



DEPOLARIZING THE AMERICAN MIND

How America Can Grow Beyond Its Currently Polarized Politics

Abridged Version, October 2014

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NOTE: This paper is an abridged, introductory version of the Institute for Cultural Evolution's longer white paper "Depolarizing the American Mind." For a more in-depth analysis including a summary of our proposed "Synthesis Platform" and a Polarization Test, read the long paper at www.culturalevolution.org/campaign-issues/political-polarization/

POLITICAL GRIDLOCK IN WASHINGTON is one of the most troubling problems faced by America today. The polarized state of our democracy has been called a "wicked problem" because there are multiple causes but no clear solutions. The costs of polarization, however, are easy to recognize. As a result of this logjam in the legislature, action on other pressing problems is stalled. Important issues such as income inequality, climate change, budget deficits, campaign finance reform, immigration reform, and tax reform all remain unaddressed.

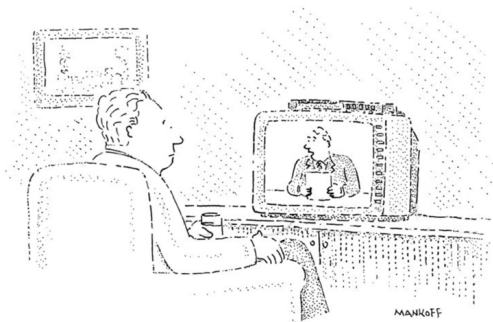
The problem of political polarization is now being analyzed by some of America's best minds and a variety of proposals to reduce the gridlock have begun circulating in the marketplace of ideas. Some proposals call for a revitalization of the political center through the formation of a third party that represents independent voters.¹ Others recommend action at the state level that employs ballot referendums to disempower partisan control over primaries and congressional redistricting.² Still others argue that polarization results from the corrupting influence of money in politics, which causes legislators to answer more to special interest groups and large campaign contributors than to voters who favor bipartisan compromise.³ Many of these proposals tend to assume that the problem lies with the parties or structural elements within our political system. Polarization, in other words, is seen as unrepresentative of the people's will. However, as Harvard professor Jill Lepore points out in a recent article in *The New Yorker*, "if polarization happens first among the electorate, and only later in Congress, then voters are driving it, in which case it is 'representation.'"⁴

Here at the Institute for Cultural Evolution (ICE) we are in favor of many of the proposals that have been advanced by others, but our focus is on understanding the cultural roots of the problem and envisioning the cultural solutions that could emerge. We believe it's critical to address the ideational divide that exists within the electorate itself, which is ultimately producing the polarized "representation" that Lepore identifies.

WHAT IS CAUSING THE POLARIZATION?

While our gridlocked government may be at least partially representative of a polarized culture, there are few who are happy about the results. And it seems like the default assumption, and the position often repeated in the mainstream media, is that both sides are responsible, which leads to the conclusion that the appropriate remedy is for politicians to simply meet in the middle and compromise for the greater good.

Both parties are not, however, equally responsible. Political scientists attribute much of the current polarization to the Republican Party's shift to the right over the past twenty years, even while Democrats have remained in relatively the same center-left position they have occupied since the Clinton administration. Arguing that conservatives have a covert interest in maintaining polarization, political scientists Matthew Nisbet and Dietram Scheufele conclude that the responsibility to overcome the current situation rests primarily with liberals:



"In Washington today, the sun rose over Capitol Hill and received broad bipartisan support."

If liberals respond to the provocations of the Right with rigidity, vitriol, outrage, and a growing unwillingness to compromise, they only strengthen the hand of their opponents . . . Conservatives, in this sense, are playing a long game, happy to starve the beast and delighted by dysfunction, even when they control the government. For this reason, as liberals unwittingly conspire to turn American politics into a zero-sum game, conservatives win even when they lose.⁵

At ICE, we agree that the responsibility for overcoming polarization falls primarily to liberals and progressives. But our reasons differ. We believe that the causes of polarization are in fact to be found not just in the Republican retrenchment of the past twenty years, but in the liberal and progressive flowering that happened in the decades before that. We argue it is the perceived threats posed by the cultural developments that began in the 1960s and 70s that have pushed many Republicans to move further to the right.

In the 1960s and 1970s, America's "liberal consensus" became destabilized by the rise of a distinct countercultural worldview, which ICE identifies by the defined term "postmodernism" (used in the general sense to refer to America's progressive cultural demographic and not in the more narrow academic sense). This progressive postmodern worldview burst onto the political scene with all the promise and excesses characteristic of new movements. As millions began to identify with the values of this worldview, it changed the political dynamics of the country permanently. The "post-war consensus" that had informed politics for the previous decades was effectively broken.

