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Communicative Solutions to the United States' Political Polarization

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Communicative Solutions to
the United States' Political Polarization

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Honors Project

Submitted to the Honors College
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INTRODUCTION

The United States' political spectrum ranges from socialists to environmental activists to tax reformers to small-government advocates. Yet, the US has only two major political parties. Somehow, these two parties attempt to represent the widespread array of American political views. Although one party couldn't dream of adequately representing so many conflicting stances, the Democrats and Republicans alike try to do so anyway. Astonishingly, the American populace clings to its parties, as political polarization reaches an all-time high. Not only are American voters strongly divided along party lines, but they also harbor an intense hostility for members of the opposition. Political polarization, in this sense, constitutes a combination of one's steadfastness in his/her own beliefs combined with his/her disdain for other political parties. The "political divide," as I use the term, refers to the disparity between the two major US political parties, and the metaphysical gap created by political polarization. I also frequently use the term "partisanship," in the sense that we tend to hold a prejudice in favor of our own political party.

Why has political polarization reached an all-time high in recent years? How does our political identity shape our interactions with and perceptions of others? How do our preconceived notions of others' political affiliations affect the way we engage with others in political discourse? What factors contribute to such preconceived notions? And how can these preconceived notions be broken down to help shape a more open, discursive environment? Of course, perfect harmony is a pipe dream; a society that lives in 100% political agreement may prove both unrealistic and even potentially dangerous. But how do we achieve a society that can disagree in a respectful manner, and discuss those disagreements with civility? The following pages attempt to answer these questions.

I've conducted countless hours of research – combing through survey data, examining existing literature, and interviewing people across the country. I've pored through hundreds of pages of studies, but I consider myself no expert. I am simply a fellow citizen offering a humble set of suggested solutions to a problem that I perceive as plaguing our society, based on my own experiences and readings.

I've broken my findings into four sections. First, I'll discuss the nature of the current chasm that divides our country politically. I'll examine the lines upon which this divide exists. In the second section, I will explicate some of the possible reasons for the divide, analyze why that divide runs so deep, and expound upon why many people consider it so insurmountable. I'll subsequently explain why the political divide presents a problem to our society, and the significance of that problem, in the third section. In the final portion of this paper, I evaluate some potential solutions, and offer suggestions for how we can move forward, based on the theoretical frames discussed in part three.

PART ONE: THE POLITICAL DIVIDE

We're split. The United States serves as home to 326 million people,¹ and over 200 million of those people are registered to vote.² That's a lot of people with a lot of opinions. And those opinions vary far and wide across the political spectrum³. It is measurably clear that the United States faces a tremendous divide along such lines as gender, race, and education levels. In fact, critical PEW data across three longitudinal studies demonstrate this divide.

The PEW Research Center is widely hailed as one of the most prestigious, most reliable, and most nonpartisan political research groups in the country. They have exemplified high-quality research for decades. One study they conducted a couple years ago (PEW 2015), soaked in graphs and charts and visual aids, presents data collected from over 25,000 interviews.⁴ The results show strong correlations between religion, race, education level, and generation, to party affiliation. That means simple, uncontrollable factors, such as your age or ethnicity, can predict your party affiliation with high accuracy. And the divides are enormous. Using race as an example, 49% of whites are either Republican or Republican-leaning (40% lean Democratic). Among white men who have not completed college, that figure is 54% (vs. 33% Democrat), and 55% among white southerners (vs. 34% Dem.). 89% of African Americans, 65% of Asian Americans, and 56% of Hispanics at least lean Democratic (vs. 11%, 23%, and 26% respectively leaning Republican).

As if the above study didn't present enough concrete evidence of partisan divides in America, PEW (2016) compiled results of another longitudinal effort in the following year.⁵ This study also explores voting trends in race, religion, economic status, education level, and generation, but along a twenty-four-year timeline. As a general rule, white, southern men without a college education over the age of thirty-five vote Republican. Millennials (adults age 20-37) of any education level prove most likely to identify as either Democratic or Independent. Baby Boomers and the Silent Generation on the whole seem evenly split: one third Democrat, one third Republican, and one third Independent. However, when one isolates race as a variable, the results shift dramatically. Non-white Millennials, Generation X-ers, and Baby Boomers are all nearly four times more likely to lean Democratic; non-white members of the Silent Generation are 3 times more likely to vote Democrat.

