

## American Political Polarization

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Daniel Spiro, May 2, 2021

“Do what I say, not what I do.” So said my old high school band teacher, reminding us that whereas everyone decries hypocrisy, we’re all hypocrites. Similarly, whereas everyone decries political polarization, we’re all agents of division. These days, it is hard not to be. Every day, we’re told what’s wrong with the *other* political side – their hypocrisy, inhumanity, criminality. If we wish to stay informed, we consume this news in droves. We develop a deep dislike for the other team. We disrespect their intelligence and their integrity. Oh, we understand our team isn’t perfect either. But to *equate* the two teams? To create moral equivalence between our team and *theirs*? We could never go that far. Because we see our side as the only hope for salvaging America as she used to be – a beacon, a model. And the other team? The one we call commies or fascists, snowflakes or racists, baby killers or knuckle draggers? We loathe them - at least we’re programmed to do so and supported for doing so. The alternative makes as much sense as standing between the trenches in the Battle of the Somme. No Man’s Land indeed.

Do you know what’s funny? In interfaith groups like this, we often disagree sharply with each other on theological issues, but we don’t let those disagreements turn into disrespect. Yet when the subject turns to politics, we feel perfectly free to do just that – and be vocal about it. For a nation whose motto is E Pluribus Unum – out of many, one – something has gone amiss.

So how did we get this way? Thanks to Ezra Klein, who devoted a book to answering that question, ticking off the reasons is simple. Consider, first, the changes in our political parties. When I was a child, we had liberal Republicans and conservative Dixiecrats. Accordingly, party affiliation wasn’t a very strong predictor of political ideology. Then came the Civil Rights movement of the 60s. The Dixiecrats joined the primarily conservative party, and liberal Northern Republicans like Lowell Weicker or Jacob Javits went the way of the dodo bird. Before long, the liberals sorted themselves into Democrats and the conservatives into Republicans. The parties became two warring camps, with less ideological diversity and more willingness to circle the wagons whenever controversy came calling.

Similarly, we've seen a profound change in government itself. Presidents are more careful not to nominate jurists who are centrists. And thanks to legislative gerrymandering, few congressional seats are up for grabs. Now, we see solidly left politicians owning blue districts and solidly right politicians owning red districts, and there's little reason why any of them would reach across the aisle – especially after the elimination of earmarks, which for all their ugliness were definite vehicles for bringing members of different political parties together to support the same bill.

Let's turn next to the role of the mainstream media. Exit Walter Cronkite, David Brinkley, and their "Just the Facts, Ma'am" approach to the news. Enter Rush Limbaugh, Rachel Maddow, Jon Stewart and the blurring of news and entertainment. In the new America, people tune in to a celebrity who reliably delivers a perspective that's either on the left or the right. Frequently, this comes with snark, mockery and condescension. Whatever you can do to prop up your side's politicians and de-legitimize the other side is de rigueur. And the audience becomes consumers of one of these polarized perspectives and vilifiers of the other.

Fourth, we have the role of social media. Now, whether you prefer Facebook, Twitter, or Parler, you can find a never-ending stream of spewing from one political direction or another. Whoever enters the fray learns a simple fact – as long as you criticize the *other* side, you'll get all sorts of "Likes." But if, God forbid, you side with that other team on an issue, you can expect one critical post after another. Who wants to deal with that? Who even has the time? It's far comfier to stay on one side of the fence, gulp down the facts and figures your allies have to offer, and then tune into a celebrity journalist who'll mock the other side and further convince you of your righteousness.

Fifth, we have the role of demographic changes and globalization. As America becomes increasingly non-white and internationalist, some are liberated and others are threatened. For many, this shift signals an opportunity to cut down the weeds of racial privilege. For others, this trend endangers the American way of life. They hear coastal elites refer to them as "deplorables" and condescend to the way they speak, vote, listen to music, watch sports, eat food, or celebrate ancestors. One is reminded of the old Bob Newhart joke, "I don't like country music, but I don't mean to denigrate those who do. And for the people who like country music, denigrate means 'put down'." It's a funny joke. But who really is the butt of it -- the country music fans? Or the coastal elites who think of them as bumpkins? Probably both.

