



Politics

How to Escape the Partisan Mindset and Why You'll Probably Fail

September 20, 2018 · 10 minute read · by Victor Bruzzone and Matt McManus

Introduction

Our progressively polarized political climate, combined with the growth of various social media platforms, has led to an increasing consensus that the culture is devolving into distinct political echo-chambers corresponding to separate sets of facts—in the so called *post-truth era*. As mentioned in a recent episode of the [Hi-Phi Nation](#) podcast, this appears to be strongly supported by public opinion polls, which show large statistical differences between Democrats and Republicans on their beliefs about a number of verifiable facts.

As the podcast discusses, sometimes the difference between Democrats and Republicans can be as large as 50 percentage points, as a recent poll, asking whether President Donald Trump is a liar, demonstrates. Other examples show that the vast majority of Democrats think unemployment went down during Barack Obama's presidency, whereas the opposite belief is held by a large majority of Republicans. Similarly, most Democrats think the economy is doing worse under Trump, while few Republicans agree. So perhaps the idea that we live in a post-truth era is justified?

On the other hand, a recent study by John G. Bullock et al. seems to undermine this entire set of assumptions. Indeed, Bullock was so skeptical about the idea that the difference in factual belief could be that significant that he devised an experiment to test his suspicions. The experiment consisted of a set of factually verifiable questions, similar to those asked in opinion polls, where in half the cases the correct answers would make the Democrats look bad, and, in the other half, the Republicans. Bullock offered participants a few cents as an incentive for each correct answer. What he found was that under such circumstances the partisan gap in belief was cut by 50%.

Bullock, not totally satisfied with these results, decided to run the experiment again, but this time, in addition to the reward for correct answers, he offered half the original reward amount to participants who admitted they didn't know the answer. This reduced the partisan gap even further. Amazingly, when Bullock increased the reward to \$1 for correct answers and 50 cents for admitting ignorance, the partisan gap in factual belief effectively vanished.

As Bullock et al. state in their article abstract, “the apparent gulf in factual beliefs between members of different parties may be more illusory than real ... [moreover,] we show (as others have) that Americans know little about politics, but we also show that they often recognize their own lack of knowledge.”

At first blush, it is tempting to read these results optimistically. We might be heartened to learn that partisans don't really live in completely different *fact-worlds*. However, we don't think this is the right interpretation. After all, doesn't this result show that people are systematically dishonest about their knowledge of facts? As Hi-Phi Nation's Barry Lam claims, facts may not matter in politics—at least not to the extent we might assume. As these results seem to show, people have conscious access to the facts, or potentially more importantly, they know that they don't know certain facts. But disturbingly, this self-awareness doesn't seem to influence their political opinions.

Making Sense of The Results

Those are my principles and if you don't like them...well, I have others. —Groucho Marx



hat these results seem to demonstrate is that political partisanship has a complex relationship to self-interest. While our vision of the world is partially determined by self-interest, what that means can change depending on the

circumstances. One might interpret Bullock's finding as demonstrating that people's understanding of the world tends to be rather rigid, until they are incentivized to adopt a more flexible and open minded one.

In our opinion, Bullock's finding shows that most of us adopt a rigid outlook on the world when there are no incentives to adopt a more flexible one because this satisfies certain immaterial psychological needs. These can include the psychological need for a simplified worldview, which provides a certain sense of epistemic stability, ontological economy and communal belonging. However, when many individuals are confronted with material incentives to shift their outlooks, these often supersede their psychological needs and can encourage them to be more open minded. We will discuss each of these factors in turn.

Ideological partisanship satisfies our psychological needs for epistemic stability and ontological economy because it enables us to simplify the information required to interpret a complex and often normatively ambiguous world. At an epistemic level, narratives tend to stress simple binaries of *us and them*, in which the privileged ideology stands as a source of descriptive honesty and moral integrity, and the condemned ideology as a category of dishonesty and corruption.

The truth of certain facts isn't really important in such contexts because partisanship grants a larger moral significance to a broad orientation to the world, a general style of living supported by simplifying narratives and binaries. Thus, opinion poll respondents are not exactly lying to themselves, but rather they perceive a larger *truth* in a certain kind of orientation: an aesthetics of *making America great again* or a reduction of the social world to *oppressor and oppressed*, for example. This pattern of thinking characterizes the outlook of, for example, postmodern conservatives, as well as some activist left partisans.

The Partisan View of the World

At an ontological level, this kind of partisanship enables a reduction of the breadth of information one needs to interpret facts, since the privileged ideology provides an ostensive set of tools for analyzing a complex social world. Meanwhile, the countervailing narratives presented by the condemned ideology, which might otherwise problematize the narratives of the privileged ideology, can be dismissed for their bias or lack of moral integrity. As Slavoj Žižek has repeatedly pointed out, this may even happen at an unconscious level, with our mind unwittingly censoring aspects of reality which

trouble this sense of self and social belonging. This also helps the partisan when analyzing the world, since a sense of what is stable and *normal* is ontologically privileged over abnormalities, which need to be marginalized or pushed away to retain worldview stability.

