

The Common Ground – Introduction

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Polarization

The United States is a polarized country. The views of Americans about key political questions—such as immigration, the role of government in addressing inequality, and racial discrimination—have come further apart in the last decade. Call this trend *belief and value polarization*.

The main driver seems to be party membership. Americans are today more likely to view themselves as consistently liberal or consistently conservative than before. Call this trend *party polarization*.

In addition—and most worryingly—members of the opposite political party are more likely to view the other side as a threat to the nation. Call this *affective polarization*.¹

Other distinctions could be made, but in general, polarization seems to consist in a growing division among people's attitudes: beliefs, values, party affiliation, how they view others, etc.² This is a problem when it paralyzes political decision-making.

Explanations

A surface level explanation for polarization is that political parties, the media industry and Big Tech—those who influence people's attitudes—benefit from polarization. Big Tech is seeking consumers, the media industry an audience, and political parties voters. Perhaps, these objectives are most effectively achieved by sustained polarization.³ This explanation, plausible though it is, make us—those at the receiving end—an easily manipulable target. We are stripped away of our agency, independence of thought, freedom of choice. Are we really so powerless? If we are, why have we become like that?

Polarization might just be the tip of the iceberg of an ongoing crisis of Western democracies. We will focus on three deeper explanations. I have chosen them, not so much because there is overwhelming evidence in their favor, but because they are both plausible and provocative, commonsensical and radical, reasonable and unsettling.

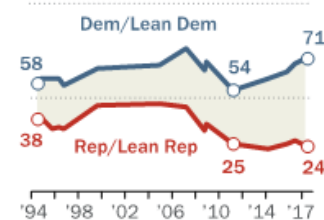
(a) LET's start with **liberalism**.

Perhaps, there is something wrong with “liberalism” itself, or with how it has been understood and implemented, or with some

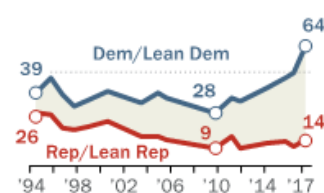
Growing partisan gaps on govt, race, immigration

% who say ...

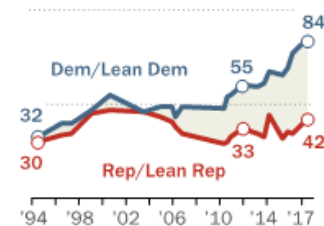
Government should do more to help the needy



Racial discrimination is the main reason why many black people can't get ahead these days



Immigrants strengthen the country with their hard work and talents



Source: Survey conducted June 8-18 and June 27-July 9, 2017.

PEW RESEARCH CENTER

Figure 1: Growing Polarization. Source: Pew Research Center.

¹ See Pew Research Center, Political Polarization in the American Public.

² Divisions, of course, do not just exist in attitudes, but also in material conditions: wealth, income, education, health, etc. Inequalities along these dimensions exist in the United States, and seem to be growing.

³ For a review of common explanations, see also Colbert, How Politics Got So Polarized, *The New Yorker*, 2021.

aspects of it that have come to dominate the United States (and other Western countries). Liberalism is often used in the formula “liberal democracy”, though liberalism and democracy are different concepts. There can be liberalism without democracy.

Democracy is a form of government guided in part by people’s inputs, sometimes directly via referendum, or indirectly via elected representatives. In contrast, liberalism’s core tenet is that the individual is the carrier of certain fundamental rights: the right to autonomy (belief, religion, speech, political association); the right to own private property and carry out economic activity; and, in liberal democracies, the right to vote.⁴

Liberalism’s primacy of the individual is associated with a weakening of people’s ties towards the family, clans or local communities. When the severing of social ties is extreme, it brings about the atomization of society. At the same time, insistence on the primacy of the individual—especially, an insistence on individual property rights—has been historically accompanied by significant economic growth and rising standards of living.⁵

Since individuals form their own beliefs and preferences, and own their own property, great material and ideological diversity will exist in a liberal society. There will be diversity of thought, but also material inequality. In this context, the primary goal of the government should be to foster this “diversity” without imposing a particular conception of the good. The choice of what counts as the good should be left up to individual choices. This is how the right to autonomy is realized in a liberal society.⁶

These premises, according to political scientist Deneen, lead to the *degradation of citizenship*.

The idolization of “diversity” in the form of personal identity was sewn into the deepest fabric of the liberal project, and with it the diminution of a common civic . . . the only allegiance that would remain was to a political project that supported ever more individuation.⁷

Yet once degraded, such as a citizenry would be unlikely to insist upon Tocquevillian self-command; its response would predictably take the form of inarticulate cries for a strongman to rein in the power of a distant and ungovernable state and market.⁸

This is not an explanation for polarization. An emphasis on individualism should lead to fragmentation, not polarization. But it is an explanation for why we are powerless and manipulable. A manipulable populace can then be turned into a polarized crowd.⁹

Deneen’s analysis is far reaching. It reaches back to the founding fathers and the roots of modernity itself. Perhaps we need not reach so far back.¹⁰

⁴ That the individual is the carrier of certain fundamental rights—or even that individuals exist—is a conceptual construction. We take it for granted as self-evident, but it is a recent idea. See, for example, Siedentop, *Inventing The Individual: The Origins of Western Liberalism*, Harvard University Press, 2014

⁵ Standards of living, however, will primarily be understood on an individualistic level, say, in terms of individual wealth, income, purchasing power, access to consumer goods, etc. Debates about morality, justice and fairness will also tend to emphasize individuals.

