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Group Dynamics

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My goal here is to cast some light on a particular puzzle. Why did the overwhelming majority of Republicans — representatives and citizens alike — support the impeachment of President Clinton? Why did the overwhelming majority of Democrats — inside and outside of Congress — oppose impeachment? Consider some remarkable numbers. In the House of Representatives, 223 of 228 Republicans, or 98%, voted for impeachment on at least one count, whereas five of 206 Democrats, or 2%, voted for impeachment on at least one count. In the Senate, 51 of 55 Republicans, or 93%, voted to remove the President from office, whereas 0 of 45 Democrats, or 0%, voted to remove the President from office. Within the citizenry, there also were exceedingly sharp divisions, with the vast majority of Democrats believing that impeachment would be a mistake, and the vast majority of Republicans believing exactly the opposite. (Independents typically opposed impeachment and helped produce the large anti-impeachment numbers among the public as a whole.) What accounts for this difference?

It is far too simple to say that one group was right and another wrong (though I believe that this is true[1]). Whatever the appropriate stance on the impeachment question, it simply defies belief to suggest that this pattern of judgments is what one would expect if each person, whether ordinary citizen or legislator, had been consulting his own conscience; surely independent judgments would have led to far more defections from the party line. I think that this is particularly true on the Republican side. Did so many Republicans really believe, in principle, that the President should be removed from office? But it is plausibly true on the Democratic side as well. This level of party solidarity is not what one would expect if people independently were consulting their consciences.

With respect to legislators, as opposed to ordinary citizens, perceived electoral self-interest undoubtedly played a role. For example, a vote by a Republican to defect from the party position might have played well with the general electorate, which was averse to impeachment; but it also

might have increased vulnerability to a primary challenge within the party, and in any case, have caused the defector a series of problems with party leadership. For many Republicans, and for many Democrats, a defection might have seemed much more trouble than it was worth. But at least on a straightforward account of electoral self-interest, it is not plausible to attribute all of these votes to perceived electoral pressures. Many Republicans and many Democrats would hardly have risked the political wrath of voters if they had voted otherwise on impeachment. At least some of them were free to vote as they wished. Some of them probably would have been helped, not hurt, if they had defected; certainly this is true for some Republicans, and it defies belief, again, to suggest that it was not true for any non-defecting Democrats.

Even if we could explain the votes of representatives in terms of electoral self-interest, it remains necessary to explain the sharply divergent positions of citizens, with the dramatic split between people who identify themselves with the two parties. Of course, Democrats tend to like President Clinton much more than Republicans do. But on what ground would so many self-identified Republicans support impeachment, and so many self-identified Democrats oppose it?

I believe that much of the answer to the otherwise puzzling pattern of judgments lies in certain characteristics of collective deliberations — characteristics that tend to push groups in predictable directions. Above all, the pattern seems to have a great deal to do with *group polarization* — a process that leads groups in a more extreme version of the direction indicated by their original tendency. An understanding of group polarization helps explain some alarming behavior by individuals in social settings. It also sheds some new light on party-line voting. At the same time, it raises a series of questions and doubts about processes of public deliberation, especially but not only in the context of highly visible controversies like impeachment.

There is a warning here, for the future, about a political process in which like-minded people talk principally to one another. The warning is that this kind of talk can lead to extremism, through entirely predictable processes; and when various groups go in opposite extreme directions, misunderstanding, confusion, accusation, and sometimes even violence may well be the result.

I. Group Polarization

Although it has received little attention in law and political theory, group polarization is one of the robust findings in social psychology.[2] The central point here is that the outcome of a group deliberation tends to be a more extreme version of the tendency indicated by the initial predisposition of group members. Deliberating groups thus move not toward the middle, but toward within-group extremes. For example, a group of people who tend to oppose affirmative action is likely, after discussion, to oppose affirmative action with some vehemence. Those inclined to support gun control will, after discussion, do so with great enthusiasm. People who tend to think well of an ongoing military build-up will strongly favor a military build-up after discussing the problem with one another. Those who believe that President Clinton is likely a victim of a concerted right-wing attack are likely, after talking together, to think that this is undoubtedly the case. Those who fear that the President is a criminal and a liar who is protected by an indifferent public and an obsequious media are likely, after talking together, to believe that this is a very optimistic picture of the situation, one that is far too favorable to President Clinton.

