

## Editorial

# Political Polarization: A Clear and Present Danger

The textbook controversy in Kanawha County, West Virginia began in the spring of 1974 when a school board member, the wife of a fundamentalist minister, objected to integrating new multicultural and egalitarian textbooks into the curriculum. After the board nevertheless voted to adopt the disputed books at their jam-packed meeting in June, several fundamentalist organizations mobilized various public protests during July and August. In September, aggrieved parents kept 20% of elementary school children home, rocks were thrown at the homes of children who continued to attend, and school buses were attacked with shotguns. In October, one elementary school and the county school board building were dynamited. When the board, with the support of the West Virginia Council of Churches, confirmed approval of the new textbooks by a 4-1 vote, the dissenters filed a formal complaint with civil authorities, and the four board members plus the school superintendent were arrested for “contributing to the delinquency of minors.”

Today, at this writing, “Freedom Convoys” of truckers protesting pandemic vaccine mandates by blocking travel and disrupting business have spread from Canada throughout the Euro-American world. Even a pandemic that threatens each of our own lives has failed to unite us nationally, and if anything, has driven us further apart. Like war in Vietnam or Iraq, evidently not even war at home against a plague can deliver the traditional American motto of *E pluribus unum* – “Out of many, one.” Some people seem more ready than ever to die, or transmit death, for their cause, freedom being their ultimate *raison d'être*, as if freedom were ever, anywhere absolute. As the saying goes, “my freedom to swing my fist ends at your nose.”

The centrifugal forces of both ideological and affective polarization are worsening everywhere we look. In *Democracies Divided: The Global Challenge of Political Polarization*, Carothers and O'Donohue (2019) focus on nine diverse countries – Bangladesh, Brazil, Columbia, India, Indonesia, Kenya, Poland, Turkey, and the United States – extracting many problematic cross-cutting findings. Other academic works published last year trumpet the same alarm: *The Divide: How Fanatical Certitude is Destroying Democracy* (Dotson 2021), *Sustaining Democracy: What We Owe to the Other Side* (Talisie 2021), and *The Way Out: How to Overcome Toxic Polarization* (Coleman 2021). As former American Senator Sam Nunn put it, “[w]e are in a race between cooperation and catastrophe, and the global threat is outpacing our response” (Love 2020:387).

While the 2021 *Democracy Index* of the Economist Intelligence Unit (EIU) still classified Canada as a “full democracy,” it classified the U.S. as a “flawed democracy.” Also in 2021, the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance added the U.S. to its list of

“backsliding democracies.” In *The Next Civil War: Dispatches from the American Future*, Stephen Marche (2022) declares that “The United States is coming to an end,” and speculates how the U.S. could be broken into four separate countries, roughly corresponding to the Northeast, the West Coast, the Midwest plus the Southeast, and Texas. Alternatively, Ron Elving (2022) suggests that “we’re less a nation divided into 50 states than we are two nations that are both present in each of those states.” Hence the state of what is now termed the *Cold Civil War* (Belcher 2022 – see the book review in this issue of this journal), perhaps only because another hot civil war is territorially impossible. Indeed, the Wikipedia article on a “Second American Civil War” is among its longest entries, and reliably one of the most up-to-date sources.

Political polarization is the extent to which opinions on an issue are opposed, and the process by which that opposition increases over time (DiMaggio, Evans, and Bryson 1996). Bramson et al. (2017) identified nine different senses of polarization:

1. Spread: the breadth of beliefs/opinions in terms of how far apart the extremes are.
2. Dispersion: the overall statistical distribution of beliefs/opinions.
3. Coverage: the proportion of all possible beliefs/opinions actually held by groups.
4. Regionalization: the geographical location of beliefs/opinions held.
5. Community Fracturing: the degree to which the population can be broken into sub-populations.
6. Distinctness: the degree to which group distinctions can be separated.
7. Group Divergence: how distant the characteristic ideas of groups are without attention to potential group overlap.
8. Group Consensus: the diversity of opinions within groups.
9. Size Parity: whether different clusters of beliefs/opinions are held by equal numbers of peoples.

Political polarization may be less about conservative/right versus progressive/left policy differences than about traditional versus modern, religious versus secular, nationalist versus globalist, or rural versus urban differences. In the U.S., Carothers and O’Donohue (2019) observed a distinct alignment of ethnicity, ideology, and religion on each side of the divide, what they termed the “iron triangle” of U.S. polarization.

Polarization is caused primarily by the social cleavage that occurs when a single division separates people on all issues, instead of the pluralism that occurs when divisions on various issues do not coincide. For example, when stances on gay rights, gun control, and immigration all align, only two factions are formed, and they disagree on all three issues; an enemy on one issue is an enemy on all issues. Polarization then emerges and gravitates toward authoritarianism. But when stances on those same issues are crisscrossing, multiple sub-groups are formed that moderate each other. An enemy on one issue is likely to be an ally on another,

so everyone must compromise and tolerate everyone else. Pluralism then prevails, which is the mechanism that sustains democracy.

Instead of juggling several potentially conflicting, crisscrossing identities, Lilliana Mason (2018) documented how Americans now identify with one all-encompassing alliance which confers what she terms a mega-identity. Political party, race, faith, and even television viewing habits are all correlated. One study found that the twenty television shows most popular among Republicans were completely different from those favored by Democrats. Of course, we now use the echo chambers of social media as a mirror to decipher our place in society, but it functions more like a prism that distorts our identities, empowers status-seeking extremists, and renders the moderate majority all but invisible (Bail 2021). By absenting themselves from online political discussions, moderates allow extremists to dominate, resulting in a profound form of distortion.

