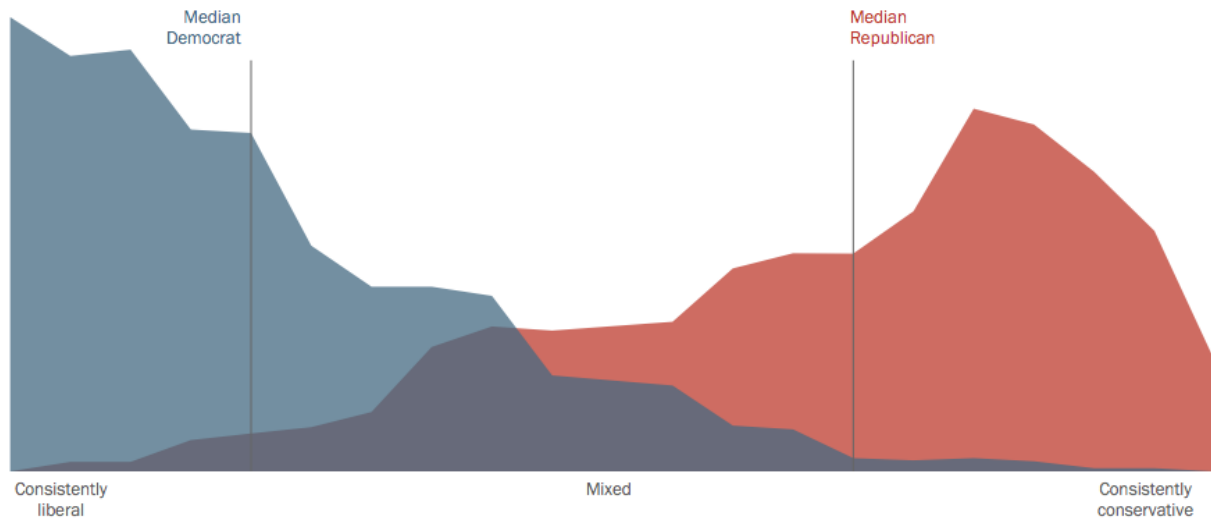


2017



Politically Engaged Americans

<http://viableopposition.blogspot.com/2017/11/the-growth-of-political-polarization-in.html>

Fighting Political Polarization

As of the 2016 Presidential election cycle, here's the score:

Democrats	72
Republicans	20
Libertarians	0

That's the number of times each of the parties used the word "fight" in their platforms, as revealed by word-find queries. (To check for yourself, click on the links to their platforms above).

[Political polarization](#) is commonly viewed as a problem and knowledge shared in Wikipedia sheds light on the contribution of such rhetoric to the magnitude of the malady.

[Fighting words](#) "tend to create (deliberately or not) a verbal or physical confrontation by their mere usage." While freedom of speech is protected by the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution the *fighting words doctrine*, established by the Supreme Court, imposes a limitation on that right. It was not a close call when the vote (9-0) occurred in 1942, but since then, the Court has narrowed the grounds on which the doctrine is held to apply. While freedom of expression remains a defining characteristic of American life, it may be time to consider applying voluntary, socially enforced restraints on the usage of such words in political discourse – not merely for the sake of civility but, more importantly, productivity.

Verbal confrontation may not necessarily lead to physical conflict, but as Wikipedia explains, [irritation and anger](#) remain relatively inevitable and counterproductive results:

It is generally difficult for most people to remain calm and collected in a conflict situation. However, an increase in negative emotions (i.e. anger) only exacerbates the initial conflict. Even when group members begin to discuss their positions calmly and dispassionately, once they become committed to their positions, an emotional expression often replaces logical discussion.

Dialogue may have the [unintended consequence](#) of *aggravating* and *solidifying* disagreement. Indeed, for some types of decisions, James Surwiecki has argued that [independence of thought](#) is key. Moreover, anger is contagious. Negotiating with someone who is angry makes us angry too. With reference to the dynamics of such interactions, [social conflict](#) occurs when:

... two or more actors oppose each other in social interaction, reciprocally exerting social power in an effort to attain scarce or incompatible goals and prevent the opponent from attaining them. It is a social relationship wherein the action is oriented intentionally for carrying out the actor's own will against the resistance of other party or parties

With respect to [resistance](#) to “other parties,” Wikipedia’s observations about physical systems is practically as well as metaphorically applicable to human [systems of engagement](#), particularly those driven by [politics](#): “components malfunction or fail if they overheat, and some parts routinely need measures taken in the design stage to prevent this.”

In the design of politically driven systems, [normalizing civil resistance](#) may be preferable to encouraging violence but might there be a still better alternative as yet untested? French and Raven identified [seven sources of social power](#) and Gene Sharp set forth a set of [principles for non-violent resistance](#). However, in the cyberage, the [legitimacy](#) of power based on positional rather than personal attributes is questionable and Sharp’s principles may be outmoded as well. As with [light-emitting diodes](#) (LED), might it be possible to apply our individual and collective energies more efficiently by dispensing with the heat-inducing resistance while enhancing [enlightenment](#)?