Partisanship also provides a sense of communal belonging, which can be psychologically irresistible to the partisan unless they are provided with a material incentive to deviate from group expectations. The emergence of social psychology and anthropology in the twentieth century have enabled us to better grasp the limits of the classical liberal model of the private and rational individual as the atomic basis for understanding the dynamics of human behavior. We are far more influenced by the opinions and demands of others than we often consciously admit.

By *others* here, we do not simply mean a collection of discrete individuals. The influence of discrete individuals is important when understanding human behavior, but only at a specific analytical level. What we mean by *others* is something closer to the Lacanian psychoanalytic interpretation of the term: the socio-psychic projection of a *Big Other* that stands in for the presence of the ontologically non-existent *group narrative*. Put more simply, when we engage in partisan behaviors we see ourselves as not just individuals, or even as part of a collection of individuals, but as participating in a broader discrete cultural group identity, which includes meaning structures that provide the moral grounds for living. This illusory and all-pervasive cultural group identity is the foundation of ideologies which nourish the partisan's stable and reductive worldview, which functions by demanding we conform in order to retain a sense of belonging. This is why it can be quite hard for partisans to deviate from the norms established, and why verifiable facts are often unconvincing to the partisan.

As individuals, each person may privately have opinions and expectations that deviate from those of his or her peers. But it is necessary to demonstrate conformity, since maintaining the socio-psychic illusion that there is a transcendent group stabilizing our worldview requires that we don't deviate too far from the status quo. Doing so would reveal the fragility of this illusion and could lead to the entire edifice crashing down. To illustrate this, consider the often deployed expression *having an honest conversation* with another person. The implication isn't that the individuals involved were actually dishonest before. It is that they were trying to retain the illusion of normality to maintain the stability and economy of their shared outlook. Having an *honest conversation*—say about one's relationship—means accepting that the curtain is going to be torn away.

This, we believe, is what happens in microcosm when one offers individuals money to deviate from partisan scripts. The offer of a cash payment breaks the illusion of the group identity and encourages participants to revert back to their real and material status as private individuals. In such circumstances, they become concerned with looking after themselves rather than ideological stability and economy. The communal demand for conformity is brought crashing down by the private strength of my individual desire to have what I want. Unfortunately, it is not clear how such incentives could be instituted at a policy level. That is, there isn't an obvious way to get people to be honest about their knowledge of partisan facts in everyday life.

How to Talk to Partisans

As we've shown above, partisanship is not primarily influenced by verifiable facts. Instead, partisanship, especially extreme partisanship, seems to be much more linked to a larger morally charged social sense of belonging. Assuming this conclusion, what is the most productive way of talking to partisans? This question is especially relevant for online platforms such as *Areo*, *Merion West*, and others, which want to encourage open discussion across ideological lines.

Facts aren't going to work because they don't bring with them the kind of normative charge that broader ideological orientations do. We would argue that this means that productive discussions, discussions that could potentially change minds, must somehow stimulate moral intuitions, not through ideas, but through demonstration. Let us explain what we mean.

An instructive—and rather extreme—example of what we mean comes from the admirable anti-racist work of African-American Blues musician Darryl Davis. In the documentary *Accidental Courtesy*, Davis recounts his childhood puzzlement at the idea of racism, “how can you hate me if you don't even know me?” Davis set out to answer this question by doing something quite surprising. He began seeking out and eventually befriending racists, including members of the Ku Klux Klan. One of his first relationships was with Roger Kelly, a Grand Wizard of the KKK. Over the years, he began inviting Kelly over for dinner, having discussions with him about music, community and life. Kelly ultimately left the KKK and gave his Klan robe to Davis. Over the years, Davis repeated this process with other KKK members and has now collected over 200 robes, from people who quit the Klan as a result of his influence.

While this is an unusual example, we think it effectively demonstrates that stubborn ideology is not likely to change by factual argumentation (nor is it altered by *punching Nazis*). This is because ideological commitments are not primarily factual, but normative, and related to an orientation toward life. As former neo-Nazi Chris Picciolini [puts it](#), radical ideology functions by grounding itself in “identity, community and purpose.” Thus, productive discourse with extreme partisans must be grounded in stimulating that same need for “identity, community and purpose.” This is similar to *having a real conversation*, or, as Davis [describes it](#), “respect is the key, sitting down and talking.” Although it may sound corny, minds are changed by making a real human connection. Not by reminding one’s political rivals of the *fact* that most people’s lives are likely comparable, that all people desire the same basic things from life, but by actually showing them, through exposure and conversation.

This is precisely what Davis did with members of the KKK. Sure, he could have spouted all kinds of scientific facts about the sameness of human biology across races or made a Kantian argument for the intrinsic value of all human lives, but those are all abstractions, divorced from the extreme partisan’s lived orientation toward the world. The only hope in such cases is to puncture the partisan’s orientation toward the world through a competing lived experience, what Emmanuel Levinas calls “the trace of the other.”