Although I have so far paid much attention to such factors as race, age, and education level, I make no judgement on the validity of any viewpoint or its relationship to these factors. I am simply attempting to demonstrate a rift exists between parties. One of the easiest ways to demonstrate something exists is to show *where* it exists. A reader who falls into the 89% of the African Americans who lean Democratic should not feel self-conscious about her political

¹ United States Census Bureau, "U.S. and World Population Clock," *The United States Census Bureau*, 2017.

² Shane Goldmacher, "America Hits New Landmark: 200 Million Registered Voters," *POLITICO*, 2016.

³ Chris Nelson, Jerrick Adams, Sarah Groat, Taylor Kempema, and Adam Vaughn, "List of Political Parties in the United States," *Ballotpedia*, 2017.

⁴ PEW Research Center, "A Deep Dive into Party Affiliation: Sharp Differences by Race, Gender, Generation, Education," *People-Press.org*, 2015.

⁵ PEW Research Center, "Party Affiliation Among Voters: 1992-2016," *People-Press.org*, 2016.

identity's confirming some kind of stereotype. That's not the point of the preceding paragraphs. The point was to show that people hold very different opinions and affiliations.

Of all these varying opinions and affiliations, one thing remains constant: people don't like it when somebody disagrees with them. Although a partisan divide has existed since our country's inception – sometimes violently – animosity and disdain surrounding the divide reached a level in 2016 that had not been seen in over two decades. A third PEW study (2016) documents the contempt among voters held for any member of the opposite party during the 2016 presidential elections.⁶ Over half of Democrats and nearly half of Republicans claim they fear the intentions of the other party. Feelings of anger and frustration for the opposite party also soared: each surpassing 57% in either party. 52% of Republicans consider Democrats closed-minded and 70% of Democrats say the same about Republicans. The data also shows that members of both parties overwhelmingly consider the other party to consist of lazy, dishonest, immoral, and unintelligent people.

Think about those numbers for a moment. Far greater than half of all people *fear the intentions* of those who think differently than they do. And even more people think the side with which they disagree is closed-minded. How are we supposed to have healthy discussion when we think everyone is either scary, obstinate, or stupid?

As the political animosity plaguing our country deepens, frustration has stretched its hands into the one place where disagreements should be considered most sacred: the classroom. Universities are a place to test new ideas, to question old ideas, and above all else, to mold our own beliefs based on healthy, educational discussion. But students have begun to perceive what are known as “silencing behaviors.”⁷ Researchers Jayne Henson and Katherine Denker (2009) conducted interviews with and distributed surveys to a large group of college students, and observed multiple university classrooms for a semester. They strove to measure the perceived political differences between students and professors, and whether those differences produce silencing behaviors- attempts by the professor to snuff out any students' views that oppose his or her own political beliefs. The results showed the greater the perceived political difference between students and professors, the more likely the students were to feel as though their views were being silenced.

According to the Association of American Colleges and Universities, an education “empowers individuals and prepares them to deal with complexity, diversity, and change ... with broad knowledge of the wider world.”⁸ How do we expect to foster a cohesive, collaborative society that is prepared to deal with complexity, diversity, and change, when bias and prejudice taint the place where young people are supposed to learn about these processes? Indeed, the outlook is bleak.

Why does this political divide exist? What led to such enmity and utter disdain for those who think differently than we?

⁶ PEW Research Center, “Partisanship and Political Animosity in 2016,” *People-Press.org*, 2016.

⁷ Jayne R. Henson and Katherine J. Denker, “Political Differences and Perceptions of Silencing in University Classrooms,” *Communication Research Reports*, 2009.

⁸ Association of American Colleges and Universities, “What is a 21st Century Liberal Education?” *acu.org*, 2017.

When answering questions like these, it's dangerous to assume that the answer revolves around one single cause. Societies are so complex, with so many moving and interconnected parts, it would be naïve to claim social issues arise from a sole source. It takes a lot for an entire society to behave in a certain way. Rather than imagining this dilemma as a cause and effect situation, we should view it as a pot of stew.

What makes a stew taste a certain way? There are the obvious ingredients, like meat, vegetables, broth. But there are also hidden components that underlie the stewing process. For example, what herbs or spices were added to the broth for flavor? How long was heat applied? How frequently was the stew stirred? We can ask similar questions of societal phenomena. What makes a society behave in a certain way? There are the obvious factors, like population size, demographic, largescale crises that might evoke a reaction from the population. But there are also hidden components that underlie the actions taken by a people. Communication scholars are most interested in the underlying components, because they're so frequently overlooked. For example, what unstated values do the members of that population hold? What cognitive biases lead those people to think a certain way or perceive their world in a particular manner? The following section proposes several possible causes for why Americans have come to harbor such rancor for one another.

