history. By comparison, the widely criticized “do-nothing” Congress of 1947–48 passed 906 laws. While it’s true that the activism of a given congressional session cannot be construed as a measure of its wisdom or effectiveness, today’s level of polarization is clearly causing paralysis in our governance, in part by entrenching a “status quo bias” that can delay or prevent us as a nation from responding to new challenges, including major issues such as climate change, war and peace, and America’s role in the global economy.⁷

2. It degrades our public discussion.

Why is our public discussion so dominated by rancor and divisiveness? Why do our politicians in their public utterances increasingly resemble silly children throwing food at each other? Why do our “news” programs on TV so often consist of people dealing out abuse and accusations at decibel levels most people would consider unspeakably rude were they to be heard in one’s home?

Of all the manifestations of affective polarization, probably the hardest to miss for most Americans is the degradation of our public discourse. Mass affective polarization and hyper-partisanship are not the only causes of our coarser, dumbed-down public conversation. But they are important ones.

3. It likely contributes to inequality.

The rise of American economic and social inequality in recent decades has corresponded with the rise of political polarization, and some current scholarship suggests that there are at least some reasons to believe that the two trends are causally

related and mutually reinforcing. For example, political partisanship today is increasingly correlated with income levels, resulting in a steadily widening rich-poor divide between the two main parties. The contest between Republicans and Democrats is in some respects increasingly one between the economic interests of higher-income Americans and those of lower-income Americans. More broadly, according to Nolan McCarty, Keith T. Poole, and Howard Rosenthal, “polarization in the context of American political institutions now means that the political process cannot be used to redress inequality that may arise from nonpolitical changes in technology, lifestyle, and compensation practices.”⁸

Whatever the exact nature of what McCarty and his colleagues call the “dance” of polarization with inequality, it seems clear that the two are locked in a kind of mirror relationship with one another. On the one hand is a steadily rising polarization that itself has socio-economic dimensions, and on the other is a steadily widening gap between upscale, college-educated Americans and everyone else, producing what observers as diverse as Charles Murray on the Right and Robert Putnam on the Left agree is the nation’s most disturbing social problem.

It may be unrealistic to expect that depolarization by itself could cause a reduction in inequality. But it is at least plausible to expect that, just as these two trends have risen together, they may fall together as well.

4. It segregates us.

Polarization separates and divides us. Of course, not all forms of separation are harmful—it is at least arguable, as Robert Frost concedes, that “good fences make good neighbors”—but the segregating effects of American affective polarization, which now even include growing residential and geographical segregation, are almost certainly socially harmful, in part because they produce social echo chambers in which people increasingly rarely befriend or even personally encounter someone who disagrees with their political views, and in part because ideological segregation is the proven ally of ideological certitude and extremism.

Depolarization is integrative. It desegregates. Frost again: “Something there is that doesn’t love a wall,/ That wants it down.”

5. It undermines trust.

Trust is the indispensable social glue that helps make possible the rule of law, effective governmental institutions, a thriving civil society, and economic dynamism. Robert J. Sampson, for example, finds that mutual trust is a critical component of what he calls “collective efficacy.”⁹ On many key indicators of well-being, high-trust societies do better than low-trust societies. In recent decades social trust appears to have declined significantly in the United States.

Polarization reduces social trust at two levels. First and most obviously, polarization magnifies mistrust of government. Current mistrust of government in the United States

has multiple sources, but several scholars have argued that “a primary consequence of polarization is that it undermines citizens’ trust in the capacity of government to solve problems.”¹⁰ It’s probably more than a coincidence that extremely high levels of polarization in Congress today coexist with extremely low levels of public trust in Congress.

Second and arguably most consequentially, polarization magnifies mistrust of each other. One recent study concludes that, since the mid-1980s, trust in others in America has “declined dramatically.” Part of the reason has to do with “generational replacement,” as “more trusting generations of Americans have been dying and being replaced by younger, less trusting Americans.”¹¹ Another recent study reports: “Trust in others and confidence in institutions, two key indicators of social capital, reached historic lows among Americans in 2012 in two nationally representative surveys that have been administered since the 1970s.”¹² Polarization is not the only contributor to this trend, but it is a significant factor.

Tragically, the loss of trust in others traceable to polarization appears to be a similar process, writ large, to what happens during a couple’s divorce. As Joseph Hopper and other researchers have pointed out, a divorce tends to be an intensely polarizing process.¹³ Trust ebbs. Anger grows. During the course of—and as a result of—the process of separation, each spouse’s views of both the present and the past tend to harden and become more extreme and one-dimensional. For example, the view that blame or responsibility for the marriage’s breakdown is mutual tends to be replaced by the view that all or nearly all blame or responsibility for the breakdown rests with the other spouse. Quite often, the once-firmly held view that “we fell in love and had a good marriage” at least for a while is replaced by the view that “it was never a good relationship, it was wrong from the beginning.” That is what polarization looks like, up close and personal. In divorce, the polarization is often strong enough to help produce a new way of seeing other people and of experiencing the world. As Bob Dylan writes, describing his own divorce: “I can’t feel you anymore, I can’t even touch the books you’ve read.”¹⁴

Separation typically polarizes and polarization magnifies the consequences of the separation. And arguably the deepest consequence of this dynamic process, for both the couple that splits and for the society that splits, is the loss of trust.

6. It thwarts empathy.

The word “empathy” came into the English language in the early 20th century as a translation of the German word “*Einführung*,” which means “feeling into.” The word began largely as an aesthetic term, as philosophers struggled to explain why works of art, or scenes of nature, can move us emotionally. Today we typically use the word to mean the capacity to identify emotionally with another person’s situation and feelings. Discussing the related concept of sympathy in 1759, Adam Smith wrote that “it is by changing places in fancy with the sufferer, that we come either to conceive or be affected by what he feels.” That’s also a lovely description of empathy.