Conclusion

He who knows only his own side of the case knows that poorly. —J. S. Mill

The world is so immensely complex that it is unlikely we shall ever know the truth about much of it. Moreover, this same complexity necessitates that we, at least to some extent, simplify the world in order to operate effectively. Any person determined to understand a situation fully before acting risks finding him- or herself stuck, compulsively reflecting on the various possible meanings of a single sentence, as Joseph Grand does in Camus’ seminal novel *The Plague*. But what distinguishes the open-minded person from the partisan is not just an openness towards contrary opinion, but excitement at the prospect of being proved wrong, since that enriches his or her worldview. While no one is completely above the partisan temptation, the more non-partisan person tends to approach life in an experimental fashion, and wishes to encounter the new and the interesting in order to develop a richer account of the world.

The partisan temptation, by contrast, leads us to look inward and shut certain ideas out, if they problematize the worldview we find ourselves increasingly attached to. This partisan temptation is noticeable even among those allegedly committed to open discussion and

debate, especially those now fighting back against the excesses of political correctness and left-wing identity politics. Something we have both noticed on comment sections is a kind of over-correction against the problem of left-wing identity politics. There's been a tendency to fall into a reductive us-versus-them mentality fueled by a moral panic that sees the identity politics left as an enemy to be opposed at all cost. Any suggestion that some ideas from the identity politics left have merit is often met with intense hostility.

Similarly, in *Accidental Courtesy*, there's a striking moment where Davis meets members of Black Lives Matter (BLM) and explains the work he's been doing changing the minds of racists through respect and engagement. The BLM activists are not impressed: "why I got to get along with them?" asks one. While completely understandable at a certain level, this is yet another example of the partisan temptation in action. The BLM activists appear especially opposed to the idea that the racist could be humanized, perhaps even morally redeemed. In a way, it seems as though the BLM activists are uninterested in *the fact* that Davis has successfully converted over two hundred people away from racism, because what fuels the partisan mindset is an emotionally-charged normative orientation toward the world, not facts.

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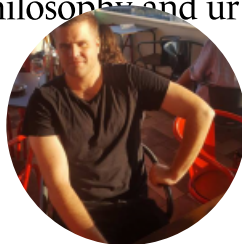
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Jordan

September 25, 2018 at 10:43 pm

“This partisan temptation is noticeable even among those allegedly committed to open discussion and debate, especially those now fighting back against the excesses of political correctness and left-wing identity politics. Something we have both noticed on comment sections is a kind of over-correction against the problem of left-wing identity politics. There’s been a tendency to fall into a reductive us-versus-them mentality fueled by a moral panic that sees the identity politics left as an enemy to be opposed at all cost.”

Among the many insightful observations in this article, this one particularly stood out to me. It highlights the permanent protean danger of the partisan mindset for the inquiring mind. It is crafty. It has us most when we are unaware of it. And what could make us more unaware of it than the feeling that we have escaped it?

For my part, I am even looking for a word more basic than partisan, since it tends to evoke mostly political and social allegiance for me : unless, we can hear in the word “partisan” its being set off against the word “the whole.” To be content with seizing on a part of what presents itself rather than to press forward toward the whole picture is a defection from seeking. But sometimes this defection from seeking seems to be recommended by the results of that seeking itself: as the essay noted, “the world is so immensely complex that it is unlikely we shall ever know the truth about much of it.” If we can only know the world in part, and we can know in advance that we can only know a part, why not find some part or other and stick with it? I think this might be one of the relatively unexplored fruits of the prestige and dominance of intellectual culture: so many puzzles, so much thinking, has potentially shown the limits of thinking.

I know the authors are not recommending partisanship at all, I only raise it to add more to the intricacy of the dynamics in which being thoughtful puts its own thoughtfulness in danger. There is a resentment towards intellectuals, I think, that comes in part from their endless dilly-dallying in the openness of questions. There comes a time for “action” and “decision” and “choosing” and leaving ambiguity behind. Leaps of faith sometimes get their support from a thinking that has shown it cannot go the necessary distance that living requires. It’s an old, even ancient and theological theme. I wonder to what extent the rise in partisanship today could be said to compare to the conditions in which the idea of faith took hold. An atmosphere of people tired with the “fruitlessness” of thinking. That’s probably like how great minds like Augustine and others come to be ultra-partisans of their ultimately quite partisan view on the “total picture.”

What I appreciate here is attention to the way in which fantasies of seeing “the whole picture,” or the “state of things in their clarity”—in other words, a purported repudiations of partisanship, can prove to be the partisan urge in just its latest guise. I’ve also noted this in the watershed of articles and conversations that, to their credit, have finally worked up the courage to be critical of identity politics. Thinking we see “the whole,” this might be crafty partisanship. But thinking we can never see “the whole,” this might recommend partisanship too. What to do?

A good piece, thanks!



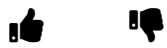
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David F

September 24, 2018 at 6:05 pm

A useful companion piece reflecting the potential correlation of partisanship and truth.

<https://www.currentaffairs.org/2018/09/why-we-take-sides>



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