

Overcoming polarization: Why and How?

We live in a polarized nation. Ideological division in America has been on the rise in recent years and is now at an all-time high.¹ In Congress, bipartisan compromise is becoming increasingly rare. Polarization on social and political issues is not confined to politicians but extends to ordinary citizens. Mutual dislike between the ideologically opposed is also at a record high. More and more, Americans feel antagonistic towards those with whom they disagree.

The questions of how we have become so polarized and how that trend can be reversed have received a considerable amount of attention.² The related questions of who holds responsibility for addressing polarization and what that responsibility entails are ones that I address later in this paper. But I wish to start by turning to some questions concerning the nature of polarization, beginning with this one: Why should we be troubled by polarization in the first place? The mere fact that people disagree, even strongly, about some issues does not in of itself seem to be cause for concern. What, then, is distinctive about polarization that sets it apart from other forms of disagreement?

I. The value of disagreement

Disagreement can be a good thing. John Stuart Mill famously defended the worth of the public airing of opposing viewpoints, including those that strike most people as ill-informed or repugnant. On the one hand, where a viewpoint is wrong or objectionable, subjecting it to scrutiny can serve to usefully illuminate its flaws. On the other hand, such critical assessment may sometimes lead us in a surprising direction: we may discover the merit of an unconventional idea or opinion. In either case, Mill maintained that exposure to conflicting perspectives in what he called ‘the marketplace of ideas’ provides the only stable means for individuals and communities to make progress.³ Conversely, he took people’s blind acceptance of conventional views to be a recipe for stagnation.

Thus it might appear that in virtue of its diversity America is in an enviable position. As a nation we not only tolerate difference: we celebrate it. Individuals of different religious faiths or none at all; of wide-ranging cultural, lingual, and ethnic traditions; of different races—all are recognized as equals in their status as Americans. We prize freedom of thought and expression, and accordingly we protect individuals’ rights to articulate their differences. Where perspectives clash, the parties to a disagreement may engage in a process of collective learning and profit from their differences. Disagreement need not be resolved in favor of one party or another, or lead to compromise, in order to have

¹ Haidt and Hetherington (2012).

² See, for instance, Sunstein (2009), Mann and Ornstein (2012), Edwards (2012).

³ Mill (1859[1963]).

value. Even where opponents simply agree to respectfully disagree, the process of mutual engagement can be valuable as people come to better appreciate and sympathize with their opponent's views. It is in these ways, in the spirit of Mill, that disagreement can be regarded as a keystone of our society's flourishing.

II. What makes polarization distinctive?

As Mill suggests, the value of disagreement lies in its capacity to promote learning, progress, and mutual understanding between individuals. But these benefits seem to be absent in cases of polarized disagreements. Polarized parties resist compromise. They remain steadfastly committed to their viewpoints without seriously considering those of their opponents. Mutual respect is not present. Where it is marked by polarization, disagreement is apparently devoid of the benefits Mill discusses. What is distinctive about polarized disagreement that makes this the case?

Not only is polarization indicative of deep division on an issue, but moreover it tends to involve the persistence of that division. It is enduring in character. The resistance on the part of the polarized to move past their differences is a product of how they perceive the disagreement itself as well as the stance they take towards their opponents. Those who are polarized on an issue are strongly committed to their positions. They tend to view their division in binary terms, rejecting even the conceptual possibility of an amenable middle-ground position. A statement made by President George W. Bush in the wake of the 9/11 terrorists attacks exemplifies this tendency: "You're either with us or against us in the fight against terror," he proclaimed to the world. He later spoke of the war on terror as "a confrontation between good and evil."⁴

Framing the differences between their position and their opponents' in absolute terms places constraints on how the parties can interact with respect to their ideological differences. The polarized tend to eschew the prospects of compromise or revision of their respective stances as acceptable ways of overcoming their dispute. Based on this perceived lack of common ground, the only desirable way to settle the clash in viewpoints, in the eyes of the polarized, is through their opponents coming to accept their position. Yet neither side is willing to budge. As such, it seems predictable that over time each party will come to regard their opponents as lying beyond the pale: despite an appeal to sound reasoning and to basic values, the other refuses to accept what is regarded by its proponent as a clearly well-grounded position.