Initially, the emergence of postmodern culture created a series of progressive passions, many of which turned into policy—environmentalism and the EPA, the peace movement, the anti-nuclear movement, the consumer protection movement. Our culture was evolving, but with that evolution came a whole new set of problems. By the 1980s, the Democratic Party had become overly identified with postmodern extremes and weakened by the internal struggle between its mainstream liberal traditions (liberal “modernists”) and the influx and energy of millions of Boomers operating within the context of this new postmodern progressivism. While the Democrats struggled to resolve these internal tensions, the conservative movement rallied, leading Reagan into office on the backs of many crossover “Reagan Democrats,” frustrated with the Democrats' embrace of countercultural positions still out of step with the majority of the country.

Then in the Clinton Era, the Democrats began to move back toward the center, upsetting the more progressive postmodern elements of the electorate, but achieving more success in Presidential politics. As the Democrats moved toward the center, the Republicans engaged in a battle for their own party—stay centrist or move right? Conservative political, economic, and social issues won the day, moderates were slowly purged, practical governance was de-emphasized, economic positions reflected a more laissez-faire approach, and the culture wars heated up. The “healthy centrism” of the postwar era now seems consigned to the history books of a simpler time and a less complex culture. Compromise has thus become ever more difficult, resulting in an increasingly dysfunctional political system, which can only be understood through an increasingly sophisticated cultural analysis.

ICE’s polarization analysis starts with understanding the more complex political playing field that now exists (see Figure 1, right), and in particular, the new political dynamics that have arisen along with this progressive postmodern segment of our population (which represents around 20% of the electorate by some estimates⁶ and is largely ignored by mainstream pundits). On one hand, postmodernism has the potential to be the most evolved form of culture yet to appear. In many respects, its values and concerns have already transformed our society. Who would have imagined fifty years ago that ecological values and sustainability issues could work themselves so deeply into the American economic system, or that social justice issues like gay rights (and civil rights and women’s rights) could rapidly become mainstream? Indeed, despite its reflexive rejection of the establishment, this worldview’s values point toward part of the necessary future course of our ethical and cultural development. Unlike centrist proposals, which seek to “cut off the extremes,” ICE’s analysis recognizes the importance of postmodernism’s role as the most progressive segment of American culture.

On the other hand, postmodernism is too immature and countercultural to provide effective leadership for the nation as a whole. In fact, we

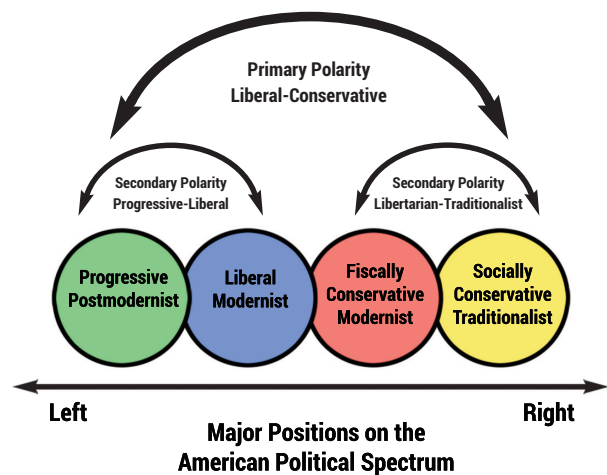


Figure 1. Liberal-conservative polarities among various positions in the electorate

suggest that it is postmodernism's current polarizing stance of staunch antithesis to the mainstream that is effectively inhibiting the further evolution of American society overall. Because postmodern positions tend to threaten the very identity of many modernist and traditionalist Americans, progressive demands for change often end up transforming important national policy issues into "identity issues."

This can be seen in the case of climate change. Studies show that one's position on climate change can now be reliably predicted by one's party affiliation.⁷ Even the use of the word "environmentalism" has now become highly polarizing. As another recent example, Michelle Obama's call for better nutritional standards in schools has made healthy eating an identity issue, a new front in the culture war. And once a political position is seen as threatening one's very identity, meaningful dialogue and compromise become impossible. As a result, managing America's highly polarized democracy will inevitably entail the emergence of a less countercultural, less polarizing "Future Left."

