

The Reach

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Abstract

The United States of America is often regarded as the model example of democracy in the modern world. Within its borders, however, it grapples with a domestic issue far more dangerous than any foreign threat: polarization. 21st century politics in America is devoid of compromise and cooperation. The unrelenting growth of division in the country calls for judgment.

This is an opinion piece on the dysfunctional state of our union. I discuss how polarization can be weaponized, the data legitimizing our selfish nature, how empathy can be our greatest skill, and the power behind changing our minds. Most importantly – that our founding institutions warn against these political fissures and how history teaches us to combat them.

“America will never be destroyed from the outside. If we falter and lose our freedoms, it will be because we destroyed ourselves.”

- Abraham Lincoln -

For a country which frequently parades its unrelenting commitment to the truth, it's ironic it is so comfortable lying to the world, or more significantly, lying to itself – as the most successful lie even convinces, in the end, the mind of its architect. However, the expanse of *this* lie in particular is so frightful because of its need to bare itself so loudly, so proudly, that its falsehood is almost forgotten. Almost. How inappropriate is it to allow this lie to spread on sticky squares for mail, through the media, on cash, on the engravings of coins, through even the encouragement of children to rise from their school seats daily, put their hands on their hearts and pledge it? The lie in question refers to the unyielding fabrication that America truly deserves the moniker of: The *United* States. Because we're not, and we haven't been for a very long time.

When I say that, do you feel a pull to defend our great nation? Itching to list our never-ending internal issues? Maybe you agreed? Maybe you were indifferent.

Of course, your response likely varies between topics, but this division is common for any nation. Therefore, the etymology of designating that division as *polarization* is important when understanding its effects in the modern day. Polarization as a term has existed for centuries, but it was used exclusively for the natural sciences and had “acquired a variety of meanings” describing circumstances in which “phenomena like light” moves, according to Dr. Andreas Schedler – a Senior Research Fellow at the Central European University Democracy Institute. However, Schedler traces the first entry of the term into the world of *politics* back to 1862, when a distressed political commentator in Britain labeled the growing antagonistic culture between the Whigs and Tories as “wretched polarization of our whole national thought” (Schedler, 2023). Since then, the appellation has served to describe various confrontations between deep-rooted political groups.

Don't fret if you had any response, or none, because it isn't differences of opinion that divide this country today: it is our indifference towards the Reach.

The Reach is the principle that despite our human nature to further only our individual interests, we actively choose to coexist with each other. We choose to bind the threads of our various lifestyles, religions, opinions, races, and ages together in the investment of compromise. We choose to respect our diversity. To *reach* beyond our average lifespans to just simply learn something about somebody else, so we can intentionally *choose* to be "United".

If that sounds unthinkable, I promise it is a principle we are familiar with. When a congressman could vote in favor of a bill introduced by their opposing party because it brought jobs to their district. When we saw the oppression of a minority group and could agree it was against our founding principles. When John McCain told his Republican voters that more than anything else, his Democratic opponent Barack Obama was a "decent, family man" who he happened to have "disagreements" with. When neither party claimed the other was against the entirety of democracy. Times when we saw those different from us and still reached out a hand.

When we were capable of logic and compassion.

Let's pause. If the word polarization is used to describe any political clash between habitual groups of people, scholars make those seemingly infinite designations digestible into two major classifications: ideological [differences concerning policy] and affective [a dislike/distrust of groups different than your own] (Iyengar et al., 2019). It's important to break down the etymology and categories of the term in this way, because it gives confidence to any victim of it that it *is* indeed predictable and extensively studied. This is a critical lesson:

polarization is not some exotic oddity we can never quite explain. It's known, defined, and not hostile in nature - like it can often feel.

If this is the truth, why should we care and when does this become an uniquely American problem? Well, in regards to the United States, polarization has skyrocketed in the last four decades compared to our international peers. Brown University's Jesse Shapiro and his new research in comparative politics wanted to explore to what extent polarization affects the U.S. and why we're so much more fractured than our democratic allies. In the study, Shapiro presents, for the first time, evidence on trends across multiple nations in *affective* polarization (AP). Remember, this is a circumstance where people feel more negatively toward political groups they are not a part of than toward groups they are. They found that in the U.S., AP has increased more significantly [since the late 1970s] than in any of the other eight countries they researched — the U.K., Canada, Australia, New Zealand, Germany, Switzerland, Norway and Sweden. In five of those countries, polarization even *declined* and nowhere has it risen as fast as here. There is no educated republic in the world more dysfunctional than America today. We should be excelling in education, technological innovation, renewable energy, even human rights – not standing alone as an outlier for hatred of those 'different' from us. Hate? *Of all things?* It's shameful, especially for a country built on the foundations of compromise.

We need to understand that this trend not only affects the way we treat each other, but it drives the decisions our representatives make. Clearly, this is a major issue for our democratic institutions. But, why has the U.S. evolved in this direction? Shapiro says it may be because parties have become considerably more aligned with distinct ideologies, races, and religious identities. If you belong to certain groups and become aligned with the party which best represents you, this evolution has normalized the practice of treating those with different views

than your own with less respect, because your party *models* that behavior. It's difficult to be moderate when people who look like you, live near you, believe in the same faith as you, and vote like you are collectively embracing more extreme positions. And they're embracing those positions because the person next to *them* is doing it. And so on. It's difficult to be temperate when the positions behind many policies today are either hot or cold, yes or no; following very binary structures. We've created tribes. I believe it's easier for us to get behind the more radical school of thought of our in-group than jump tenfold to the unfamiliar out-group, who are also completely polarized in the opposite direction. If parties have begun distinguishing based on identity, even the *thought* of switching parties or reaching across the aisle is lost if you don't possess an identity the opposing party has defined themselves with. It seems as if they'd never accept you and you could never be a successful contributor to them, so why bother with the Reach? It's because of this social fear that the middle ground has vanished. It's difficult to practice the Reach when communities as a whole no longer value compromise. It's classic groupthink. It has been proven time and time again that people *will* adopt the opinion of a group at the expense of their own values.