This perceived defect in one's opponent may be regarded as a failure of reasoning or a moral failure. Either way, we would expect that it is extremely frustrating for a person to reach a point where she deems futile her efforts to convince others of her firm convictions. Thus members of each group come to regard the other as unreasonable or immoral and are on the receiving end of those same evaluations. Where each party is

⁴ CNN (2001) and Baker (2006).

unable to convince the other to accept its position, it is a mark of polarization that they both eventually disengage from further dialogue.

III. Why is polarization harmful?

Where disagreement is polarized, considerations raised by a different political philosopher, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, seem apt.⁵ Unlike Mill, ever the champion of diversity and robust debate, Rousseau was deeply pessimistic about the value of disagreement. In particular, he was wary of disagreement for its propensity to translate into divisiveness and thereby forestall social progress. This is precisely what seems to happen when parties are polarized. I have suggested that disengagement and the parties' perception that such disengagement is warranted are distinctive features of polarized disagreement. Retreat from constructive dialogue carries the implication that engaging with the other is not a worthwhile endeavor, and this implication often conveys significant disrespect towards the other group. Polarization tends to set into motion a vicious cycle. Disengagement leads to disrespect. This fuels a host of other negative attitudes, emotions, and opinions about the other—distrust, dislike, anger, hurt, resentment, and exclusion—which in turn exacerbates the disengagement. All of this supports Rousseau's contention that division is antithetical to social well-being.

The long-standing conflict between Israelis and Palestinians exemplifies these problematic features of polarized disagreement. At the center of this disagreement is the issue of which of the two groups is entitled to occupy certain disputed territory. For many decades, this conflict has been characterized by significant violence and basic rights violations endured by members of both groups. Despite the fact that the lives of many Israelis and Palestinians would be greatly improved by the two groups reaching some agreement to pave the way for their peaceful co-existence, numerous attempts to reach a resolution have failed.

Certainly, the explanation for the persistence of this conflict is complex. However, the inability of these groups to move past their disagreements and embrace a mutually beneficial solution can be partly explained by the polarized character of their division. Strong narratives within each community perpetuate the vilification of the other. In the eyes of many Israelis and Palestinians, their peoples have almost nothing in common. They embrace different cultural and religious traditions. They differ in their framing of historical events crucial to their conflict. They have radically different, conflicting aims. High levels of mutual mistrust and strong dislike have been a long-standing feature of their relations. As a result, constructive dialogue is extremely difficult to achieve. Recognizing the other as worthy of civil engagement, let alone seeking compromise, appear to many in each group as a grossly unjustified concession to the other. Thus, the polarized nature of their disagreement—marked by disengagement and a lack of mutual understanding— appears to be a significant factor in perpetuating the severe violence and brutality suffered by members of both groups.

⁵ Rousseau (1997[1762]).

What is wrong with polarization, then, seems to involve mutually reinforcing harms. Where people come to feel a total lack of understanding for one another, disengagement frequently follows, blocking off hope of moving forward. Constructive dialogue is often replaced by baser forms of interaction: violence, bullying, name-calling, and slandering. Such anti-social conduct only makes it more difficult for polarized parties to work together in the future to move past their dispute and achieve positive change. In turn, frustration with a lack of progress can perpetuate increasing feelings of isolation of the groups.

IV. Is polarization always harmful?

In some cases, polarization seems relatively unproblematic. Take, for instance, a strong and persistent disagreement between two friends as to whether the Beatles or the Stones are a better band. Suppose that the parties discuss the issue exhaustively, and each spends hours trying to convince the other of his position. These efforts are in vain. At the end of the debate, each remains firmly committed to his original viewpoint. Eventually, in frustration, the individuals realize the futility of further engagement on the issue and abandon the goal of seeing eye to eye on this all-important matter. Fortuitously, let us suppose that the individuals can peacefully retreat to their respective homes or even to the solace of their iPods following their dispute. As a practical matter there appears to be no need to come to a resolution as to who is correct. They can remain friends despite this difference. So, this is an instance of polarization in which the practical implications of the disagreement are non-existent, or at least very minimal. Nothing more than establishing which of them holds the correct viewpoint is at stake. And because this disagreement does not bear upon any matters of consequence, it does not appear to be a problematic instance of polarization.