PRINCIPLES FOR WORKING WITH POLARITIES

Part of the key to overcoming polarization is to recognize how polarities can function as *systems of development*. And while polarities are everywhere, it is important to distinguish between two essential kinds. The first kind of polarity is straightforwardly "good and bad." For example, prosperity is good and poverty is bad. The second basic kind of polarity, however, is *positive-positive*, wherein both sides of the opposition are worthy of preservation and respect, as seen in the positive-positive polarity of "individual and community" or "freedom and order." With positive-positive polarities, opposing but necessary interests require continuous rebalancing or reconciling as conditions develop over time.

A common mistake is to approach a positive-positive polarity as a problem to be solved rather than as a developmental system to be managed. According to polarity management consultant Barry Johnson, "Polarities to manage are sets of opposites which can't function well independently. Because the two sides of a polarity are interdependent, you cannot choose one as a 'solution' and neglect the other. The objective ... is to get the best of both opposites while avoiding the limits of each."⁸

This "evolutionary" understanding of positive-positive existential polarities serves as the guiding principle of ICE's proposal for ameliorating political polarization in America. We seek to help voters overcome the view that the liberal-conservative polarity is fundamentally *positive-negative*, with the "negative side" seen as whichever pole one opposes. We argue that the liberal-conservative polarity is in fact fundamentally positive-positive—that the best aspects of both sides need each other and are worthy of preservation. Even though the liberal-conservative polarity is relatively permanent and existential, it does change and evolve, reappearing in new form as conditions change. So although the contemporary American manifestation of this liberal-conservative polarity appears to be stuck, preventing any progress whatsoever, history teaches that it will eventually and inevitably reappear in the future in a reconfigured but nevertheless recognizable form.

Our campaign to reduce polarization thus seeks to influence both Democrats and Republicans by suggesting what forward movement means for each. Our proposed solution involves demonstrating how each political pole can better

use and include the essential truths and values of the pole that opposes it. We accordingly describe the *future state* of this existential political opposition by anticipating the form that the “Future Left” and “Future Right” will likely take in the decades ahead. We then use these “more evolved” political positions to fashion a *synthesis platform* (outlined in our unabridged paper “Depolarizing the American Mind”) that can be used in the present to reduce the hardened state of opposition that has made our democracy dysfunctional.

The higher-level synthesis we propose can be distinguished from the familiar centrist approach in that we are not attempting to “split the difference” between the current positions of the Democratic and Republican parties. For example, we envision future left-wing positions that better appreciate the need for limited government and the preservation of market freedoms, and future right-wing positions that better acknowledge the imperative for social justice and environmentally sustainable economic growth. Let’s take a closer look at some brief sketches of these future political constellations, based on our analysis and observation of what is already beginning to emerge.

THE FUTURE LEFT: “OPTIMISTIC POSTMODERNISTS”

The relatively small size of the postmodern segment of the electorate means that their impact at the ballot box is not decisive. But their influence on American culture far exceeds their numbers. Therefore, any proposed solutions to polarization that target the cultural dimension of the problem, seeking more sustainable longer-term solutions, must reckon with both the role postmodernists have played in causing polarization as well as the indispensable role they must play in helping us grow out of the problem.

To some extent, the cultural tension that postmodernists exert will be with us for a long time. Their countercultural anti-modernism is simply part of their value system. But it can be moderated. Its values and political discourse can become more inclusive and mature. Indeed, while many postmodernists will undoubtedly continue to reject the mainstream culture of modernism, postmodern political positions can be evolved or otherwise improved by helping postmodernists better appreciate how healthy forms of modernism provide an indispensable foundation for postmodern culture as a whole. An important goal of the synthesis platform is thus to persuade significant numbers of postmodernists to move away from their current stance of antithesis to a more synthetic stance, one that is more positive and “optimistic” about America’s future and its ongoing influence in the world.

The promotion of greater optimism within postmodern culture is needed to counteract the highly polarizing pessimistic tone of its discourse, which often assigns malicious motivations to its cultural opponents. For example, the well-meaning but highly polarizing Occupy Wall Street movement essentially rejects the legitimacy of the American establishment and seeks to overturn America’s capitalist, market-oriented foundations. This staunch rejectionism exacerbates polarization and contributes to the relative political impotency of much of the progressive agenda.

Here we return to our opening premise: that the Left is primarily responsible for overcoming our current polarization because they are most invested in achieving cultural progress and because it is their cultural emergence that destabilized America’s former liberal consensus of the 1960s. No matter how much blame for the current problem we may assign to right-wing groups such as the Tea Party, the job of reducing our democracy’s stagnation belongs more

on the progressive side of the divide. To borrow one of their favorite slogans, progressives need to “be the change” themselves by becoming more accepting of other worldviews and thus less polarizing in their demands. The Left of the future will need to be less hostile to the institutions and values of Right-leaning America, recognizing them to have a foundational and ongoing role to play in making the world a better place.