PART TWO: CONTRIBUTING FACTORS

Political scientist Lincoln Dahlberg (2015) offers one potential reason for the political divide, paying specific attention to age and economic status.⁹ He argues that in a modern society, most political conversations no longer take place in face-to-face conversation. Rather, they occur online, via social media, message boards, chat rooms, et cetera. Dahlberg asserts that members of older generations tend to shy away from such media, and members of the lowest economic status never gain access to it. In a society whose political discussions occur online, those who remain “unplugged” never become privy to the conversation. This process of being left out can result in political isolation, and those feelings of isolation often result in feelings of anger, and even resentment, according to Dahlberg.

Dahlberg’s argument has been met with mixed reviews. On one hand, he articulates an excellent point about the isolation of certain demographics when we move our political discussions to the internet, and the internet seems to serve as the primary location for more and more of our political discussions. But on the other hand, Dahlberg fails to consider the fact that our political polarization exists along more social lines than just age and economic status. Yet there remains at least some validity to Dahlberg’s argument, because other researchers have drawn similar conclusions from separate studies.

Social scientist JungHwan Yang and her team of researchers conducted an experiment whose results seem to coincide with Dahlberg’s argument.¹⁰ In a study compiled by fourteen researchers across ten countries, Yang et al (2016) explored perceived political polarization by analyzing data collected from surveys in Canada, Colombia, Greece, India, Italy, Japan, South Korea, Norway, the US, and the United Kingdom. The researchers strove to determine whether internet news media affect citizens’ “beliefs about partisan divides among major political parties,” as opposed to the actual polarization in those countries.¹¹ The results showed online news consumption was strongly associated with perceived polarization in a majority of the countries surveyed. Those who consume their news from the Internet generally perceive political polarization as much higher than those who consume their news from traditional media. However, there seems to be no relationship between online news consumption and attitude polarization. Those who consume their news via the Internet aren’t necessarily polarized, but their perception of others’ polarization tends to be rather high. Like Dahlberg, Yang et al conclude there exists at least a perceived level of polarization among those who receive their political news from somewhere other than the internet.

The polarizing effect of presidential debates constitutes another potential reason why Americans have become so polarized.¹² Researchers Benjamin Warner and Mitchell McKinney

⁹ Lincoln Dahlberg, “Expanding Digital Divides Research: A Critical Political Economy of Social Media,” *Communication Review*, 2015.

¹⁰ JungHwan Yang et al, “Why Are ‘Others’ So Polarized? Perceived Political Polarization and Media Use in 10 Countries,” *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, 2016.

¹¹ *Ibid*, p. 350.

¹² Benjamin R. Warner and Mitchell S. McKinney, “To Unite and Divide: The Polarizing Effect of Presidential Debates,” *Communication Studies*, 2013.

(2013) analyzed the effects of presidential debates on voters who view them, in relation to political polarization. They collected data from twelve presidential debates from the 2000, 2004, 2008, and 2012 elections, and the vice-presidential debates in 2008 and 2012. The results showed, generally, participants with the lowest initial polarization were more likely to become polarized to a particular viewpoint after watching a debate; those “with moderate levels of preexisting polarization” experienced a small amount of new polarization; and those who were highly polarized before watching a debate either remained at the same level of polarization, or became slightly less polarized.¹³

Warner and McKinney’s research demonstrates how people with no particular political leanings can be swayed to one side by viewing a debate, but it fails to account for those who already hold staunch political beliefs, and it fails to account for those who are polarized but have never watched a political debate. So how do people become polarized? Are we born with political leanings or are we conditioned to think a certain way?

Consider a semi-recent study conducted by sociologist David Lazer (2010).¹⁴ In addition to possessing the world’s coolest last name, Lazer has contributed quite a bit to the field of research on homophily. Homophily is, essentially, the human tendency to flock toward those we perceive as similar to us. Lazer and his team have found that homophily presents itself across every demographic in the United States. It doesn’t matter where we’re from, what ethnicity we are, what sexual preferences we may hold. Lazer’s most recent research studies children as young as eleven and twelve years old, and the children still fall culprit to homophily. We like people who are like us, so we surround ourselves with people we perceive as being like us. Note that perception is key here. The people with who we surround ourselves don’t necessarily *have* to be like us; we simply *perceive* them to be similar.