The polarized disagreements that capture our attention are not like this one. Rather, they concern disagreements that, as a practical matter, stand in need of resolution. Usually, they center on social or political issues that significantly affect the lives of many people. In this respect, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is paradigmatic. Both groups cannot have everything they want, and the particular way in which their disagreement is resolved (or continues not to be resolved) will have widespread, serious consequences. Similarly, the issues that polarize Americans involve high stakes. This certainly seems true of the national debates over immigration, health care, gun control, gay marriage, and abortion, to name a few.

Where weighty practical implications attach to a disagreement, it does not seem that polarization is always a bad thing. Take an example from our nation's past: the polarized disagreement between those in favor of and those opposed to the institution of slavery in the Antebellum South. The two sides sharply disagreed and opposed compromise. In this case, the Abolitionists seem perfectly justified in maintaining their polarized stance. This is because compromise—if that meant accepting anything less than the complete dissolution of the system of slavery—would have been a grave

injustice. To the extent that standing their ground and refusing to compromise was instrumental in eventually bringing about an end to slavery, disengagement on the part of the Abolitionists was warranted.

The issue of the justifiability of the show of disrespect that tends to accompany polarization is a difficult one in cases of this type, in which one group's cause is clearly legitimate and the other's is not. Suppose that Abolitionists genuinely engaged with supporters of slavery, yet that the latter refused to re-consider their position in the face of reasonable objections. On the one hand, we may be inclined to say that insofar as Abolitionists tried but failed to convince the pro-slavery movement of the repugnance of its position, they were warranted in showing disrespect towards those who remained steadfast in their support of racial oppression.

Yet, on the other hand, we should be cautious in condoning disrespect, even towards persons who hold clearly unjustified viewpoints. For one thing, just because individuals defend ill-informed or immoral positions, they do not necessarily deserve to be treated with contempt or written off as unworthy of further engagement. Before passing such severe judgments, we need a more nuanced understanding of how people come to forge objectionable viewpoints in the first place and what is required in changing them. Furthermore, in many cases, treating others with disrespect may be ultimately counter-productive to bringing about just outcomes. Thus, determining whether polarization is a bad thing in cases of this kind requires careful consideration of the extent to which it serves to impede or to enable social progress, as well as the extent to which the disrespect it embodies is warranted.

V. How can individuals become less polarized?

When polarization can be shown to be problematic, on balance, how should it be addressed? Disengagement, which is part and parcel of polarization, is harmful to the extent that it impedes just outcomes and bolsters the cultivation of troubling perceptions and attitudes between those who stand opposed. It is sustained by the unwillingness of polarized parties to bridge their disagreement. More specifically, polarized disagreement persists where individuals show an unyielding commitment to their beliefs and convictions that leaves no room for compromise or constructive engagement with their opponents. Consequently, overcoming polarization would seem to require polarized individuals to adopt a willingness to genuinely engage with their opponents.

Consider what is required to follow this prescription. For a start, an individual must take stock of the reasons undergirding her particular beliefs and convictions. Then she must take account of the grounds for her opponent's viewpoint. She must make a good faith effort to understand and seriously consider the merits of her opponent's position. With respect to each site of disagreement between the opposing positions, she should aim to impartially assess the evidence for each, as well as the relative reliability of the respective sources of evidence. She may defend her viewpoint where she believes,

upon reflection, that her position is better supported, but she must be willing to revise her position where she is unable to produce a satisfactory defense. Having gained a clearer sense of one another's positions, the prescription further requires that individuals approach their opponents with an open mind: with the aim of converging on reasonable ideas or, less ambitiously, of showing respect for their opponents' viewpoints. The hope is that this process of rational reflection will enable formerly polarized parties to engage in constructive debates and move past their stubborn disagreements.

