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OPINIONCOMMENTARY

Why the 'Smart' Party Never Learns

If your views by definition are enlightened and progressive, why should you bother understanding those of the other side?

By Barton Swaim [Follow](#)

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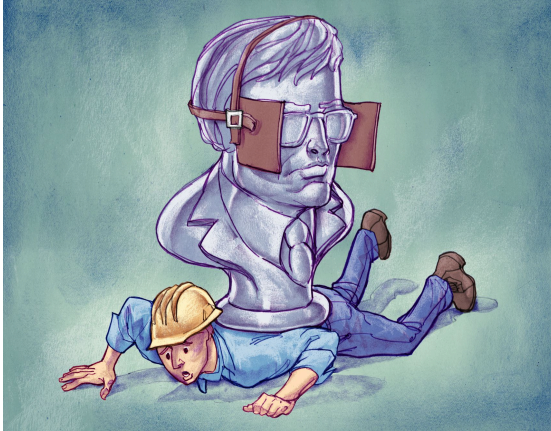


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The most obvious change in American politics this century is the sorting of voters along educational lines. The Democrats are increasingly the party of educated urban elites; the GOP belongs to the white working class. The dispute is over suburban and minority voters. The latter still plump mostly for Democrats, although the party's social radicalism is pushing them toward the GOP. Voters with impressive educational credentials tend to be Democrats, and those without them lean strongly Republican.

That one party is the educated party—that its members see themselves, in some respects accurately, as more cultured and informed than their opponents—has generated an intellectual pathology that is obvious to everyone but themselves. Adherents of the smart-people party have lost the capacity for self-criticism. Which on its face makes sense. If your views are by definition intelligent, those of your critics must be dumb. Who needs self-reflection?

We can start to understand the Democrats' predicament by ridding ourselves of a set of metaphors. For a decade or more, we've been told that left and right live in "silos" or "bubbles" or "echo chambers" or "information cocoons." The left watch MSNBC and read the New York Times, and the right watch Fox News and listen to talk radio.

Exacerbating this state of affairs, we're told, are social-media platforms whose algorithms give politically attuned users only content they're likely to agree with. Facile claims to the contrary, Facebook, Twitter and similar platforms don't have this effect. A 2019 study, "Are Filter Bubbles Real?" by Axel Bruns of Queensland University Technology in Australia surveys a wide array of evidence and finds that social-media users on all sides get plenty of exposure to content with which they disagree. "Ironically," Mr. Bruns writes in an aside, "echo chamber and filter bubble concepts may have become so popular with some journalists, media critics, and politicians because members of these professional classes are genuinely more likely to inhabit an information cocoon of sorts."

In any case, the silo/bubble metaphor doesn't describe American politics in the 2020s for the simple reason that there is no silo or bubble. Or if there is, it's very large and almost exclusively populated by adherents of the smart-people party.

If you're on the right, you simply can't isolate yourself from the habits and attitudes of left-liberal progressivism. They are everywhere. The most determined imbibor of right-wing opinion still watches television and movies and reads the mainstream press. The left-liberal outlook is expressed everywhere in these media, and generally it isn't expressed as viewpoint but as established fact.

The conservative voter who follows nothing but right-wing accounts on social media still sees CNN as a captive audience at airports. He advises his college-age children as they negotiate campus environments in which they're expected to state their "pronouns" and declare themselves "allies" of the "LGBTQ2SIA+ community." However scornful of left-wing opinion he may be, his employer still subjects him to diversity training. He attends a concert by the local symphony orchestra and has to listen to a four-minute lecture about systemic racism or climate change before the music starts. He can't watch a pro football game without enduring little pronouncements of wokeness. The right-winger may get 100% of his news from Republican-leaning news sites but still has to be vigilant as his 5-year-old browses the children's section of the local public library.

There is no bubble, no silo, for such a person.

The urban-dwelling knowledge-class progressive experiences few such dissonant moments. So pervasive are the opinions of left-liberal progressivism throughout American culture that the adherent of that worldview may roam freely in it with minimal disquiet. The TV ads that subtly legitimize the latest sexual identity; the lefty sermonettes intoned at public events; the movies and sitcoms that virtually all accept trendy orthodoxies; the race-fixated version of American history promoted in public schools—these the holder of conventional progressive opinions can absorb almost without noticing it.

The left-liberal outlook has triumphed across American culture—in corporate boardrooms, in government agencies, in sports and entertainment institutions, in K-12 education bureaucracies, in universities and in media organizations. But that is precisely what has robbed progressives, especially those in the political class and in the media, of any ability to criticize themselves or doubt their own righteousness. They don't engage with serious arguments advanced by the other side. They live in a world in which it is possible to pass through a month without encountering much in the way of serious conservative opinion. When they do encounter a conservative view, it is precategorized as "fringe" or "extreme" by the calm, omniscient NPR voice that relates its content.

And so progressives have become, if I could put it bluntly, incurious and lazy. Every conservative journalist born in the last 70 or 80 years has, early in his career, come to the sad realization that liberal writers and intellectuals, the people conservatives are so careful to read and react to, don't actually read conservatives or know much about the right. Their attitude recalls that wonderful line in "Casablanca" when Ugarte (Peter Lorre) asks Rick (Humphrey Bogart), "You despise me, don't you?"