Lazer’s research also reveals we tend to adopt the views of people we like, and reject the views of someone we dislike (this phenomenon comprises part of the horns effect, the tendency to perceive an action or viewpoint as bad or poor-quality simply because it comes from someone we dislike). If a person we don’t like also happens to hold views that contrast with ours, it becomes easy to dislike anyone who holds the same views as the person we dislike.

There’s nothing wrong with enjoying the company of people who think and act like you. It’s nice to connect with someone, to see eye-to-eye. The trouble arises when these people are the *only* people with whom we choose to spend our time. If we never engage with people on the opposite end of the political spectrum, we’ll have no frame of reference regarding the type of people they are. If I were a staunch libertarian, who despised large government, I might be inclined to despise socialism. I might be a good-natured person with the best of intentions. But if my basic assumptions about the role of government lead me to believe people will be happier and enjoy more freedom and prosperity without the tyrannical trespassing of a state’s regulation, I will rightfully fear any attempt to expand government programs. If I surround myself solely with other

¹³ Ibid, p. 516.

¹⁴ David Lazer, Brian Rubineau, Carol Chetkovich, Nancy Katz, and Michael Neblo, “The Coevolution of Networks and Political Attitudes,” *Political Communication*, 2010.

libertarians, I may never receive the opportunity to interact with a socialist, and to learn that he, too, is good-natured with the best of intentions. He just thinks the government provides the source of freedom and prosperity. If I don't communicate with the socialist, I won't understand that only one unstated assumption about government's role in our lives separates us.

Confirmation bias and selective exposure bias might also play a role in homophily, and therefore our political polarization. Selective exposure bias describes the human tendency to seek only the information that coincides with what we already believe. Rather than challenging our values by exposing ourselves to new ideas that confront our beliefs, we read articles or watch news stories that confirm our existing opinions. A conservative Republican consuming news from media from only Fox News exemplifies selective exposure bias. Confirmation bias refers to the human tendency to retain only the information in a message that supports what we already believe. For example, an environmental activist who advocates for the use of wind energy might read an article about alternative energy and retain only the parts of the article that describe the positive impact on the environment associated with wind power, and pay little attention to (or even forget) the details in the article regarding the incredibly high initial costs or the effect on bird migration patterns that windmill generators tend to bear.

This concept of homophily, and this process of hanging around only those with analogous belief systems as ours, contribute to a phenomenon that anthropologist Elaine Pagels refers to as the "demonization of the other."¹⁵ The concept boils down to a human tendency to fear anything novel or different that we encounter. Pagels found this tendency across history and across cultures. When we find something that challenges our beliefs and perceptions about the world, we immediately fear it, because of its potential to uproot everything we have come to know as truth. Out of this fear springs anger and, eventually, hatred.

Imagine, for instance, living your entire life thinking the tiny village in which you lived was the only civilization on the planet. This is an extreme example, but bear with me. Now imagine one day someone wandered into your village. Someone who was immensely different than anyone you'd ever seen before, and clearly not from your village. Initial reactions would understandably be met with fear. The sheer existence of this stranger threatens everything you ever thought to be true. You and the villagers begin to fear what the stranger's existence means for your village and for your belief system. If communication scholar Michael Calvin McGee is correct in saying that one's beliefs are intricately tied to one's identity,¹⁶ then you'd begin to question your very existence. Understandably, feelings of resentment would begin to fester beneath the surface of your tiny village, and those feelings of resentment would, according to Pagels, then be slowly directed toward any stranger, toward any group of people who proved different than the village's inhabitants.

This demonization of the other explains why some men are so willing to go to war, without a second thought about the repercussions or the potential loss of thousands of lives. It explains

¹⁵ Elaine Pagels, "The Origin of Satan," *Random House*, 1995.

¹⁶ Michael Calvin McGee, "In Search of 'The People': A Rhetorical Alternative," *The Quarterly Journal of Speech*, 1975

nationalism and anti-immigrant sentiments. And it helps explain why Americans hate each other with such passion. If people fundamentally hate anything different than them, it won't be difficult to find a reason to despise the members of a competing political party.