VI. The limits of rational reflection

Although this prescription for how parties to polarized disagreements should change their ways seems to offer a promising means of overcoming polarization, in practice it is likely to run into serious problems. It is predicated on the idea that polarization persists because some individuals are ignorant or misinformed. As such, the natural remedy to this problem is to bring relevant evidence to the attention of the people involved in the dispute and to counsel them to more carefully evaluate the cases for and against their positions. Once they are exposed to a wider pool of evidence and have the opportunity to rationally reflect upon it and deliberate with others, they will come to convergence in their viewpoints over time, or at least will achieve a more sympathetic understanding of opposing views.

However, changing people's viewpoints as a means to bridge polarized disagreements is unlikely to be achieved through these measures alone. To think otherwise relies on a simplistic understanding of the processes behind the formation and revision of people's viewpoints. Psychological and sociological studies demonstrate that a number of unexpected factors account for why we form and retain the particular beliefs that we do.⁶ Some of these factors are social. We want to conform. If we perceive that many people around us hold a viewpoint, then we are more likely to accept it. This is so not only in cases where we lack evidence to support such a claim but also in cases where we have direct contradictory evidence.

Consider a striking experiment.⁷ Subjects were presented with a card with a single line drawn on it, as well as a second card with three lines of varying length on it. They were asked to identify which of the three lines on the second card was closest in length to that on the first. One of the three lines on the second card was exactly the same length as the original while the other two differed significantly; the correct answer was obvious. Subjects were to each announce what they took to be the correct answer in a room of others doing the same. In initial rounds of the experiment, each person in the room selected and vocalized support for the correct answer. In later rounds, other individuals in the room (who were actually part of the experiment) articulated support for an incorrect answer. The subjects being studied gave their answer following these others. They could maintain their judgment of what they took to be the correct answer, or they

⁶ Caplan (2007), Nyhan and Reifler (2010), and Sunstein (1999).

⁷ Asch (1955).

could do as did others and express support for the incorrect answer. In 36.8% of these cases, subjects chose the wrong answer (compared to doing so less than 1% of the time in the absence of such group pressure). And this tendency to acquiesce to group pressure in the face of direct contrary evidence occurred across at least 70% of the subjects.

Other seemingly arbitrary factors also influence our viewpoints. Once we hold a particular belief, we tend to do a number of things that result in strengthening our commitment to it. We are more likely to seek and to recall information that supports rather than contradicts our beliefs. In general, people are biased towards sources that support their views and skeptical about the reliability of sources that contradict their views. On the whole as a nation, we have become increasingly skeptical of the mainstream media.⁸ Nevertheless, if we hear a claim asserted in the mass media enough times even with no evidence for it cited, we tend to believe it. We spend time with people who hold the same beliefs we do, and deliberation with like-minded others results in becoming more firm in our original convictions. Where we are confronted with evidence that directly contradicts our pre-existing beliefs, we tend to reject that evidence and, in some cases, perversely, we are apt to becoming more committed to our original viewpoint. These are not tendencies only exhibited by zealots, but rather evidence suggests that most ordinary people are prone to them too.

With respect to the issues that are frequently subject to polarized disagreement, we should expect especially great resistance to changes in people's viewpoints even in the face of apparently reasonable challenges. This is because polarization concerns issues that people feel very strongly about. These are disagreements that relate to their deeply held convictions about right and wrong, as well as to issues that are bound up with their identities and allegiances to groups with whom they have had long-standing relationships. Thus people have strong emotional investment in their particular viewpoint. Moreover, even where a polarized disagreement seems to concern a single issue, upon reflection, it often turns out that opposing parties disagree with respect to a cluster of beliefs and opinions.