Rick's answer: "If I gave you any thought, I probably would."

In the early 2000s, the Bush administration's critics in Congress and the media showed no interest in understanding the neoconservative outlook that supposedly drove the Iraq War. Preposterous caricatures and badly informed theorizing were enough. Today, the left's politicians and journalists, with a small number of exceptions, have still made no effort to understand the strangest and most surprising turn in politics in many decades: the election of Donald Trump. Russian meddling, "collusion" with Vladimir Putin, fear of nonwhite people, the ignorant reaction of poor white opium addicts, a resurgence of fascism—any explanation was OK as long as it didn't involve self-reflection.

Something about Mr. Trump gave Democrats and liberal journalists all the emotional license they needed to discount, once and for all, any possibility that a Republican might have a point. No party that could nominate Mr. Trump deserved further thought; the GOP had, in their eyes, defenestrated what was left of its legitimacy.

Consider the past two years of Democratic governance. A slender majority in the U.S. House and a 50-50 tie in the Senate somehow led Democrats to believe they had no opposition to speak of. At times they seemed literally to believe this, as

when Sen. Bernie Sanders and others fulminated against his Democratic colleagues Joe Manchin and Kyrsten Sinema for resisting President Biden's so-called Build Back Better bill—as if the bill had two opponents and not 52.

Democrats and their backers in the news media, insisting on the infallibility of science, doubled down on onerous Covid restrictions long after it was clear that shutdowns, school closures and mask mandates were futile and destructive. In July of this year Anthony Fauci said his only regret is that he didn't recommend "much, much more stringent restrictions" in the spring of 2020. Even now, long after the views of antimasking and antishutdown protesters have been largely vindicated on the available evidence, long after fans of China's draconian restrictionism have been disgraced by the reality of China's failure, no one has offered an apology or an admission of error.

The pullout from Afghanistan was a stupendous debacle, but virtually no Democrat in Congress or the administration could be found to hint that the thing had been less than ideal. Violent crime has returned to major cities, but the Washington Post, the New York Times, CNN and elected Democrats have treated the matter as though it were an invention of conservative media. Massive levels of illegal immigration at the southern border, too, are treated by Democrats as though the whole business is made up.

On economics, Republicans warned the administration in early 2021 about the danger that trillions in spending would inflate the currency. Their warnings were ignored. Inflation exploded, and the administration denied it. In August 2022 President Biden asserted that inflation was "zero percent." He was, absurdly, comparing that month's prices to the previous month's, ignoring everything that happened before July.

A global energy shortage has sent gas and electricity prices skyward. Congressional Democrats and the administration might easily have backed off their green commitments, promoted fracking and increased domestic oil production, at least on a temporary basis. That would have brought prices down, which was the only outcome Mr. Biden and other elected Democrats appeared to care about. I am not aware that such a policy change was ever considered.

Rarely in politics does anyone admit fault. You don't expect high-ranking members of either party to acknowledge straightforwardly that they were wrong about anything. But people sometimes adjust, even if they don't admit they're adjusting. After the 2022 midterm elections, in which Democrats outperformed expectations but still lost the U.S. House, the president was asked what, in light of the fact that three quarters of Americans say the country is headed in the wrong direction, he plans to do differently in the future. His reply: "Nothing." You can discount Mr. Biden's words for senescence, but that answer expressed perfectly the solipsistic self-confidence of his party.

Even if the Democrats had been crushed in the 2022 midterm elections, they would have been unable to adjust. Their cultural dominance discourages them from changing course, which is why they can be counted on to invent exogenous reasons for electoral defeats: an allegedly racist TV ad in 1988, shenanigans in Florida in 2000, faulty voting machines in Ohio in 2004, collusion with Russia in 2016. Mr. Trump adopted this custom with abandon in 2020, but Republicans, who aren't encouraged by elite culture to think themselves infallible, usually blame each other for electoral losses. Hence the 2013 autopsy, as wrongheaded as it was. There is no Democratic correlative to such a document.

Democrats will hotly contest this analysis of their mindset and behavior. They will note that Republicans, too, think themselves infallible, and conservatives discount the views of their critics.

And they do—sometimes. But Republicans and conservatives, when they are empowered and can make decisions, can't depend on elite society backing them up. If a Republican official somewhere expresses a view falling outside the liberal conventional wisdom, that official can expect opposition from every segment of educated elite society—Hollywood actors, Fortune 500 boardrooms, university-based experts and so on. Blowback from so many sources isn't easy to take, and in that case the Republican official will often, perhaps usually, back down.

But this objection—the objection that Republicans often behave peremptorily—misses the point. The GOP is, increasingly, the party of the uneducated, of the uncredentialed worker who lacks proper data and nuance. Surely it is the educated voter, the respecter of scientific argumentation and informed debate, who bears a special responsibility to

consider contrary views. It's the smart person, not the stupid or ignorant one, who holds the gravest obligation to respect views other than his own. Yet owing to his status as a smart person, respecting other views is precisely what he can't do.

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