Further supporting this idea that a demonization of other ideologies contributes to the political rift our country faces is the instrumental work of Samantha Smith (2017).¹⁷ Smith collected thousands of self-reported surveys about political identity and the results demonstrate an increasing number of registered voters who identify as Democrats or Democratic-leaning also identify as liberal, 20 percentage points more so than in 2000. Far more Democrats call themselves liberal now than they did just seventeen years ago. But what does this data have to do with Pagels' demonization of the other?

Political communication scholar Duncan Bell (2014) conducted a study tracking the evolution of the connotation of the term "liberalism" throughout history.¹⁸ According to Bell, the term "liberalism" has shifted from referring to an opposition to oppressive regimes. The term now connotes the antithesis of conservatism. When Americans hear the term "liberal," they think not of opposing oppression. Rather, they immediately think of the Democratic party, and promptly and subconsciously contrast the term with "conservative," a term they associate with the Republican party. Americans seem to feel as though "liberal" simply means "the opposite of conservatism." Combine Bell's research with Smith's work on liberal identity, and we start to see a reason for the bitterness between parties. If people fundamentally believe they represent the polar opposite of other voters, animosity for those other voters becomes much more likely to develop.

Perhaps you're not convinced that the reason liberals hate conservatives (and vice versa) is simply because they're different. Perhaps you're not sold on the idea that presidential debates and tainted media may have led to some the polarization we see in the U.S., and maybe you don't agree that the rapid advance of technology might have led certain groups of people to feel left out and disillusioned with the political process. If that's the case, perhaps you'll find some appeal in the later writings of the aforementioned scholar, Michael Calvin McGee (1980)¹⁹

McGee is known for having some serious problems with authority. Most of his literary works question the nature of power. Who holds the power in a society? Who has the right to bestow that power upon others? When is someone justified in wielding the power they have? In one of his better-known works, McGee comments on why political disagreements sometimes devolve into a mass of anger, confusion, and name calling.

Ideology in practice is a political language, preserved in rhetorical documents, with the capacity to dictate decision and control public belief and behavior. Further, the political language which manifests ideology seems characterized by slogans, a vocabulary of "ideographs" easily mistaken for technical terminology of political philosophy. An analysis of ideographic usages in political rhetoric ... reveals interpenetrating

¹⁷ Samantha Smith, "Democratic Voters are Increasingly Likely to Call their Views Liberal," *PEW Research Center*, 2017.

¹⁸ Duncan Bell, "What is Liberalism?" *Political Theory*, 2014.

¹⁹ Michael Calvin McGee, "The 'Ideograph': A Link between Rhetoric and Ideology," *The Quarterly Journal of Speech*, 1980.

systems or “structures” of public motives. Such structures ... have the capacity both to control “power” and to influence (if not determine) the shape and texture of each individual’s “reality.”²⁰

McGee uses an abundance of technical jargon, so allow me to break down the essence of his message. First, McGee asserts political ideology can be its own language. This language is made up of slogans and jabs meant to grab the attention of voters (he calls these slogans and jabs “ideographs”), created and promulgated by those in power. We, the voters, mistake simple slogans and simplified jargon as actual technical terminology used in political philosophy. But we’re never provided with adequate definitions of these “ideographs;” they remain ambiguous, according to McGee. Terms such as “freedom of speech,” “liberty,” “tyranny,” and “trial by jury” exemplify ideographs. As a result, we begin to use empty slogans to shape our beliefs on essentially empty rhetoric. We justify our political positions with “ideographs,” terms and phrases that were never meant to represent entire ideas, terms and phrases that remain ambiguous but evoke strong emotions. Both socialism and libertarianism claim to preserve liberty, but each political philosophy clearly has a separate definition of liberty. Frustration arises when two completely opposite viewpoints claim to promote the same values. Therein lies a possible seed for the current crop of animosity that continues to ripen between our two parties.

As a final note on the above McGee quote, it ends with a comment on ideographs’ ability to shape our reality. When we form a political belief, according to McGee, it becomes a part of our very being. For example, I don’t hold liberal values, I *am* liberal. The difference is subtle, yet immensely important. The idea that one’s beliefs comprise one’s identity proves consistent with what communication scholars call a “structural subject position.”

Structural subject positions, as communication scholars Anton and Peterson (2003) point out, refer to the way people form their identity in relation to groups of which they consider themselves a part.²¹ Using the example above, if I were to consider myself part of the liberal community, then liberalism would become part of my identity. And when it comes to political identities, the members of the communities we join tend to share a basic ideology. Therefore, when we hear someone criticize the ideology to which we subscribe, we take that as a criticism of our identity, as a personal attack on our *self*. It becomes quite difficult to remain unoffended if I perceive an attack to be directed at *me*, rather than at *an idea* of mine.

