

A Nation Divided and Polarized: Can We Discuss Solutions?

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ABOUT THE EVENT HOST



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Laurel Harbridge-Yong

POLARIZATION OVER TIME

- Our parties at the state and national level are more polarized than they were 60 years ago.
- In the 1950s and 1960s, American politics lacked differentiation between the Republican and Democratic Parties. There were a lot of moderate members of Congress. There was overlap in preferences between the parties. Today, there is almost no overlap.
- Beginning in the 1970s, congressional parties became sorted along ideological lines. Polarization increased as members took ideologically extreme positions.
- Partisan conflict goes beyond ideology—legislators in each party have a collective interest in winning and being the majority party. This competition, especially since the 1980s, has increased the extent of partisan conflict, even on non-ideological issues.
- Both ideological polarization and partisan fighting contribute to the difficulty of reaching bipartisan agreements.

POLARIZATION OF THE PUBLIC

- Some scholars argue that the public has polarized along ideological policy lines, much like members of Congress. This might be a good portrayal of the activist class.
- Others suggest that the public has sorted rather than polarized. Preferences and ideology align with party, but people are not necessarily taking more extreme views.
- Sorting or ideological polarization can contribute to people voting for their preferred party again and again, but a bigger challenge for working across the aisle is the increase in affective or social polarization. Partisan identity has become a core social identity for people. Partisan identity is increasingly aligned with other identities, such as race and religion. This leads to conceptualizing the world in terms of ingroups and outgroups.
- Social polarization not only makes it difficult for citizens to engage with those on the other side, but may also lead voters to encourage elected officials to fight against, rather than work with, the opposing party.
- People not trusting the opposing party to work in the interest of the country reduces support for compromise.

PARTISANSHIP IN POLICYMAKING

- The choices of party leaders in Congress have important consequences as to whether partisan conflict or bipartisan agreement prevails.
- Party leaders want to pursue legislation that aligns with their ideological platform and points out differences from the minority party. Democrats may prefer to advance the more liberal agenda over a more bipartisan compromise, but there are several important constraints.
- Although the Democrats have a unified government, the margins are tight, and many moderate Democrats represent competitive Republican-leaning districts. This will rein in what the progressive wing would like to achieve. The majority party may still need to pursue bipartisan legislation in order to produce a record of success.

GOVERNING AND MESSAGING

- Bipartisan legislation can be good for governing, but bad for messaging. Compromise can be good for governing, but it can demoralize the base. An inaccurate perception among legislators that primary voters are antagonistic to compromise, leads them to reject compromises.
- The majority party has the greatest incentive to govern and get things done in times of unified government, even if the minority party is focused on political messaging.
- Partisan legislation and messaging bills that become law tend to have some degree of bipartisan support. The party line votes, as seen for the Affordable Care Act or the Trump tax cuts, are the exception rather than the norm.

POTENTIAL SOLUTIONS

- Allow legislators to hold some key negotiations in private. Transparency with public roll call votes is important, but public committee hearings may make legislators unwilling to speak frankly and accept compromises in some cases.
- Legislators need to hear from the broader public—perhaps through town halls that invite a random sample of constituents—not just the most ideologically extreme, politically active constituents.

Will Friedman

OUR CURRENT STATE

- After a bitter, close election and the events of 6 January 2021, we have gone from having a problem to being in the midst of a crisis. The growing divisiveness of so much of American public life cannot be underplayed.
- We have a complex problem with many factors at work: social media, increasingly fractured news media, a steady decay of trust in public institutions since the 1970s, economic inequality, racial injustice, and demagogic leadership with inflammatory rhetoric.
- We need short-term measures to stop the bleeding, and long-term solutions to heal the body politic.

SHORT-TERM MEASURES

- One measure already taken was ratifying the election. Universal condemnation of the events at the Capitol on 6 January was also important. The country needs to see accountability of those who instigated and participated that day for things to settle down.

LONG-TERM STEPS

- Societal narratives need to be addressed. We have seen the damage—rhetoric reinforces our divisions and inflames “us versus them” thinking. We need to disrupt and neutralize pernicious narratives that stand in the way of seeing ourselves as one people with lots of viewpoints.
- There are signs of progress. A recent Ipsos poll found that 83 percent of Americans liked President Joe Biden’s inaugural address—including 72 percent of Republicans. That is a lot of people across partisan lines.
- There are initiatives—which can happen virtually, in popular media, or in face-to-face situations—that try to foster constructive humanizing contact with people holding different ideas.
- Palpable improvements in the lives and prospects of *all* Americans are critical. Unifying narratives that help people see their commonalities will only gain power if attached to lived experiences.

- We need to create conditions in our society conducive to wiser public judgement. This is a daunting task in our divisive digital age. The forces of misinformation, mal-information, and inflammatory rumormongering are strong.
- We must teach kids to think critically and access trustworthy sources of information.
- As a country, we need to make people’s bubbles more permeable, so that people can encounter diverse ideas and solutions.
- Leaders should be incentivized to not misinform and inflame the public.
- It is important to focus on the local level of American public life, and not just national politics. Politics can be somewhat less ideological and dysfunctional at the local level. It is easier to help people engage with public life at the local level.

HIDDEN COMMON GROUND INITIATIVE

- This initiative challenges the increasingly dominant narrative of a hopelessly divided America by identifying and elevating the areas and narratives where Americans agree on solutions to politically polarized issues, and by fostering productive dialogue on areas of disagreement.
- For example, on the issue of economic opportunity, there was common ground on such measures as raising the minimum wage, ensuring affordable childcare, and investing in a job-creating infrastructure.
- These emerging insights need to be brought alive to help the American people absorb and act on the information. The Hidden Common Ground Initiative and Strange Bedfellows stories try to do this via community-based journalism and online dialogue. The Strange Bedfellows stories featured real people working together across lines of difference to solve community problems.