Having discussed the causes of our society's polarization, I hope we can dispense with a lengthy discussion of why it's intolerable. To quote folk singer, Greg Greenway, "hate is too great a weight to bear." And personally, polarization puts me off because it discourages free thinking and turns most of us into predictable mouthpieces of party lines. Considered from a societal standpoint, polarization prevents us from taking on problems that require all hands on deck. If, for example, we and our allies had been this polarized 50, 60 or 70 years ago, maybe the Russians would have been the first to put a person on the Moon, the national highways wouldn't have been built, and Hitler would have won the war. Today, whether you're talking about climate change, Covid, racism, or as my conservative friends would point out, political correctness, we can't fight these scourges together because what one team determines to be an enemy, the other team must label a hoax.

Of course, polarization is intolerable. The question is, what are we going to do about it? Let's begin by looking in the mirror. Polarization will end when Americans blame *ourselves* for it as much as the so-called wackos across the aisle. In other words, we must recognize the disgust that we have for the *other*, and see that as *our* problem, not just theirs.

We must also cultivate friendships with the political *other* -- just as we in the interfaith movement cultivate friendships with the theological *other*. I can't ask this question enough: why is it so easy for us to respect those we think treat *religious* myths as historical fact, whereas when people treat *political* myths as fact, we mock them for it? The next time you want to ridicule a Republican for thinking the election was stolen, imagine yourself, if you're Muslim, ridiculing a Jew for thinking that God rested on the Sabbath. Or if you're a Jew, imagine ridiculing a Muslim for believing that Muhammad ever went to Jerusalem. We don't even *disrespect* people for having different views on those issues. So why do we *despise* them when we disagree about politics?

In addition, we can get on social media and show courage. Rather than joining an amen chorus for the 500<sup>th</sup> time, post something that criticizes your political tribe or that humanizes the other. We can't confront polarization as long as we act like fans of a football team. Football fans are as predictable as the rising of the tides. From beginning to end, we cheer for the same team. I'm sure like that. But when it comes to talking politics on Facebook, you won't know which side I'm on until you read my post. I do that, in part, because if liberals like me don't show an ability to see multiple sides of issues, why should we expect that from conservatives? If

we don't point out the pettiness and the snark on MSNBC, how do we expect conservatives to get upset when Fox whitewashes Trump's conduct? Let's leave predictability where it belongs – watching football games. Let's sometimes voice views that aren't popular with our own political tribe. We all have them. Most of us are simply afraid to voice them.

Staying within the media context, we can be choosier when it comes to the news outlets we frequent. Cronkite isn't coming back. But print media is less juvenile than cable TV, and so are certain network newscasts. This is one area where each of us needs to lead by example. Turn the TV off, or at least change the channel when you start hearing predictable, petty, one-sided rhetoric. That's why I watch CNN and MSNBC a lot less than I used to.

As for situations when sounding off against the *other* side is irresistible, we can still dial down the hatred and the disrespect. I recognize that certain politicians are flat out intolerable. But at least we can refrain from name calling and insults directed at an entire political party or its members. The idea that the other side is ignorant, for example, is itself ignorant. As Fareed Zakaria has pointed out, studies have shown that “‘high-information voters,’ those who read widely and follow news carefully, are in fact *more* guilty of ... partisan thinking.” The real problem, he argues, isn't stupid, uninformed voters but “‘rationalizing voters’ – smart people who read the facts and follow the debates, but use their knowledge to justify and support their pre-existing biases.”

Finally, the most important thing we can do to confront polarization is provide an antidote, or if you prefer, a *vaccine* – namely, causes we can embrace together. We must recognize that our political differences are small compared to what we have in common. And once we recognize our commonalities – good *and bad* -- then we can work on joint projects confronting issues that haven't yet become politicized.

Feeding the hungry or educating the poor come to mind. As another example, an interfaith group like JIDS could consider bringing our members together to encourage public schools to embrace comparative religion as a course of study. Today, though, I'd like to offer a more thought-provoking supplement, one that should remind us of how much our values have in common, once we stop listening to the hate mongers and other dividers. My example comes from the work of the political philosopher, Michael Sandel. His recent book, *The Tyranny of Merit*, concerns perhaps the deepest similarity that brings together Blue and Red America – our reverence for the so-called “American Dream.” This is the dream of living in a meritocracy, a

land of upward mobility and opportunity, where we all can rise as far as our efforts and talents will take us.