I’ve listed many possible reasons why Americans seem so polarized and angry at the other side. Maybe only one of the above contributing factors is accurate, maybe all of them are, maybe none of them. This is a very complex issue. Rather than trying to pin down one specific cause, my goal is simply to demonstrate the intricacy of this subject, and to inspire my readers to think about our country’s polarization more deeply. Humans (by no fault of their own) tend to fall prey to cognitive fallacies that perfidiously guide us to accept only one causation for deep issues. We like to see things simply. One thing caused another. But often, that’s not the case. Often, a whole slew

²⁰ Ibid, p. 5.

²¹ Corey Anton and Valerie V. Peterson, “Who Said What: Subject Positions, Rhetorical Strategies, and Good Faith,” *Communication Studies*, 2003.

of factors contributes to such a complicated societal issue as that of deep partisanship paired with a contempt for the other side.

I've spent several pages calling our country's polarization a "problem" or "issue." But is it *really* a bad thing? Can disagreements prove healthy or even necessary? What is the standard of measurement for determining how bad the problem is, if it really is a problem? I grapple with these questions in the following section.

PART THREE: THE PROBLEM WITH SUCH A STARK DIVIDE

I've spent the last ten pages treating political polarization as a conundrum to be solved. But is our deep partisanship actually a problem? Political scientist Ian Chowcat (2000) makes a compelling case for the necessity of competing viewpoints in a healthy democracy.²²

Chowcat begins his argument with the assumption that most people have some kind of political view, a belief that “either positively or negatively, contains or implies how things should be.”²³ And truly having a view, according to Chowcat, implies that we have at least some desire to see it realized. If I held the political view that everyone has a basic right to education, then I'd naturally want to ensure that all members of my society received an affordable education. A view about how things should be inherently comes with a desire for things to be the way my view asserts they should be.

Because those who hold political views inherently wish to see the world operate the way their views claim it should operate, Chowcat maintains, people will share their views with one another. We're motivated to share because we know that the more people who hold a particular view, the more likely that view is to become a reality. This sharing of views leads to public dialogue, and encourages discussion on important issues. When communicating their views to others, people will come across views that conflict with their own, and they'll be forced to discuss the merits of each view in question. Therein lies the basis for an active and engaged constituency, Chowcat contends. The more competing views a society hold, the more voter participation and political discussion that society will have. And Chowcat's ideal democracy entails inclusion and participation in the legislative process, and representation of each competing view in the democracy's leadership. Chowcat argues these requisites of democracy cannot be fulfilled unless there exists political pluralism and at least some level of partisanship.

Back in 2007, then-governor of California, Arnold Schwarzenegger, and several leading state politicians organized an event called CaliforniaSpeaks. Over 2,000 Californians were invited to eight locations to discuss recent changes in the state healthcare policy. Participants were placed at a table of 8-10 California voters, fed a meal, and asked to talk about their stances on the issue. The goal was two-fold: to provide citizens the opportunity to have their views heard by their fellow voters, and to expose citizens to opposing points of view. The hope was to encourage democratic deliberation, similar to what Chowcat considers essential to a healthy democracy.

Before and after the event, a team of researchers administered surveys inquiring about political affiliation, stance on the issue to be discussed, and general feelings toward those with whom the survey participants disagreed.²⁴ The post-survey gauged the level of disagreement the participants perceived during their discussion, and whether they felt the discussion was fruitful. Did the participant walk away feeling as though he or she had learned something? Did the participant feel as though his or her arguments were understood and respected? To what extent did the other participants agree or disagree on the healthcare issue?

²² Ian Chowcat, “Moral Pluralism, Political Justification, and Deliberative Democracy,” *Political Studies*, 2000.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 746.

²⁴ Kevin M. Esterling, Archon Fung, and Taeku Lee, “How Much Disagreement is Good for Democratic Deliberation?” *Political Communication*, 2015.

The results demonstrated that those who perceived a moderate amount of disagreement considered their conversations the most enjoyable. The participants in this category felt their views were respected, and their arguments were taken seriously. They also reported having learned a great deal from the experience and appreciated the chance to be exposed to people who think differently. Participants who perceived a large amount disagreement at their table, however, left the event angry and unwilling to compromise on the issues they discussed. Participants who fell into this category reported that other participants at their table were rude, biased, and unwilling to respect their views. This group of participants' experiences points out one of the major flaws in Chowcat's argument.

