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BETTER ANGELS

The Top 14 Causes of Political Polarization

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Why we can't stand each other, explained.

Why do Americans increasingly believe that those in the other party are not only misguided, but are also bad people whose views are so dangerously wrong-headed and crazy as to be all but incomprehensible? What has created what Arthur Brooks in his forthcoming book calls a “culture of contempt” in American politics and public life?

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I'm glad you asked! Behold a baker's-dozen worth of causes.

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1. *The end of the Cold War.* The West's victory in the Cold War means that (with the possible exception of jihadi terrorism) there is no longer a global enemy to keep us united as we focus on a powerful and cohesive external threat.

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2. *The rise of identity-group politics.* On both the Left and the Right, the main conceptual frameworks have largely shifted in focus from unifying values to group identities. As Amy Chua puts it in *Political Tribes* (2018): “The Left believes that right-wing tribalism—bigotry, racism—is tearing the country apart. The Right believes that left-wing tribalism—identity politics, political correctness—is tearing the country apart. They are both right.” (Never mind here the possibly problematic usage of the terms “tribe” and “tribal.”)

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3. *Growing religious diversity.* Current trends in American religion reflect as well as contribute to political polarization. One trend is growing secularization, including a declining share of Americans who are Christians, less public confidence in organized religion, and rising numbers of religiously unaffiliated Americans. One consequence is an increasingly open contestation of Christianity's once-dominant role in

American public and political culture. But another trend is the continuing, and in some respects intensifying, robustness of religious faith and practice in many parts of the society. This growing religious divide helps to explain the rise of several of the most polarizing social issues in our politics, such as gay marriage and abortion. It also contributes to polarizing the two political parties overall, as religious belief becomes an increasingly important predictor of party affiliation. For example, among Democrats and Democratic-leaning U.S. adults, religiously unaffiliated voters (the “nones”) are now more numerous than Catholics, evangelical Protestants, mainline Protestants, or members of historically black Protestant traditions, whereas socially and theologically conservative Christians today are overwhelmingly Republican.

4. Growing racial and ethnic diversity. In the long run, increased racial and ethnic diversity is likely a strength. But in the short run—which means now—it contributes to a decline in social trust (the belief that we can understand and count on one another) and a rise in social and political conflict.

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5. The passing of the Greatest Generation. We don’t call them the greatest for no reason. Their generational values, forged in the trials of the Great Depression and World War II—including a willingness to sacrifice for country, concern for the general welfare, a mature character structure, and adherence to a shared civic faith—reduced social and political polarization. Thus, note:

I didn’t vote for him but he’s my President, and I hope he does a good job.
—John Wayne (b. 1907) on the election of John F. Kennedy in 1960

I hope he fails.

—Rush Limbaugh (b. 1951) on the election of Barack Obama in 2008

6. Geographical sorting. Americans today are increasingly living in politically like-minded communities. Living only or mainly with like-minded neighbors makes us both more extreme and more certain in our political beliefs. As Bill Bishop and Robert Cushing put it in *The Big Sort* (2008): “Mixed company moderates; like-minded company polarizes. Heterogeneous communities restrain group excesses; homogeneous communities march toward the extremes.”

Percent of U.S. voters living in counties in which a presidential candidate won by a “landslide” margin of 20 percent or more of the vote:

1976: 25

2016: 60

7. Political party sorting. Once upon a time, there were such creatures as liberal Republicans and conservative Democrats. No longer. The parties have sorted philosophically such that today almost all liberals are Democrats and all conservatives are Republicans. One main result is that the partisan gap between the parties is wide and getting wider.

Across 10 measures that Pew Research Center has tracked on the same surveys since 1994, the average partisan gap has increased from 15 percentage points to 36 points.

—Pew Research Center, 2017

8. New rules for Congress. The weakening and in some cases elimination of “regular order”—defined broadly as the rules, customs, and precedents intended to promote orderly and deliberative policymaking—as well as the erosion of traditions such as Senatorial courtesy and social fraternization across party lines—have contributed dramatically to less trust and more animosity in the Congress, thus increasing polarization.

It’s hard to exaggerate how much House Republicans and Democrats dislike each other these days.

—Juliet Eilperin, *Fight Club Politics* (2006)

9. New rules for political parties. Many reforms in how we nominate, elect, and guide our political leaders—shifting the power of nomination from delegates to primaries, dismantling political machines, replacing closed-door politics with televised politics, and shrinking the influence of career politicians—aimed to democratize the system. But these changes also replaced the “middle men” who helped keep the system together with a political free-for-all in which the loudest and most extreme voices are heard above all others.

As these intermediaries’ influence fades, politicians, activists, and voters all become more individualistic and unaccountable. The system atomizes. Chaos becomes the new normal both in campaigns and in the government itself.