Take the issue of abortion. The language and imagery invoked by those on either side of this disagreement are telling of the emotionally charged nature of the issue. Claims of those in favor of and against abortion are equally impassioned in their indictment of their opponents' position. From the perspective of the pro-life movement, the legalization of abortion is tantamount to state-sanctioned murder, and their pro-choice opponents seem to be advocating the slaughter of innocent human beings. On the other side, those aligned with the pro-choice movement raise fears of the state's invasion into a domain over which they take every woman to have a basic right to control: her own body. They regard legal restrictions on a woman's right to choose as an attack on bodily integrity, analogous to rape.

⁸ According to the Gallup Poll, in 2010 only 43% of Americans trust newspapers, television, and radio sources to provide them with accurate information (compared with 72% in 1976). See Cooper (2012)

Not only does the debate on abortion center on deeply held moral convictions of each party and inspire repulsion of the opposing position, but moreover it turns on a number of factual disputes.⁹ For instance, those on either side disagree as to whether and to what extent fetuses feel pain. They disagree about the effects that undergoing an abortion has on a woman. Opponents of abortion point to its physical and mental harms, such as the increased risks of breast cancer and of mental health problems incurred by women who have had abortions. These claims are contested by those on the pro-choice side, who cite conflicting evidence. Those on either side also disagree on their interpretations of the scientific evidence concerning how emergency contraception works—whether by suppressing ovulation or destroying a fertilized egg.

Given that the issues that polarize us concern deeply held and interconnected beliefs and values, the prescription with which we began—to seriously engage with the opposing viewpoint—appears all the more demanding. To rise above polarization, on this prescription, it looks like a person must start at square one in the process of rethinking a range of deep-seated beliefs and values—ones that may be central to her understanding of herself and the world. In the most extreme instances, disagreements stem from differences in worldviews: the basic framework of beliefs and values a person has and draws upon to understand and assess the world. Questioning that framework carries the risk of discovering that what she had regarded as unshakeable truths are in fact falsehoods.

Putting aside the emotional and personal difficulties raised by this prescription, there is a further practical difficulty. In the case of someone who does come to question some of her most basic views, what is the next step in moving forward? Recognizing that many of her beliefs have been formed through unreliable processes, a person may have difficulty in figuring out where to turn at all. Widespread skepticism may be the natural response. All of this suggests that it can be extremely psychologically and practically demanding for a person to seriously consider her opponents' viewpoint and dispassionately evaluate her disagreement with them.

VII. A collective problem requires a collective solution

Even if some parties take steps to seriously engage with their opponents, polarization may persist. For each individual who takes the necessary steps to work towards change, she potentially bears a considerable burden, not only because of the difficulty of the task itself but also on the basis of the social sanctions she may face from those around her who may resent her conduct. Yet if an insufficient number of others who hold her viewpoint fail to follow this same prescription, then her actions will be in vain. This is because overcoming polarization requires a change in the attitudes and conduct of many individuals. Thus, this is an instance of a collective action problem. For each individual who is part of the problem, the expected pay-off is low (corresponding to the

⁹ Belluck (2012), Derbyshire (2006), Paul (2008), and Planned Parenthood (2006).

extent to which others are unlikely to do the same). This provides each with a strong disincentive to do her part that is necessary for the collective effort.

Given that polarization is an inherently social phenomenon—one that involves a great number of people and their behavior over time—overcoming polarization ought to be regarded as a shared responsibility. That is, instead of focusing, in the first instance, on what individuals should do to combat polarization, we should instead consider how features of our society at large contribute to the tendency of members to become polarized. Of course, it is true that it is individuals who are the primary agents of polarization, and that their actions and beliefs contribute directly to its perpetuation. However, the tendency for individuals to become polarized is influenced by the background structures of their community – its formal institutions and social norms.