There are two explanations for group polarization, involving two different mechanisms. Each of the mechanisms plays a role in producing group polarization and, as we shall see, each of them played a role in the impeachment debate. The first is based on *persuasive arguments*. The idea here is that people respond to the arguments made by others, and the argument pool, in a group with some initial disposition, will be strongly skewed in the direction of that disposition. Thus, a group whose members tends to oppose affirmative action will hear a large number of arguments in favor of abolishing affirmative action and a comparatively fewer number of arguments for retaining it. If people are listening, they will have a stronger conviction, in the same direction from which they began, as a result of deliberation. If people believing that President Clinton's impeachment was a constitutional atrocity speak to one another, they will be entrenched in this belief as a result of conversation together, simply because they will hear a range of arguments to this effect (and few good arguments the other way). There is considerable empirical support for the view that the argument pool has this kind of effect on individual views.

The second mechanism has to do with *social influence.* The central idea here is that people have a certain conception of themselves and a corresponding sense of how they would like to be perceived by others. Most people like to think of themselves as different from others, but only in the right direction and to the right extent. If you think of yourself as the sort of person who favors gun control less than most people do (because, let us say, you think that you are unusually disposed to reject liberal homilies), you might shift your position once you find yourself in a group that is very strongly in favor of gun control. If you stay where you were, you may seem less favorably disposed toward gun control than most group members, and this may be disconcerting, thus producing a shift. Or if you believe that you have a comparatively favorable attitude toward affirmative action, discussion with a group whose members are at least as favorable as you are might well push you in the direction of greater enthusiasm for it. Having heard group members, you might move your stated position, simply in order to maintain a certain self-conception and reputation, as one who likes affirmative action a bit more than most people do. If you want to seem to be unfavorably disposed to President Clinton, and so consider yourself, you may support impeachment in a group that does the same, not because you have a considered judgment in favor of impeachment, but because you do not want to seem, in the eyes of the group, to be a defender of President Clinton. There is a great deal of evidence that social influence is an independent factor behind group polarization; consider in particular the fact that mere exposure to the views of others can have this effect, even without any discussion at all.

These points raise many questions about the value of deliberation and about the whole ideal of deliberative democracy, which lies at the heart of our constitutional order.[3] Of course, we cannot say, from the mere fact of polarization, that there has been a movement in the wrong direction; perhaps the more extreme tendency is better. But when group discussion tends to lead people to more strongly held versions of the same view with which they began, it may be nothing to celebrate. If social influences, rather than a full appreciation of relevant reasons, incline people in certain directions, the shifts that result may have very little to do with the merits. Those who believe in deliberation are likely to be pleased to find that arguments and reasons have an impact. But if the impact is a product of a skewed argument pool, the resulting changes in judgment may be

a product of happenstance and distortion, rather than better thinking. I will return shortly to the relationship between the impeachment vote and group polarization.

II. Cascades

The empirical findings on group polarization closely connect to theoretical work on social "cascades."[4] The question here is why social groups sometimes move quite rapidly in some direction or another and why groups of like-minded people may move rapidly toward or against an extreme outcome, such as impeachment.

A. Information and Informational Cascades

A central point here is that when individuals lack a great deal of private information, often they rely on information provided by the statements or actions of others. If A is unaware whether abandoned toxic waste dumps are hazardous, he may be moved in the direction of fear if B seems to think that fear is justified. If A and B believe that fear is justified, C may end up thinking so too, at least if she lacks independent information to the contrary. If A, B, and C believe that abandoned hazardous waste dumps are hazardous, D will have to have a good deal of confidence to reject their shared conclusion. The result of this process can be to produce cascade effects, as large groups of people end up believing something — even something that is false — simply because other people seem to believe it too.

The same processes should be at work for political, legal, and moral questions; in fact we easily can imagine political, legal, and moral cascades — even pro-impeachment and anti-impeachment cascades. The same process may work for political candidates, as a fad develops in favor of one or another — a cascade with victory-producing or ruinous consequences. Sometimes people are not entirely sure whether affirmative action is a good idea, whether capital punishment should be imposed, whether the Constitution protects the right to have an abortion, whether it is wrong to litter or to smoke, whether perjury counts as a high crime or misdemeanor. Many people, lacking firm convictions of their own, may end up believing what (relevant) others seem to believe. There is an obvious analogy here to the persuasive arguments account of group polarization

— though for cascade effects, what is crucial is the very fact of the belief, not its grounds.

If the literature on cascades is correct, the White House was right to be worried about any small shift in public opposition to impeachment. If (as I suspect) many ordinary citizens were not really sure if the President should be removed from office, the large percentages who opposed removal were *fragile*. A small shift in the direction of pro-impeachment sentiment — from 70% against to, say, 58% against, and falling — could have started a cascade effect, if what people thought was dependent on what (they thought) others thought.