Miriam Juan-Torres

MORE IN COMMON

- More in Common's mission is to build a more united and inclusive America—where there is a deep commitment to shared democratic culture, and where all Americans feel they can belong.

POLARIZATION AS A STRATEGY AND A PROCESS

- As a strategy, political leaders and grassroots activists choose to use polarization to mobilize a base and appeal to emotions.
- As a process, polarization can occur as a top-down phenomenon, but it can be also engrained in society in ways that become a vicious cycle. There are many social, economic, demographic, and cultural factors at the root of polarization.
- The United States is a country that is polarized with defined groups of people who are diametrically opposed.
- Issue-based polarization is overstated because the issues we disagree on are overblown. The issues on which there is more agreement do not get as much coverage.
- In contrast to other countries, groups at the extremes in the United States tend to be quite consistent in the way identities coalesce around issue areas. This conflict extension, when members of a group converge across issues, does not happen everywhere. For example, in the United Kingdom, identities and alliances formed for Brexit do not hold for issue areas like migration or inequality. It is a bulwark against the kind of polarization seen in the United States.
- Society appears less polarized when we examine people's core beliefs and values, rather than look at everything through the lens of Democrat or Republican. Despite two very polarized and active groups at the extremes, there are less polarized groups that comprise most of society.

PERCEPTION GAP

- More in Common's research shows that people hold inaccurate views of what the other side thinks.
- Taken to the extreme, misperceptions of the other side can lead to dehumanization and increase the likelihood of violence.

WORKING TOWARDS SOLUTIONS

- Think about how we are creating public online spaces—people are more likely to be polarizing in online spaces.
- Address the social, economic, and cultural factors at the root of polarization.
- Offer positive narratives that disrupt divisiveness.
- Dismantle the caricatures and undo the dehumanization of opponents.
- We must embrace complexity. People cannot be reduced to their party identity or a particular ideological belief.
- Analyzing everything through the lens of Democrat and Republican puts the focus on political affiliation, which is often not the most important component of people's identities.
- Think about solutions grounded in our understanding of social psychology.
- Supporting in-group moderates could be the most effective strategy to combatting polarization and stopping the erosion of democratic norms.
- In light of what happened on 6 January, we need a process of accountability and reconciliation.
- Separate our understanding of societal polarization from efforts to counter extremism. Polarization and political violence are connected, but we need separate interventions.

Question and Answer Takeaways

ATTENDEES HAD THE OPPORTUNITY to ask the panelists questions following the panel discussion.

Regarding private versus public negotiations, are private negotiations not already a part of the process?

- Harbridge-Yong: Certainly, private negotiations happen. They currently get a bad rap as being inappropriate in the democratic process. We should not think of them as bad for the democratic process and, in particular, for reaching bipartisan agreements. At the state level, there are many transparency laws that prohibit private negotiations.

The role of media and social media in creating echo chambers raises questions about the need to regulate. How do you view this?

- Juan-Torres: We cannot point to social media as being the main or sole culprit of the polarization we are seeing in the United States—though it is a nefarious actor in many respects. We know that algorithms contribute to further polarization. We need additional transparency to understand how social media operates, and how it exploits people’s psychological vulnerabilities.
- Friedman: Hidden Common Ground research found a correlation between the media outlets people favored and how they see the other side. Additionally, people believe social media contributes a great deal to polarization, and they may be open to seeing things done about it.

About 85 percent of congressional representatives get reelected, which means we are sending to Washington, D.C. the same people who have proven they cannot work in a bipartisan way. Is there any way to break this vicious cycle related to reelection?

- Harbridge-Yong: Examine the state legislatures which put into place term limits. Term limits increase polarization rather than reducing it by making legislators more reliant on party leadership. The parties get more involved in recruiting candidates to run. A better alternative would be to get more voters to support moderate candidates in primaries, and punish legislators who refuse to compromise.

What can the average voter do to show they are fed-up and want to see the two parties work together to solve problems?

- Friedman: We need disincentives for divisive candidates and office holders, and rewards for leaders who try to be less divisive. Also, look beyond national politics. To get past polarization, we need to help people solve local problems and vote differently at the state and local levels.

Can crises be a catalyst for change that moves people together?

- Harbridge-Yong: In times of crises, there is a “rally around the flag” effect, and people do come together. We did not see that throughout the pandemic, however. If we do not see leaders signaling bipartisanship and coming together, we will not necessarily see that in the mass public. There was some degree of unity after 6 January, but that unity did not last because the root of the conflict is quite partisan in nature.
- Friedman: Public support for Biden’s inaugural address across the board may be an example of us feeling like we came through a crisis. Coalition-building from the bottom up may turn into something that can begin to change our political culture.
- Juan-Torres: It is going to require a society-wide effort to put an end to the polarizing trends we are experiencing and to address the root causes of polarization. We will need a reconciliation agenda to lower the temperature.

How does gerrymandering contribute to polarization?

- Harbridge-Yong: The Senate and House have polarized at the same rate, even though there is no redistricting or gerrymandering in the Senate. We also know that polarization increases between election cycles, not just every 10 years. The geographic clustering of people is perhaps more of a problem for our contemporary politics.

Any advice for educators on how to address a significantly polarized society with our students?

- Friedman: We need to teach children to deal with differences and different opinions constructively and productively. We also need to teach adults how to do that.
- Juan-Torres: Younger generations are more comfortable with certain kinds of diversity, but we also need to expose them to different moral and political viewpoints.