THE FUTURE RIGHT: “PROGRESSIVE LIBERTARIANS”

While we argue that responsibility for ameliorating polarization rests primarily with the Left (which includes both liberal modernists and progressive postmodernists), any authentic synthesis must involve movement on the Right as well.

While the label “libertarian” includes a wide spectrum of political positions, we think the phrase “progressive libertarian” is appropriate to describe the emerging position of the Future Right. Those who adopt this political stance will not be doctrinaire followers of Ayn Rand. Rather, they will hold the values of individual liberty, economic progress, and limited government, while at the same time integrating the values of environmental sustainability and tolerant diversity into their positions. Indeed, the value of limiting the size and reach of the Federal government is deeply rooted in American history, as exemplified by the old American truism: “The government that governs least governs best.”

Examples of “progressive libertarianism” in action can be found in the movement for *Conscious Capitalism*, as described in the book by the same title by ICE partner John Mackey, co-founder and CEO of Whole Foods Markets.⁹ The Conscious Capitalism movement includes both progressive libertarians and optimistic postmodernists, but within this sub-culture all parties agree that America’s free market system creates tremendous value, and that we can continue to improve this system in a way that retains its strengths while reducing its negative externalities.

CONCLUSION

Obviously, a complete and detailed description of both the Future Right and the Future Left is beyond the scope of this paper. (How this thesis applies to specific policy positions is outlined in more detail in the unabridged version.) But though it would be a mistake to try to define these fluid and still forming positions in a fixed or definite way, working to anticipate and imagine how politics will evolve in the future provides guidance for the problems we face today. By recognizing and supporting early cultural forms of these Future Left and Right positions, we can encourage their growth and development, and discover policy areas where compromise and synthesis are more likely to bear fruit. In this way, we can foster the depolarization of the American electorate and ultimately the American political system. Cultural evolution, and the new problems it created, is what got us into this mess. We thus maintain that only further development, helped along by smart, caring individuals and institutions, will lead us out. ■

For a more in-depth analysis of America’s political polarization including a summary of our proposed “Synthesis Platform” and a Polarization Test, read the long version of this paper at www.culturalevolution.org/campaign-issues/political-polarization/

ABOUT THE INSTITUTE FOR CULTURAL EVOLUTION (“ICE”): Founded in 2013, ICE is a 501c3 nonprofit think tank organized around the goal of applying groundbreaking insights taken from Integral philosophy, developmental psychology, evolutionary theory, and the social sciences to help create significant forward movement in the evolution of the American cultural and political landscape. ICE is focused on creating small but critical shifts in public opinion, opening up new opportunities for political action. www.culturalevolution.org.

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NOTES:

¹ See: Charles Wheelan, *The Centrist Manifesto* (W. W. Norton & Company, 2013) and <http://www.centristproject.org>.

² See: Mickey Edwards, *The Parties Versus the People: How to Turn Republicans and Democrats into Americans* (Yale University Press 2013).

³ See: Lawrence Lessig, *Republic Lost: How Money Corrupts Progress—and a Plan to Stop It* (Twelve, 2011).

⁴ Jill Lepore, “Long Division, Measuring the Polarization of American Politics,” *The New Yorker*, December 2, 2013.

⁵ Nisbet and Scheufele, “The Polarization Paradox, Why Hyperpartisanship Strengthens Conservatism and Undermines Liberalism” *The Breakthrough Institute Journal*, Summer 2012.

⁶ See, e.g. Robert Inglehart, ed. *Human Values and Social Change* (New York: Brill 2003); Paul Ray and Sherry Anderson. *The Cultural Creatives, How 50 Million People are Changing the World* (New York: Harmony Books 2000); and Jenny Wade. *Changes of Mind: A Holonomic Theory of the Evolution of Consciousness* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press 1996).

⁷ See e.g.: <http://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2012/10/121004134731.htm>, and <http://www.climateaccess.org/blog/exploring-role-political-identity-climate-attitudes-highlights-becc-2013>.

⁸ Barry Johnson, *Polarity Management* (HRD Press 1996) p. xviii.

⁹ See John Mackey and Rajendra Sisodia, *Conscious Capitalism: Liberating the Heroic Spirit of Business* (Harvard Business Review Press, 2014). See also <http://www.consciouscapitalism.org>.