Although I agree with Chowcat that a healthy democracy requires a heap of competing views, and that the discussion of these views can prove tremendously beneficial to society, Chowcat's argument fails to acknowledge the animosity that has arisen in the United States. It's one thing to possess competing views and to encourage a dialogue to understand the differences between those views. But it's an entirely different matter when the holders of those competing views utterly despise one another, and thus act uncooperatively and antagonistically. The data shows that the latter scenario describes our current political situation in the United States.

Think back to the PEW study mentioned on page 4. 70% of Democrats and 52% of Republicans think the other side is too closed minded to even begin a conversation about their differences. The two sides don't respect each other in the manner necessary for Chowcat's society to exist; the terms "Lazy, dishonest, immoral, unintelligent" are the most commonly used words by each party to describe the other.²⁵

Why should you care? So, we're too polarized to promote healthy discourse, but what are the consequences of a society with too much polarization? The RAND Corporation, a nonprofit research organization, published a paper in 2007 that listed some of the consequences associated with paralyzing political polarization.²⁶ Among these consequences one finds legislative gridlock, a decreased quality in the legislation passed, a decrease in the independence of the federal judiciary, and an undermining of the unified image of the United States leadership in foreign policy.

Look around you. We have seen empirical evidence of each of these consequences. The current administration has been in control for nearly a year, and the recent tax bill seems to be the only piece of major legislation to pass either house. And the two houses haven't even agreed on one another's version of the bill. And the quality of the tax bill is rather poor. Voters on both sides of the aisle hate the bill; it doesn't even accomplish the goals promised to the American populace.²⁷ Middle-class Republicans and Democrats alike lament the fact that their collective taxes will increase by \$4 billion in the next five years, as the taxes collected from the wealthy will decrease by over \$5 billion.²⁸ The current administration has had more run-ins with the federal court system in the last year than one can count. And President Trump has advocated domestically and abroad

²⁵ Ibid, p. 4.

²⁶ Diana Epstein and John D. Graham, "Polarized Politics and Policy Consequences," *RAND Corporation*, 2007.

²⁷ "Tax Bill: Trump Victory as Senate Backs Tax Overhaul," *BBC*, 2017.

²⁸ Bob Bryan, "The Senate Passed the Massive GOP Tax Bill in the Middle of the Night – Here's What's in It," *Business Insider*, 2017.

his disdain for much of the Obama- and Clinton-era foreign policy decisions. We're already seeing the consequences of polarization on a daily basis.

A society that can express political disagreement healthily, without disdain for the other side, constitutes a shared goal between Chowcat and me. However, I think we're a long way from achieving that goal. The good news is I think we have a realistic means of getting there. The following section discusses several possible solutions to the polarization dilemma we face.

PART FOUR: MOVING FORWARD

Fear not; there remains hope for a collaborative democracy. One in which people can entertain civil disagreements and can gain from the discussion of those disagreements. There exist several potential solutions to the polarization dilemma we face. And these solutions can be enacted by politicians and citizens alike.

We'll begin with what politicians can do. Empirical research exhibits that the people in power hold the capacity to change attitudes country-wide. Renowned political theorist Maurice Charland (1987), and later Kenneth Zagacki (2007), propose the idea of "constitutive rhetoric."²⁹³⁰ Charland defines constitutive rhetoric as the use of literature, narratives, and rhetorical symbols by those in power to either motivate a people toward action or to accept a particular ideology. Using the push for an independent, sovereign state of Quebec as an example and case study, Charland explains the complex relationship between discourse and identity. The identity of an entire people, the *Peuple Quebecois* (nationalistic group of Quebec citizens who wanted their own nation), arose from the discourse of one political party. That party, the *Quebecois*, told a narrative of oppression and a drive for freedom, and created a strong collective identity within the state of Quebec. In fact, in a referendum 45% of Quebec citizens identified as *Quebecois* and advocated for Quebec's independence. But prior to the party's formation in 1967, the term "*Quebecois*" didn't even exist in the French-Canadian language. The people who founded the party desired a sovereign Quebec, and sensed a similar feeling in the general population. They used their position in society to motivate their people and construct an identity. By distributing pamphlets, delivering speeches, and telling compelling stories, this political party constructed a new ideology, a new identity, and gathered the support of nearly half of Quebec.