Regarding [polarization in politics](#), “in a [two-party system](#), like the [United States](#), moderate voices often lose power and influence.” Among the possible causes of polarization are [limiting choices](#) and unduly [focusing on sensitive matters](#), so called “[hot button](#)” issues. Human beings have been exquisitely designed by evolution to detect differences, especially those that are “hot” in the sense of representing threats. Moreover, a surefire way to foment opposition is to tell people they have no choice. Doing so may turn into opponents those who might otherwise be disinterested or at least not care enough to object.

Political parties and systems are designed to accentuate differences and limit choices – based upon personalities (candidates for elective office) and tribalism. Few, if any elections turn on detailed performance plans [enabling voters to match the candidates’ objectives to their own](#). Candidates may publish generic issue statements but 30-second [attack ads](#) garner far more attention and, indeed, [seem to be effective](#). How could that not be polarizing? Who but ourselves do [We the People](#) have to blame?

[Majoritarian](#) political systems are commonly considered to be conceptually synonymous with [democracy](#) and polarization is inherent, as [Wikipedia explains](#):

When conflicts erupt, group members use coalitions to shift the balance of power in their favor, and it is typical for multiparty conflicts to reduce to two-party blocks over time. Coalitions contribute to the conflict because they draw more members of the group into a fray. Individuals in coalitions work not only to ensure their own outcomes but also to worsen outcomes of non-coalition members. Those who are excluded from the coalition react with hostility and try to regain power by forming their own coalition. Thus, coalitions need to be constantly maintained through strategic bargaining and negotiation.

Does majoritarianism present a [false choice](#)? Might there be another, better, less coercive alternative? Might it be time to tone down the politically motivated rhetoric and begin to focus instead on results that matter? If not, perhaps those who believe politics is the one and only, fully mature (CMM [Level 5](#)) end-all-and-be-all way to effect meaningful change (whose ends justify the means) may wish to take a lesson from a highly qualified practitioner of [coercion](#):

The techniques used by the Chinese authorities included a technique derived from standard [group psychotherapy](#), which was aimed at forcing the victims (who were generally intellectuals) to produce detailed and sincere ideological "confessions". For instance, a professor of [formal logic](#) called Chin Yueh-lin – who was then regarded as China's leading authority on his subject – was induced to write: "The new philosophy [of [Marxism-Leninism](#)], being scientific, is the supreme truth."

For those captivated by politics, techniques supporting the [Stockholm syndrome](#) might also be usefully applied, particularly to those who can be coerced into re/education. The Chinese "Thought Reform" program of [psychological coercion](#) was supported by "revolutionary universities". In light of that historical fact, it is noteworthy that lack of diversity of opinion at universities in the [land of the free and the home of the brave](#) prompted a group of tenured professors to form a peer group called the [Heterodox Academy](#), whose mission is: To improve the quality of research and education in universities by increasing viewpoint diversity, mutual understanding, and constructive disagreement.

While [peer pressure](#) is commonly viewed in a negative light, it can be a powerful [source of good](#) when applied by [paternalistic libertarians](#) to [nudge](#) their friends, families, and communities to act in their own best interests, thereby establishing new and presumably [progressively](#) improving [social norms](#). Indeed, with respect to personal interactions, Christakis and Fowler [have asserted](#):

To address social disparities ... we must recognize that our connections matter more than the color of our skin or the size of our wallets... To reduce poverty, we should focus not merely on monetary transfers or even technical training; we should help the poor form new relationships with other members of society.

Among the risks associated with good old-fashioned politics as usual are [stereotyping](#), [pigeon-holing](#), [tribalism](#), [groupthink](#), and [victim mentality](#) as well as [winner-take-all](#)-induced polarization. So too is the [bystander effect](#), supported by [diffusion of responsibility](#), as reflected in the colloquialism: When everyone is responsible, no one is responsible. Diffusion of responsibility fosters [moral disengagement](#)

and, worse yet, mis/redirection of responsibility engenders [moral hazard](#) – inducing us to engage in risky behavior because the costs are shifted to others. Ought we not to remove our [blinders](#) to such dynamics and seek more rational [win/win](#) courses of action, characterized by personal responsibility?

In matters lacking personal importance to us or over which we have little control, it is rational not to waste time and effort. In such cases, it may be fine to remain [rationally ignorant](#) while divesting responsibility and authority to others, e.g., through voting. On the other hand, if we feel strongly enough to use fighting words, voting is not enough and may even be counterproductive. It's not that nothing is worth fighting for but, rather, that some things are too important to fight about.

Not only may elections prompt needless resistance but also [social loafing](#). Rather than merely voting and/or engaging in hypercritical, inherently polarizing rhetoric, we should instead take personal responsibility for meaningful action in peer-based partnerships with those who share our values and objectives ... without attempting to impose our will upon others.

Inappropriate and undue influence in politics has been roundly criticized. As a vehicle for action on issues that truly matter to us as individuals, families, and [communities](#), politics is far from the solution. To the contrary, it is the *problem*. If we believe political polarization is a problem worth addressing, each of us has a choice to make: Do we want to be part of the problem or the solution?

As Dorothy and her colleagues [learned in the land of Oz](#), we hold it within our power to achieve our wishes and desires. Among the potentials of Web-based services leveraging the Strategy Markup Language ([StratML](#)) standard ([ISO 17469-1](#)) is the prospect of disintermediating politics and politicians from the issues most near and dear to our hearts. That's a vision worth striving toward, if not fighting for:

A worldwide web of intentions, stakeholders, and results.