Scholars seeking to understand the qualities of wisdom consistently report that empathy—putting oneself in the other person’s shoes—is a key pathway to wisdom.

Polarization in general, and affective polarization in particular, are enemies of empathy. Polarization involves negatively exaggerating the views of others—an intellectual pursuit that in two ways undermines empathy. First, why would you even *want* to engage empathetically with people whom you view collectively as despicable, untrustworthy, or incomprehensibly alien? Second, even if you did decide to engage, how well are you likely to succeed if you begin the process surrounded by a self-constructed protective barrier—a kind of intellectual, ethical, and emotional firewall—which in your view is usefully separating good from bad, right from wrong, desirable from undesirable? Someone in thrall to polarization needs empathy like a fish needs a bicycle.

Conversely, of the intellectual trends that encourage polarization, one of the most important is the belief that society is divided into two mutually incompatible groups—the group of me and those like me who stand for truth, justice, and virtue, and those not like me who stand for the opposite. Probably the most powerful antidote to this increasingly popular but deeply wrongheaded way of seeing the world is empathy.

Finally, more empathy in society not only corresponds with less polarization, it also almost certainly means more wisdom, which in turn helps to make us better family members, neighbors, and citizens.

7. It weakens our intellects.

An antonym of empathy is “misunderstanding,” and the misunderstanding that necessarily accompanies affective polarization is, among its other qualities, an intellectual deficiency that for practical purposes is akin to a handicap. Polarized thinking is almost always distorted thinking—the mental equivalent of looking in a fun-house mirror while believing that you’re not. Like all forms of distorted thinking—for example, believing that I am at the center of the universe, or that my racial group is superior to all others—the errors of thought corresponding to polarization directly threaten intellectual rigor and integrity. That some smart people today are also polarized thinkers does not change this fact.

8. It lowers the caliber of our citizenship.

In his famous *Federalist* essay no. 55, James Madison asks whether there “is sufficient virtue among men for self-government.” Madison’s answer is a qualified yes. But the issue worries and engages him, in large part because when it comes to “qualities in human nature which justify a certain portion of esteem and confidence . . . republican government presupposes the existence of these qualities in a higher degree than any other form.”

We should take heed. What self-government presupposes and fundamentally depends upon is precisely what polarization corrodes. Less trust in our political institutions and

in each other. Less empathy. More separation. More inequality. More anger. Poorer thinking. Dumber public discourse. Stuck politics. Together, these fruits of American polarization reflect nothing less than the diminishment of our civic capacity. Few problems we face are more dangerous than this one.

It's time for a new direction, a fresh breeze. The paradigm of polarization that dominates our politics and, increasingly, our society is clearly failing us. Left to continue, it will cause us great harm—and not for the first time.

In late 1862, at a time in which affective polarization was probably at the highest level in our history, Abraham Lincoln wrote in a message to Congress: “As our case is new, so we must think anew and act anew. We must disenthrall ourselves, and then we shall save our country.”

American depolarization in the decades ahead will require a similar undertaking. First and foremost we must “think anew.” In our public conversation and in our public deeds, we must also “disenthrall” ourselves from the long-developing habits of heart and mind that now threaten our national experiment in ordered liberty. The success of that experiment may depend on it.

¹See Morris P. Fiorino, “America’s Missing Moderates: Hiding in Plain Sight,” *The American Interest* (March/April 2013) and Didi Kuo, “Polarization and Partisanship” *The American Interest* (November/December 2015).

²Shanto Iyengar and Sean J. Westwood, *Fear and Loathing Across Party Lines: New Evidence on Group Polarization* (Working Paper, June 2014).

³Matt Motyl, et. al., “How ideological migration geographically separates groups,” *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology* (March 2014).

⁴Bill Bishop and Robert Cushing, *The Big Sort* (Houghton Mifflin Company, 2008).

⁵Iyengar and Westwood, *Fear and Loathing Across Party Lines*.

⁶David C. Kimball, Bryce Summary, and Eric C. Vorst, “Political Identity and Party Polarization in the American Electorate,” paper presented at the conference “The State of the Parties: 2012 and Beyond,” Akron, Ohio, November 7, 2013. These authors conclude that today “followers of both parties express increasing levels of fear and contempt toward the opposite party and its presidential candidates, with the 2012 election cycle producing record levels of out-party demonization.”

⁷See Michael Barone, “The Gridlock Myth,” *The American Interest* (November/December 2010).

⁸Nolan McCarty, Keith T. Poole, and Howard Rosenthal, *Polarized America: The Dance of Ideology and Unequal Riches* (MIT Press, 2006).

⁹Robert J. Sampson, *Great American City: Chicago and the Enduring Neighborhood Effect* (University of Chicago Press, 2012).

¹⁰McCarty, Poole, and Rosenthal, *Polarized America*.

¹¹April K. Clark, Michael Clark, and Daniel Monzin, “Explaining Changing Trust Trends in America,” *International Research Journal of Social Sciences* (January 2013).

¹²Jean M. Twenge, W. Keith Campbell, and Nathan T. Carter, “Declines in Trust in Others and Confidence in Institutions Among American Adults and Late Adolescents,” *Psychological Science* (October 2014).

¹³Joseph Hopper, “The Rhetoric of Motives in Divorce,” *Journal of Marriage and the Family* (November 1993).

¹⁴Bob Dylan, “Idiot Wind,” 1974.

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