While our political polarization may not seem so dire outside of election seasons, forgetting the Reach has been the root of many domestic threats this century. Most recently, let us observe the Capitol riots of January 6th, 2021. This was an event born from a group of people, white Americans, feeling that their place in society was threatened. Their political leader, former President Donald J. Trump, was adamant that day to use polarization as a match to spark action. While claiming election fraud in his speech at the beginning of that day, Trump told his supporters, "We're going to... the Capitol" and "if you don't fight like hell, you're not going to have a country anymore." This choice of framing and this need to designate his personal loss as

this world-ending, anti-democratic, institution-crumbling *fact* very literally sparked a mob to take their own mild differences of opinion and inflame them into physical actions. Trump knew how to harness the feeling behind belonging to a group. Almost all leaders do. When you give a mouse a cookie or, more accurately, give a dragon an unsuspecting village, you will see fire. January 6th proved to us that polarization can be weaponized.

The founding fathers, like a lot of their work, predicted this human flaw. They knew the dangers of distrusting our neighbors and advancing our own agendas at the expense of others, so they formed our Constitution. Yes, it's a document that tells the government what it can and can't do and *yes*, it does protect individual liberties, but it also chains selfishness and scolds isolation. No matter the interpretation of this document, one of its goals is astoundingly clear: to recognize our intersectionality and to promote our union by limiting individual rights for the common good. They recognized that the Reach was so important, they built the institutional framework of this country around it. We have repaid them by being inattentive to history.

Since the Constitution's inception, the tension within our society has been considerable. Lines have been so important to us. Black and White, federal and state, North and South, citizen and immigrant, farm and city, you name it. These borders are formed when in the face of our great diversity, we choose what's familiar. A timeworn story of the fear of the unknown. And in this fear, we want *our* lifestyles, our opinions, our faiths, our way of thinking to become the prevailing majority. So, we form factions of only what we are familiar with, adamant against the Reach.

Acknowledging this, I must return to my earlier point on the founding fathers' predictive prowess. In one of his many defenses of the document before its ratification, and perhaps his most famous, James Madison wrote that the Constitution would form a society capable of

controlling the damage of factions. Arguing that factions are inevitable given the nature of man and that for as long as we have different opinions – shared property, wealth, and fraternization with those of one’s own kind was unavoidable. Madison agreed that we must beware of factions. He warns us of polarization, even in the 1780s. But he also had the foresight to realize that if we wanted to cut off the causes of factions at their root, the government would have to infringe on civil liberties or even worse: attempt to give each person the same mindless opinion and thought. Neither option was appealing. So, Madison said that instead of attempting to create a “cure worse than the disease itself,” we must accept the reality of our nature and control a potentially violent majority through the compromises in what is now the Constitution. This is the famous “liberty for all.”

At the mention of *liberty*, our minds rush to correlate the term with freedom. Liberties, to us, are the rights that authority cannot abridge on, usually constitutionally or legislatively, that adheres us to our individuality. What's not to love? However, this is an incomplete interpretation of the service liberty performs for us today, especially as a deterrent for polarization.

The Bill of Rights is the quintessential embodiment of our active *choice* to coexist with one another’s selfish natures. The rights outlined in those ten amendments precisely established the Reach. All our freedoms, which we ironically fight over today, are many small compromises we agree to in order to keep our unity. They are as much a celebration of our differences as they are a protector against the national government. It is idealism repackaged as pragmatism. It was a call to action for the new colonies as Washington and Co. struggled to find their footing as a new nation. It is completely the first real breath that democracy took in the West. It was the most vulnerable step toward defining what it meant to be American and why we would be the greatest country in the world. It was to say that if we can’t live together, we are bound to die alone,

bound to pull apart as a people. The moniker of the “united states” is not meant to be nonchalant. It is not meant to be taken lightly. It is a bold name for a bold idea. A reminder that we choose not to let our innate fears overpower us and to put coexistence at the forefront of our needs. And yet, we’ve been remiss.

We have backslid into another period of forgetting that our greatest gift is our diversity and have begun feeling threatened by it. We must remember that to be American is to challenge, to come together and have discourse, to debate, to question, to value an opinion different from our own. To reach across the aisle because we have a government built on the soil of cooperation and negotiation.

We fail as a country when our leaders enter halls of power and insist on getting their way and their way only. Animosity is grossly un-American and goes against the heart of our nation. We must struggle so we can recognize what we can do better, but we must not let struggle we are unfamiliar with offend us away from reasonable action. Minority races continue to ask for true equality. Muslims, Hindus, Jews, and more continue to ask to be respected for their religious beliefs. Those with uncustomary sexual orientations fought the battle to be recognized by the state and *continue* to fight against discrimination in every aspect of life. And so, the wheel turns.

We’ve always been the country of ‘one person, one vote,’ but we have never been the country of one lifestyle, one opinion, one religion. Let us hear each other’s voices, share disagreements, have productive debates, and encourage empathy. Let us practice the forgotten tradition of the Reach, to take a hand that doesn’t look like our own and shake it for a future that looks brighter than our present. Our differences are part of the American story, but let us not let our incurable division become our story too.

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