⁶ John Rawls, the most influential political philosopher of the 20th century in the United States, shares this view in the slogan “political not metaphysical”. But he also believed that the basic structure of society should comply with justice as fairness. After all, no thinker in the liberal tradition would hold that individual choices should be entirely unconstrained.

⁷ Deneen (2018), *Why Liberalism Failed*, p. 166

⁸ Ibid, p. 178

⁹ For Deneen, liberalism’s emphasis on the individual has many implications: freedom is reduced to choice; culture (understood as tie to place and time) disappears; markets become globalized; local government recedes and the central state expands; etc.

¹⁰ A critique of liberalism, not as radical as Deneen’s, is also offered by Fukuyama, *Liberalism and Its Discontents*, 2022.

(b) LET’S turn to the **free market**.

According to intellectual historian Rodgers, the 1970s—in the middle of economic turmoil, rampant inflation, and rising unemployment—saw a radical shift in economic theory: the old distinction between macro- and micro-economics was replaced by a unified, individual-focused approach:

A graduate student in economics at Lucas’s University of Chicago in the mid-1980s put the point more baldly: “The macroeconomics [that we learn here] is very much like microeconomics. We look on individual levels and sum it up.”¹¹

¹¹ Rodgers, *The Age of Fracture*, p. 67

This shift in economic theory comes along with the popularization of a new conception of the free market: a self regulating network of “individual utility maximizers” that always produces efficient outcomes (in prices, allocation of goods and services, etc.) Rodgers emphasizes this is nothing other than a metaphor, but still, it is indicative of the spirit of the time.

The individual becomes the sole unit of analysis. Social relations, common interests, larger structures, questions of power drop out.

As the market grew more abstract, society thinned out into highly reduced microeconomic mental pictures: Gilder’s heroically independent entrepreneurs, Lucas’s forward-looking utility maximizers, Wanniski’s fish and conocnut traders. . . To imagine the market now was to imagine a socially detached array of economic actors, free to choose and optimize, unconstrained by power and inequality, governed not by their common deliberative action but by the impersonal laws of the market.¹²

¹² Ibid, p. 76

So, while perhaps the atomization of society is not inherent in liberalism itself—as Deneen believes—it is visible in Rodgers’ intellectual history of the 70s and 80s.

(b) FINALLY, consider **ingroup biases**.

Public spaces in the United States were abundant in the first half of the 20th century. They were instrumental to create a common American identity. They solidified the social fabric. Americans had great trust in government spending.¹³ These attitudes are miles away from today’s widespread anti-government sentiments. What has changed?

Bestselling author and policy advocate McGhee recounts how many cities in the South had beautiful public swimming pools and

¹³ Tax brackets in the United States were also extremely high for high-income earners, even 90%, in the first half of the 20th century. See, for example, the data in Piketty, *Capital in the Twenty-First Century*, 2013.

public parks. During racial segregation, these facilities were only accessible to the white population. In the 50s and 60s, federal courts mandated that public facilities be desegregated. But local administrators instead of complying with the orders ended up closing the facilities to everybody, white and black people alike.¹⁴

That racism drained the pool—as McGhee poignantly put it—is consistent with the claim that welfare benefits are viewed more favorably in ethnically homogeneous societies such as Scandinavian countries, rather than ethnically diverse societies such as the United States. Ethnically diverse societies tend to have what is sometimes called “welfare chauvinism”.¹⁵

In addition, McGhee’s argues that Republicans in the 60s and 70s were aiming to cut taxes and reduce welfare benefits. But this political agenda could not have won support outright. So, in order to win the support of the white working class, Republicans played with their racial fears and racial resentment: undeserving black people could take away whites’ gains if blacks were given access to public facilities and government benefits in the way whites had in the past. The solution? Cut taxes and welfare benefits altogether. This political strategy worked in Republicans’ favor, but also triggered a course of deepening identitarian divisions in the country.¹⁶

The Common Ground

So why a course on the common ground? Seeking a common ground is sometimes touted as the solution to the problem of polarization, and the lack of a common ground as its cause, though some also disagree. Perhaps, the two sides should not be treated symmetrically.¹⁷

A common ground might or might not be the solution to polarization, but there are preliminary questions that need addressing here. What is the common ground? What role does it play? Why is seeking one important? What kind of common ground should we be seeking?

The common ground—whatever it is, exactly—plays a role in making possible several human cognitive endeavors: communication, reasoning, rational inquiry, and—perhaps most importantly—political deliberation. Given its multifaceted nature, this course examines the idea of the common ground from several sub-fields of philosophy: language, logic, argumentation theory, epistemology, social and political philosophy.

¹⁴ See McGhee, *The Sum of Us: What Racism Costs Everyone and How We Can Prosper Together*, 2021.

¹⁵ There is empirical evidence that supports this view, though it is contested. See, for example, van der Meer and Reeskens, Welfare Chauvinism in the Face of Ethnic Diversity, *European Sociological Review* 37:1, 2021.

¹⁶ On the role of anger, resentment and identity politics, see Mason, *Uncivil Agreement: How Politics Became Our Identity*, 2018.

¹⁷ Should we try to seek common ground with those who deny vaccine effectiveness and scientific findings? See, for example, Nguyen, Polarization or Propaganda?, *Boston Review*, 2021.