—Jonathan Rauch, “How American Politics Went Insane,” 2016

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10. *New political donors.* In earlier eras, money in American politics tended to focus on candidates and parties, while money from today's super-rich donors tends to focus on ideas and ideology—a shift that also tends to advance polarization.

11. *New political districts.* Widespread gerrymandering—defined as manipulating district boundaries for political advantage—contributes significantly to polarization, most obviously by making candidates in gerrymandered districts worry more about being “primaried” by a more extreme member of their own party than about losing the general election.

12. *The spread of media ghettos.* The main features of the old analog media—including editing, fact-checking, professionalization, and the privileging of institutions over individuals—served as a credentialing system for American political expression. The distinguishing feature of the new digital media—the fact that anyone can publish anything that gains views and clicks—is replacing that old system with a non-system that is atomized and largely leaderless. One result made possible by this change is that Americans can now live in media ghettos. If I wish, I can live all day every day encountering in my media travels only those views with which I already agree. Living in a media ghetto means less that my views are shaped and improved, much less challenged, than that they are hardened and made more extreme; what might've been analysis weakens into partisan talking points dispensed by identity-group leaders; moreover, because I'm exposed only to the most cartoonish, exaggerated versions of my opponents' views, I come to believe that those views are so unhinged and irrational as to be dangerous. More broadly, the new media resemble and reinforce the new politics, such that the most reliable way to succeed in either domain is to be the most noisome, outrageous, and polarizing.

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13. *The decline of journalistic responsibility.* The dismantling of the old media has been accompanied by, and has probably helped cause, a decline in journalistic standards. These losses to society include journalists who'll accept poor quality in pursuit of volume and repetition as well as the blurring and even erasure of boundaries between news and opinion, facts and non-facts, and journalism and entertainment. These losses feed polarization.

What have we learned so far from this survey of polarization causes?

I'd say, four things. I'd also say, not enough to get to the heart of the matter.

For starters, we could probably make the list longer. For example, we could plausibly argue that rising income equality should be added (though in my view the evidence on this one is ambiguous). Second, we can see that some of these causes are ones we either can't do much about or wouldn't want to even if we could. Third, few if any of these causes contain the quality of intentionality: None of them wake up each morning and say, "Let's polarize!" Even those coming closest to reflecting the intention to polarize, such as gerrymandering, reflect other and more fundamental intentions, such as winning elections, advancing a political agenda, or gaining clicks or viewers.

The fourth conclusion is the most important. None of these 13 causes *directly* perpetuate polarization. They are likely what analysts would call distal (ultimate) causes, but they are not proximate (immediate, direct) causes. They seem to have shaped an environment that incentivizes polarization, but they are not themselves the human words and deeds that polarize.

And so our baker's-dozen list ultimately doesn't satisfy. We need a 14th cause, arguably the most important one. It's certainly the most direct and immediate, the most proximate, cause of polarization.

14. *The growing influence of certain ways of thinking about each other.* These polarizing habits of mind and heart include:

- Favoring binary (either/or) thinking.
- Absolutizing one's preferred values.
- Viewing uncertainty as a mark of weakness or sin.
- Indulging in motivated reasoning (always and only looking for evidence that supports your side).
- Relying on deductive logic (believing that general premises justify specific conclusions).
- Assuming that one's opponents are motivated by bad faith.
- Permitting the desire for approval from an in-group ("my side") to guide one's thinking.
- Succumbing intellectually and spiritually to the desire to dominate others (what Saint Augustine called *libido dominandi*).

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- Declining for oppositional reasons to agree on basic facts and on the meaning of evidence.

These ways of thinking constitute the actual precipitation of polarization—the direct and immediate causes of holding exaggerated and stereotyped views of each other, treating our political opponent as enemies, exhibiting growing rancor and aggression in public life, and acting as if common ground does not exist.

What’s the lesson here? Although we didn’t think our way into polarization—larger and more distal forces shaped the prospects for it—we’ll need largely to think our way out. At this point in the process, unless some cataclysmic social change (economic collapse, another world war) does it for us, the first thing to change to get out of this mess is our minds.

One final consideration. It would be nice to make a straightforward “us versus them” enemies list when it comes to who’s to blame for polarization. But the fact is, none of us is pure—besides which the impulse to create an enemies list is part of the problem, not part of the solution. Some of us are more inclined to polarizing habits than others; some of us when we foster polarization are more aware of what we’re doing than others; and some of us (more and more of us, it seems) make a pretty good living these days out of encouraging and participating in polarization. But the habits and temptations of polarization are always with all of us. That includes you and me, by the way. The fault, dear reader, is not just in our 13 stars, but also in ourselves.

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