Social psychology has long documented how, when people confer only with whom they agree, their views become more extreme. In-group discussion yields a “consensual group position that is more extreme than the mean of the individual group members’ pre-discussion attitudes in the direction already favored by the group” (Hogg, Turner, and Davidson 1990:78). Stereotypic distortion then follows, whereby groups exaggerate their differences and caricature the other. The cognitive schema of the out-group becomes less complex – “they” are simple, “we” are multifaceted and nuanced. The homogeneity of the out-group becomes overstated – “they” are all alike, “we” are diverse and heterogeneous. The characterization of the out-group becomes misrepresentatively negative – “they” are exemplified by their radical fringe, “we” are exemplified by our core majority. The resultant homophilic tribalism makes “us” versus “them” reasonable, tolerance and interaction improbable, and negotiation and consensus impossible. And in a zero-sum game, or more likely a holy war, compromise is betrayal.

Perhaps the most obvious manifestation of polarization is the degeneration of public discourse to the most inflammatory and derogatory rhetoric commentators can conjure up to vilify the other. “[P]olitics quickly succumbs to the polemics of rage and recrimination . . . claims and counterclaims are made as if they were vindicated by the mere vehemence of their assertion” (O’Neill 2021:37). We trade in the currency of outrage, not argument, or conversely, the clemency – indeed, justification – of framing the violent January 6, 2021 siege of the U.S. capital as “legitimate political discourse.” Facts and moral truths lose all their weight. “In the old days, opinion was a brief dessert in the newspaper after a substantial meal of facts and news. Today, news and facts are subservient to opinion. We eat dessert without the nourishment of facts. As a result, the whole country is on a sugar high. No wonder we are bouncing off the walls” (Reese 2021:42).

Political polarization effectively damages all social institutions essential to democracy. It undermines the independence of the judiciary, reduces legislatures to either gridlock or a rubber stamp function, and facilitates the abuse of executive powers. Most fundamentally, it

shatters informal but crucial norms of tolerance and moderation among ordinary citizens, such as who is an acceptable marriage partner, or even a business associate. Meanwhile, politicians and other leaders who exacerbate polarization the most also benefit from it the most, and bear little of the cost. Researchers at the Greater Good Science Center at the University of California, Berkley (Jilani and Smith 2019) summarize research findings of the effects and costs of political polarization in simple language:

1. We're segregated even in our own residential communities.
2. Our political culture is more focused on tearing down our opponents than building up support for our own ideas.
3. We demonize and loathe our political opponents.
4. Our families are being undermined.
5. We're less likely to help each other out.
6. Our physical health is suffering.
7. We're more and more stressed out.
8. We feel pressure to conform in our groups.
9. Lying is condoned when in conflict with the other group.
10. Gridlock is damaging our government institutions.
11. Our pocketbooks are hurting.
12. We're losing trust in key social institutions.
13. It's hard to solve problems even when we do agree.
14. Violence is more likely.

What fundamental, centripetal mechanisms could be capable of countering zealous polarization? Legal or judicial action to limit majoritarianism – the idea that the feelings and rights of the minority need not constrain leaders with majority support – may have some positive effect. So could political leadership committed to forming coalitions. More radically, institutional reforms such as decentralizing political power, or changing electoral rules, could moderate polarization. For example, in 2016, the state of Maine enacted ranked-choice voting which favors centrist candidates and discourages negative campaigning.

But perhaps the most effective means to peaceful cooperation was identified by the classic 1954 Robbers Cave experiment conducted by Muzafer Sherif and Carolyn Wood Sherif (1988). It contributed to realistic conflict theory, a social psychological model of intergroup conflict in which groups have an opposition of interests – not a mere difference – that creates friction between them; one group's success/gain requires the other group's failure/loss, generating in-group solidarity and out-group antagonism. The researchers brought 22 twelve-year-old boys who had never met previously but had comparable backgrounds to a camp and divided them into two groups: the self-named Eagles and the Rattlers. The investigators first cultivated in-group cohesion, then inter-group conflict, before trying to resolve the conflict. They were only able to do the latter by creating superordinate goals via manufacturing

emergencies, such as the two groups having to work together to ensure water and food supply that neither group could do alone. The inter-group relationship was thereby restructured from competition to cooperation, from hostility to collaborative problem-solving, from win-lose to win-win or lose-lose.

During the Cold War spanning 1947-1991, the United States and the Soviet Union together with their respective allies were mutually deterred from hot, bloody, nuclear war by the balance of terror known as “mutually assured destruction” (MAD). The challenge for political polarization today is to identify any actual superordinate goal beyond mere survival. What do both factions want, or even need? Tragically, as the world hurtles toward authoritarian populism, full democracy is not a mutual, superordinate goal (Hiebert 2020).

Originating in a 1919 majority opinion rendered by the American Supreme Court, the concept of a “clear and present danger” is a rationale for the limitation of free speech. Political polarization today, fueled by its claims to and reckless abuse of free speech, is a clear and present danger, because at bottom, “[w]e are an ecosystem. What we do to each other, we do to ourselves” (Levandoski 2022). As the late, former American Secretary of State Madeleine Albright observed,

no group has a monopoly on truth or virtue. However we conceive of ‘us,’ we have ample grounds for humility. There is no question that we all have a right to quarrel with one another; that’s the democratic way. But we also have a responsibility to talk frankly and to listen carefully, to recognize our own faults and to refrain from dehumanizing labels on those with whom we disagree. (2021:19)

Or as the Apostle Paul put it to Christians, having been reconciled to God, we all are charged with a “ministry of reconciliation” (2 Corinthians 5:18).

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