B. Reputation and Reputational Cascades

Thus far the discussion has involved informational pressures and informational cascades. When information is at work, people care about what other people think because they do not know what to think, and they rely on the opinions of others to show what it is correct to think. But there can be reputational pressures and reputational cascades as well.[5] Here people are influenced by what others say and do, not because they think that those others are likely to be correct (that would be an informational influence), but because they want to preserve their reputations. The basic idea is that people care about what others think of them, and they speak out, or remain silent, partly in order to cultivate the approval of others, even at the price of failing to say what they really think.

Suppose, for example, that A believes that hazardous waste dumps pose a serious environmental problem; suppose too that B is skeptical. B may keep quiet, or even agree with A, not because B thinks that A is right, but simply in order to preserve A's good opinion. C may see that A believes that hazardous waste dumps pose a serious problem and that B seems to agree with A; C therefore may voice agreement even though privately she is skeptical or ambivalent. It is easy to see how this kind of thing might happen with intense political debates. People who believe that President Clinton is a liar and a criminal might be entirely quiet in some contexts or even agree wholeheartedly with people who speak out on President Clinton's behalf. People who believe that impeachment was a terrible idea might not say so, and even may endorse impeachment, simply to preserve their reputations in certain communities. Undoubtedly

this happened among some of those who supported impeachment, including within the House of Representatives.

The consequence of all this can be cascade effects — large social movements in one direction or another — when a number of people appear to support a certain course of action simply because others (appear to) do so. Here, as with informational forces, what is true for publicly stated factual claims can be true as well for moral, legal, and political claims. This phenomenon is of course analogous to the social influence explanation of group polarization. The only difference is that the social influence explanation concerns presentation to self as well as presentation to others.

III. The Dynamics of Impeachment

How does all this bear on the impeachment of President Clinton? At first glance the answer is straightforward, and what has been said thus far should supply the rudiments of a basic account.

A. The Basic Account

Consider informational forces first. In both Congress and the nation, Republicans were talking mostly with Republicans; Democrats were talking mostly with Democrats. The result of these two largely independent sets of deliberations was to deepen the Republicans' commitment to impeachment, to heighten the sense that the President had indeed committed a high crime, to suggest that the President's arguments were weak and self-serving — and at the same time, to strengthen the sense, among Democrats, that Judge Starr was an unprincipled zealot, that the grounds for impeachment were implausible, and that this was something not very far from a *coup d'etat* on the part of the far right.

To be sure, many diverse arguments were available to representatives and citizens alike; it was not as if the pro-impeachment or anti-impeachment case was invisible to those who disagreed with it. But it does seem reasonable to think that many Republicans, perhaps especially among the citizenry, were affected by a distorted argument pool, in which all or most of the articulated points had to do with the President's violation of his oath of office and failure to tell the truth under oath. In the relevant discussions, the best arguments on the President's behalf appeared

infrequently, and when they appeared, they were likely to have been made half-heartedly. Many discussions among Democrats were affected by a similar skewed pool of arguments, in which the best claims on behalf of impeachment were not mentioned. No wonder that both groups would tend to polarize toward a more extreme version of views originally held.

Social influences and reputational forces were undoubtedly at work as well. A Republican who rejected impeachment — whether representative or citizen — would be signaling that he was a certain sort: one who was willing to defect from the general party-line view that serious misconduct by the President warranted removal from office. Any particular Republican could be sending out a large signal of tolerance for illegality and misconduct by high-level Democrats. Indeed, the signal could be far more dramatic and extreme than anything the defector might have intended. And for representatives in particular, the consequence could be severe reputational sanctions, both within the House of Representatives and at the next election. If a range of Republicans could be convinced to reject impeachment, the signal would of course be muffled, and perhaps a cascade of anti-impeachment votes would be expected. There is safety in numbers. But the collective action problem was quite serious; without concerted action by a nontrivial number of Republicans, any particular defector would be in potential trouble.

The same dynamic was at work for any Democrat who favored impeachment. The signal would be one of capitulation to a Republican witch-hunt — a signal that would be all the louder if very few Democrats were defecting. Once defections started, they could be hard to stop, because after a certain tipping point, the loud signal would be muffled. Thus, if a few Democrats had called for impeachment, a cascade could happen here as well. This was the White House's worst nightmare; it explains why the White House believed it indispensable to keep as many Democrats as possible in line.