Every American today needs to confront the American Dream, consider its centrality to American culture, embrace what's good about it, but also fight what's decadent about it. We can do this together because when we unpack the American Dream, we will likely find both the same appeals and the same horrors.

Red and Blue alike, we love the American Dream largely because we're individualists. We believe in freedom of expression. And because of our appreciation for individual differences, we place a tremendous trust in markets -- even those of us on the political left. We listen to the voices of the people not only as producers but as consumers. We want to reward those who satisfy consumer demand.

We also believe in hard work and want to see it rewarded and encouraged. We recognize that those born with money aren't necessarily the most industrious or creative. So, Red and Blue alike, we promote opportunities for people from all social classes to advance. It makes all Americans proud to see people overcome difficult upbringings and shine as intellectuals, entertainers, or statesmen. We love that our society is so multifaceted that there are many ways to succeed in it.

In *The Tyranny of Merit*, Sandel chronicles how the rhetoric of meritocracy -- of rising up and equal opportunity -- is championed by both political parties. Our most celebrated recent Presidents have all emphasized that if you work hard and play by the rules, you should be able to rise as far as your God-given abilities will take you. The differences creep in only when the topic turns to exactly *why* equal opportunity is so difficult to attain. To Blue America, the answer lies in racial discrimination, and existing economic and societal inequality. To Red America, the answer lies in affirmative action and in domination by globalist coastal elites. So we disagree as to what's ruining the American Dream, but not about its central importance. That, we have in common.

And therein lies the rub. You see, this American Dream of ours isn't always healthy. Nor just. Each of us has a variety of talents and limitations. Some of these talents are rewarded in a market economy, others aren't. Simply because we want to encourage Meryl Streep or LeBron James to do what they do doesn't make them more deserving or dignified than, say, a supremely

talented auto mechanic or social worker. And yet, in our society, LeBron gets to live like a king, and that social worker? She may be fortunate to make ends meet.

Universal human dignity. The dignity of work. These concepts are at the heart of our faiths. And in theory, they're respected by Red and Blue America alike. All workers have dignity, even if they are not respected in our society. To quote Martin Luther King Jr. "One day our society will come to respect the sanitation workers if it is to survive, for the person who picks up our garbage is in the final analysis as significant as the physician, for if he doesn't do his job, diseases are rampant. All labor has dignity."

What if instead of obsessing solely about guns, race hatred, political correctness or other wedge issues, we spent a little time thinking about the dignity of work and the limitations of the marketplace in rewarding hard, honest labor?

Is it any wonder that in our society, cheating is so rampant among the haves, and suicides among the have nots? This culture teaches us that working-class laborers are losers. And that teenagers who don't go to elite colleges are losers. And that people who produce little of social value, put on phony airs, and approach the workplace with a suck up/shit down attitude are often winners. Whether you're on the left or the right, I suspect you find something wrong with that equation. So, why don't we tackle this tyranny of merit together – before it becomes politicized? We can think about the importance of a living wage. About how government subsidies can encourage *and dignify* hard work. About whether economic welfare doesn't simply go to the poor in our society, but more often goes to the rich. About what it means that, when all the bogus deductions are taken into account, a CEO pays a lower tax rate than his secretary. And about what it means that if you don't have an advanced degree and speak in guarded, pseudo-sophisticated language, your best hope to get the attention of the American public these days is by being a criminal. Just consider that nobody cares more for Covid patients than nursing assistants, but it will be a cold day in Hell before cable news features nursing assistants in any Covid story. That attitude doesn't cut the mustard with any of us – left or right – but it is our reality.

Once people politicize this issue by claiming that the tyranny of merit is the sole province of either the left or right, we should cry foul. That's when we need to remember the friends we've made across the aisle, who hate the tyranny of merit every bit as much as we do, and who

want to work side by side with us to dignify hard work and the basic human intelligence that is common to all of us.

This is just one example of how we can we work and dialogue together to put polarization in its place. All we need is the will to do so, and the understanding that as long as we are polarized, our society will deteriorate like a patient with a progressive, terminal illness. Happily, though, polarization need not be terminal. But it's up to us to fight it. Together.

Let me leave you with this reminder. When it comes to politics – do what I say, not what I do. You see, like everyone else, I am a hypocrite, and therefore I am worthy of being hated, disrespected and condescended to – if that's how you choose to spend your time. Personally, I hope you choose the alternative.