Consider how it was possible for so many ordinary German citizens to become Nazi sympathizers and complicit in one of history's greatest atrocities. The Nazi regime was extremely effective in its use of propaganda in creating a sharp divide between Jewish and non-Jewish Germans and in convincing the latter of their alleged superiority. Indoctrination was channeled through authorities generally regarded as reliable. So, for instance, teachers in German public schools impressed upon students the virtues of the Golden Rule, but emphasized that this moral principle did not extend to Jews. Scientists presented data from experiments with the aim of convincing the public that Jews were fundamentally different from and inferior to Aryans and should not be the object of sympathy. These conclusions were distilled through films shown to the public and in textbooks used in schools. Citizens' deference to these authorities coupled with significant restrictions upon free speech played a vital role in explaining the effectiveness of the Third Reich in perpetuating these myths. As one commentator observes, "had Germany had a free press, it would have been more difficult for Nazi propagandists to foster the belief that Jews were dangerous, subhuman vermin not entitled to respect or sympathy."¹⁰

Nazi Germany is an extreme case of social structures enabling harmful division. But analogously, we can ask of our own society how its policies and norms reinforce or serve to counter the undesirable tendencies of polarization. What are the desiderata for these structures? Encouraging careful, rational reflection seems important, but as we have seen above it is not all that matters in fixing people's viewpoints. In addition, how people perceive and identify with others with whom they disagree seems to matter a great deal.

Here, a point that Mill and Rousseau converged on—in spite of their great disagreement about the very value of disagreement—is instructive. Both authors embraced the idea that a flourishing society crucially depends upon the character of its citizens.¹¹ For a society to thrive, they thought, its citizens must demonstrate civic virtue through genuine

¹⁰ Buchanan (2002: 142). This paragraph draws more generally from his 2002 (35-42) and 2009 (281-3).

¹¹ Rousseau (1997[1762]) and Mill 1963[1861].

caring for and active participation in the political and social life of the community. They took one of the greatest dangers facing a society to be an apathetic citizenry.

On this basis, Mill defended the value of jury duty for exposing people to considerations that would not typically arise in their day-to-day lives. Jury duty could serve to expand a person's horizons and to cultivate a sense of caring about the affairs of one's community. And, for Rousseau, civic education—instilling in citizens a sense of solidarity with their compatriots and encouraging their participation in the democratic process—was vital. He further supported a more or less classless society in which people were not stratified by great differences in wealth, which would make it difficult for them to relate.

Although the prescriptions these two authors favored were different, their grounds are the same: the character of citizens is of utmost importance, and so society must take seriously the sorts of citizens it produces. It is noteworthy that much recent empirical scholarship on this topic dovetails with ideas discussed by Mill and Rousseau. Factors thought to contribute to increasing social and political fragmentation in the U.S. include growing economic inequality, campaign financing rules, and legislative decision-making rules. Discussions of these issues echo the call for greater inclusiveness of citizens in social and political affairs.

VIII. Concluding remarks

By focusing on institutional changes, the hope is that we can reduce the propensity of disagreements between individuals with divergent viewpoints becoming polarized. But it is not clear how we can realize these structural changes. This is because the desirability or need for them is itself subject to sharp disagreement amongst the individuals on whom such change depends. Policies that seem likely to combat the tendencies of polarization will always face opposition from parties that benefit from the status quo system.

There is no doubt that overcoming polarization presents a great challenge. It may even seem insurmountable in many cases, in light of the considerations I have raised. I do not think such extreme pessimism is warranted. But progress is unlikely unless we recognize the nature of the problem. So, let us take stock.

First, expecting individuals who are parties to polarized disagreement to take more seriously their duties to rationally reflect or to cultivate a sense of civic duty will not suffice. We must face up to the realities of how difficult it is for individuals to go against the grain and take up a personal crusade against polarized disagreement, while others do nothing at all.

Second, responsibility for overcoming polarization is more productively seen as a shared enterprise rather than one falling directly on individuals. We must focus our

attention on the ways in which social structures can enable meaningful engagement between those who disagree. Although this does not give us a substantive prescription for how we can bring about those changes to our society, we have achieved some progress in thinking about parameters on the sort of solution polarization requires. Our efforts must be targeted at improving the citizens that our society produces, so that our differences can be a genuine cause for celebration.

As a nation, we may expect to remain polarized on many fronts for some time, and that fact may be disheartening. Yet we must remain united in our recognition of the worth of sustaining and striving to improve the ongoing project that we collectively constitute. And so, above all, we must remain committed to what our society stands for and what it may become.

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