Here, then, is my basic account of the extraordinary party-line judgments among the citizenry at large, and also of the votes in both the House and the Senate. These were case studies in group polarization. Those who spoke with one another fortified their own preexisting views and made them all the more extreme. In this light, it should be unsurprising to find the change of heart from Republicans, such as Henry Hyde, who initially contended that impeachment should occur only if

there was bipartisan support for it. Once the logic of group polarization set in, this moderate view was bound to shift.

B. Of Representatives and Constituents

Of course, there are some differences between the legislative process and the contexts in which group polarization has been studied, above all because members of Congress are subject to external political sanctions. Even if members are persuaded that a certain course of action makes best sense, they may vote otherwise simply because of what their constituents want. Hence a limited argument pool, for members of a particular party, may matter much less than a clear signal from people back home. This point may explain some of the defections on both sides; certainly it explains why some members are able to resist party pressures and the logic of group polarization. Unambiguous electoral signals can be a powerful buffer against that logic (though for reasons I have given, the signals themselves may be a function of group polarization within the electorate).

The same point bears on the relevance of social influence. Members of the Republican Party are likely to care a great deal what fellow Republicans think of them; but they probably care still more about what local voters think of them. To be sure, the two are not independent of one another. If a certain Republican seems like an outlier among Republicans generally — for example, if he seems less sympathetic to impeachment than his colleagues — his electoral prospects might be damaged simply by virtue of this signal. But analytically the two are different. Here too the votes of constituents may matter more than group deliberations (taking members of the same party as the relevant group).

Because of the differences between representatives and constituents, it is even reasonable to think that polarization is likely to be more serious among the latter rather than the former. We can imagine a society — and it is not so far from our own — in which Republicans speak mostly with each other, at least about the issue of whether President Clinton should be impeached; we can imagine a society in which, on the same issue, Democrats speak mostly with one another too. If this is the situation, polarization should occur within political camps. Republicans will veer pro-impeachment; Democrats will veer anti-impeachment. Of course, there are multiple independent reasons why this may be so. Democrats

tend to like President Clinton, and Republicans tend not to like him. But part of electoral polarization, on the question of impeachment, is undoubtedly a result of the social mechanisms discussed here.

IV. Conclusion and A Warning

What lessons do these points have for party dynamics, especially in the context of highly visible public debates? Certainly they do not explain all of the picture. But they provide part of any account of why a vast majority of Republicans may think one thing and a vast majority of Democrats the opposite, when independent judgments by members would seem to make this pattern entirely inexplicable. For representatives, simple electoral calculations undoubtedly play a role; but a great deal depends on the limited information pool in the relevant communities and the particular signal given by defectors from the party. In the context of impeachment, I do believe that this helps explain an otherwise very puzzling set of judgments, perhaps above all the remarkable solidity of Republican pro-impeachment judgments in circumstances in which the Constitution and large percentages of the public seemed to argue in the other direction. And if the explanation contains some truth, it helps account for party-line thinking more generally, within legislatures and within the citizenry — and raises a host of questions and doubts about the value and the consequences of group deliberation.

Of course, nothing I have said here demonstrates that group polarization moves people in bad directions. We can imagine many contexts in which it is entirely appropriate for people to end up with a stronger version of their initial position; perhaps discussion clarifies matters, and perhaps the argument pool, limited though it inevitably is, makes people see things in a more reasonable light. But nothing in the mechanisms that underlie polarization makes this inevitable. The most serious problems are likely to arise when deliberating groups, insulated from one another, polarize to more extreme positions partly because of their very insulation. In these circumstances, large groups — with initial tendencies that are different but not so very different — can shift in extreme opposite directions, with little understanding of how it is that they have ended up in such different positions. It is in this setting that group polarization carries

a risk of balkanization, confusion, and even violence.

The nation managed to avoid the worst of these problems in connection with impeachment, though in my view members of both parties — the Republicans even more than the Democrats — suffered a great deal from their failure to engage the arguments put forth by the other side. If there is a warning here, there is therefore a lesson as well, about the need for deliberating groups to avoid the forms of insulation that can lead them, by the laws of social interaction, in unjustifiably extreme directions.

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1 *See* Cass R. Sunstein, "Impeaching the President," 147 *University of Pennsylvania Law Review* 279 (1998).

2 *See* Cass R. Sunstein, "Deliberative Trouble? Why Groups Go To Extremes," *Yale Law Journal* (forthcoming October 2000).

3 *See* Jon Elster, ed., *Deliberative Democracy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

4 *See* Sushil Biikhchandani et al., "Learning from the Behavior of Others," *The Journal of Economic Perspectives: a Journal of the American Economic Association* (Summer 1998), p. 151.

5 *See* Timur Kuran, *Public Lives, Private Truths* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996).