If our politicians employed a similar technique to help overcome the political divide, they could reinstate a shared identity among Americans. They could motivate Americans to treat one another with kindness and respect. They could reframe our political differences to carry a more positive connotation. Sure, we won't reach full agreement- Chowcat says that's disadvantageous anyway. But we could reach a more collaborative and discursive society that knows how to manage our differences in a healthy manner.

I'm sure you're skeptical about the realistic effectiveness of constitutive rhetoric. Or perhaps you're doubtful of whether politicians would ever use their positions for good. That's fine. The following paragraphs consist of actionable solutions we everyday people can enact.

Researchers Barbara Kaye and Thomas Johnson (2016) acknowledge the incredible ability of the American populace to detect bias in the news media they consume.³¹ It turns out that Americans are pretty good at determining whether a piece of news is biased or neutral. The problem is we continue to watch and read and listen to biased political news. We're willingly

²⁹ Maurice Charland, "Constitutive Rhetoric: The case of the *Peuple Quebecois*," *The Quarterly Journal of Speech*, 1987.

³⁰ Kenneth Zagacki, "Constitutive Rhetoric Reconsidered: Constitutive Paradoxes in G.W. Bush's Iraq War Speeches," *Western Journal of Communication*, 2007

³¹ Barbara K. Kaye and Thomas J. Johnson, "Across the Great Divide: How Partisanship and Perceptions of Media Bias Influence Changes in Time Spent with Media," *Journal of Broadcasting and Electronic Media*, 2016.

engaging in selective exposure bias. Think back to my earlier argument about the effects on selective exposure on polarization. The first step to reducing polarization is consuming nonbiased information. We already have the intellectual prowess to sift through information and separate high-quality sources from media trash. We must be more conscious of what we consume.

The second step is to consciously attempt to negate the effects of homophily. We need to make it a point to befriend – or at least converse with – members of the opposite party. I know this may seem like a rather difficult task, but remember the PEW (2016) data that conveyed just how much Democrats and Republicans hate each other? Well, I withheld a small part of that study’s findings. As it turns out, having a friend in another party makes a difference in how one views that party. Republicans with few or no Democratic friends were more than twice as likely to hold disdain for any Democratic voter. PEW found similar results among Democrats with few or no friends in the Republican party. *That means if we know people with a different party affiliation, we’re twice as likely to respect the views of their party as a whole.* Literally all we need to do to help reduce some of the intense partisanship in the US is talk to more people across the aisle.

Alyssa Morey and her research team (2012) confirm the idea that simply becoming closer to more people who disagree with us leads to more productive political discussions.³² On one hand we’re about 45% more likely to “have a congruent party affiliation with a strong tie” (someone to whom we feel emotionally close) than we are to mere acquaintances or workplace colleagues.³³ But on the other hand, we are far more likely to express what disagreements we do have in a healthy manner. The closer we are to someone, Morey et al found, the more likely we are to tell them we disagree with them in person, *and* the more likely we are to *respect their point of view*, regardless of our disagreement.

One final step we can take as citizens to help reduce partisanship is to engage in what Robert Scott and Donald Smith (1969) refer to as “radical confrontation.”³⁴ Radical confrontation focuses on arguing over only that which presents an immediate threat to physical freedoms. Any other type of confrontation is fine to discuss, but there’s no need to raise our voices over small differences. Rather than confronting any old idea with which we disagree, let’s practice radical confrontation. Let’s rise above petty antagonism, and save our outside voices for the things that truly matter.

Among the solutions I’ve offered, there exists a common requisite. Each solution will require an immense amount of patience and self-control. But that seems a small price to pay when compared to the dangers and overall unpleasantness of the political discord in America today. We can fix the political polarization, I’m sure of it. Despite the heap of evidence surrounding the existence of our partisanship, I remain optimistic. We can do this, it’s just going to take a little more mindfulness on our part. But *if we work together*, we can realize a healthy, thriving democracy where everyone’s voice can be heard and treated with the respect it deserves. Hell, working together is half the battle.

³² Alyssa C. Morey, William P. Eveland, Jr., and Myiah J. Hutchens, “The ‘Who’ Matters: Types of Interpersonal Relationships and Avoidance of Political Disagreement,” *Political Communication*, 2012.

³³ *Ibid*, p. 94.

³⁴ Robert L. Scott, and Donald K. Smith, “The Rhetoric of Confrontation,” *The Quarterly Journal of Speech*, 1969.

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