

Extremism - Polarization in America 2022

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The Rise of Modern Extremism and Polarization

Those of us Americans who are in our 70's and beyond can remember when there were liberal Republicans and conservative Democrats. Up to the later 1970's there was debate and compromise within the major parties, and members of Congress all shared a common dining room. No more!

Reagan represents the political dividing line with polarization escalating since his presidency. In this process, Republicans converted the South and absorbed the conservative southern Democrats into the GOP. Then, conservatives within the GOP began the process over the next twenty five years of purging first its liberals and then its moderates from the party. At the same time their base became more suburban, rural and white. On the opposing side, Democrats lost their conservatives and most of their agrarian constituency and over time trended more progressive. And their base retreated more and more into the racial and ethnically diverse megalopolis centers on the East and West coasts.

Republican conservatism – and its offshoot Libertarianism – has become ever more conservative through the Tea Party movement to the Freedom Caucus and has culminated in the cult of Donald Trump. Democratic liberalism has trended more liberal – openly promoting socialist goals with Progressives pushing the moderates in the party toward the fast growing middle of the road Independents.

The result of excesses on both sides: the independent center of political compromise has grown with its membership being disgusted with both parties. But this significantly populated center has failed to coalesce into an alternative party and has remained politically impotent. Instead, Independents have either withdrawn from political involvement or shifted conservative or liberal as the major parties attract the attention of the majority. This, while the two major parties and their extremists carry the country to its current state of dangerous polarization. If this divisive situation continues and a centrist party does not emerge to exercise a real politically moderating influence, the future for America is bleak as well as dangerous. This is especially the case as the GOP has been converted to a full blown cult of personality with Trump exhibiting clear anti-democratic and Putin like authoritarian aspirations.

The Root of the Problem

At the root of all of the differences between liberals and conservatives is the relative emphasis they place on either individualistic or communal values.

Conservatives celebrate individual values and emphasize competition and individual rights and freedoms. For conservatives, communal values are mostly limited to family and the immediate groups to which they belong and then tend to jump to country across all intermediate social scales. Liberals emphasize communal values of social cooperation, obligation, respect, and responsibility, and they focus on the array of needs of all people in all groups at all scales, including the global scale. For liberals, individual values of creativity, industry and freedom are important but without equal opportunity for these traits to be developed and expressed at all social scales, their support is regarded as having little broad scale consequence.

All of the economic, political and social battles between liberals and conservatives ultimately emanate from these two basic differences in perspective. Both sides are guilty of not appreciating the contribution that the values of the other side make in determining success or failure in human societies. We need to respect human rights and freedoms and reward the efforts of personal responsibility, creativity and industry. But we also need to support diversity and sustain a reasonable level of overall equality across all of the subgroups of our complex society. So, the essential answer to this conflict is to avoid a “one size fits all” approach and achieve an appropriate level of input from these two perspectives dependent upon the particulars of the situation [eg. my proposal in “dynamic humanism”].

The Underlying Issue of Resources

As both Democrats and Republicans in Congress squabble over how the nation’s financial resources are to be utilized, representatives of both parties – without so much as a squawk – recently voted almost unanimously to support the 778 billion dollar Defense Authorization Act for 2022. This commitment represents about 50% of the discretionary spending in the U.S. federal budget. As this commitment is equal to the combined defense budgets of the next 11 major countries, it boggles the mind that the media has not even mentioned, much less explored, the consequences of this extraordinary level of expenditure! The Democrats support this defense budget in the name of protecting democracy worldwide, while the Republicans offer their support to secure the nation against all potential foes. And both Democrats and Republicans support this level of expenditure to sustain the economic “benefits” of the military industrial complex.

America’s resource commitment to pursuing hegemony by trying to “police the world” exists at the same time that 1) its domestic citizenry suffers from economic and political polarization, 2) corruption is pervasive in its financial and basic information systems, and 3) an anti-democratic, internal movement toward

authoritarian government poses a significant threat. This set of circumstances closely resembles the conditions that have led to the downfall of many past empires and civilizations. Stated simply: collapse of complex society often occurs due to various sources of internal decay combined with excessive commitment to military control of other peoples.

The great irony is that America has the resources to meet all of the needs of its citizens – both liberals and conservatives – while still supporting both its diversity and the integrity of the planet's ecology. But it can only do this if it 1) adequately reduces the extremes in its citizenry of economic inequality, 2) guarantees all citizens equal access and right to vote, 3) sufficiently regulates all forms of public media to guarantee information accuracy, and 4) curtails its unparalleled expenditures in the name of defense. Under the umbrella of these changes, the great majority of other needed adjustments become much easier to achieve. These changes are made economically possible by significantly reducing defense expenditures, and by implementing modest proposals to increase the financial contribution that corporations and the extremely wealthy make to support our society.

There is an answer to America's dangerous current condition of polarization and risk to our representative democracy, an answer that respects the perspective of both sides and provides the needed resources to sustain our complex society.