Arete Review

Moderation in a Divided America

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Moderation in Political Discourse

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Tan Hoang

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Introductory Remarks

In the United States, political polarization is at an all-time high (Boxell et al. 2017, 1). The consquences of polical polarization on democracy are severe as it creates a "tendency of people [to] see … their group's beliefs as [an] objective reflection of reality" or "echo chambers" (Sunstein 2017; Cohen et al. 2020).

The aim of Arete is to promote discourse between opposing sides of the political spectrum. In doing so, we encourage a multiplicity of views articulated by students, for students. To understand our own political views better, we must understand the views of others. Especially during these foundational years of our lives, we must avoid the current tendency to reside within ideological echo chambers that are not conducive to critical reflection.

How do we build an America where both the left and right can interact and engage in dialogue? Through focusing on university students, a demographic that truly cares about politics, but often lacks valuable perspective from opposing viewpoints; encouraging dialogue between both those of opposite beliefs; and developing broad frameworks focused on moderation.

Arete seeks to publish essays that articulate the nuance of political opinions in a clear and precise manner. Understanding the points of contentions of each side breaks down stereo types, and informs the critical reader of the kinds of values and ideological commitments behind certain opinions. We hope that through this, the political spectrum becomes more than just red and blue. Arete is the Aristotelian notion of virtue that captures moderation. This virtuous moderation is precisely what we hope to inspire in our reader-

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The Conjunction Fallacy

By Tan Hoang

Today, our beloved America finds herself rooted in political polarization. Polarization dominates the political landscape. Within this year, there is no doubt the upcoming presidential elections—influenced by biased mass media campaigning and fieryrhetoric across political ideologies—will intensify tensions, deepen divisions, and foster greater misunderstanding among Americans.

While it is tempting to place blame solely on our nation's politicians and attribute our nation's polarization to their age, eccentric personalities, and disagreeable politics, it is much more challenging to recognize that perhaps our opinions are shaped by what our media networks and social circles choose to inform us of. Ultimately, it is important to realize the significant role that our inherent cognitive biases play in heightening social division.

To gain a better understanding of the impact of cognitive biases play in politics, let's consider the following scenario:

Ask yourself, which scenario for political candidate A, 1 or 2, seems more plausible?
Candidate A is a supporter of social justice reforms.
Candidate A is a supporter of social justice reforms and advocates for abortion rights.

In today's charged political environment, voters often assume that supporting social justice reforms also indicates an endorsement of abortion rights. In other words, because Candidate A supports seemingly "progressive" social reform, it seems plausible to voters that Candidate A also supports passing encoding "liberal" abortion rights into laws.

However, the probability that Candidate A supports social justice reforms and abortion rights is much less than that Candidate A supports social justice reforms alone. This misattribution can be attributed to a cognitive bias known in psychology as the conjunction fallacy.

This cognitive bias occurs when there is a mistaken overestimation of the likelihood of a combination of events manifesting compared to the probability of each event occurring separately. Our vulnerability to the conjunction fallacy underscores how we resort to stereotypes and assumptions in our social perceptions rather than adhering to probability.

The stereotypes and assumptions that can hold us back from social harmony could derive from our immediate family, our social circle, or potentially the sources which we learn current events from. Therefore, monitoring our cognitive biases not only allows us to think critically and conduct accurate assessments of situations but also enables us to transcend incorrect and limiting social prejudices.

Conforming to conjunction fallacies in politics has the potential to lead to the oversimplification of candidates' positions and the formation of false perceptions based on one's stereotypes, contributing to misinformation, biased decision-making, and polarization in the political environment. Falling victim to cognitive biases, such as the conjunction fallacy, prevents us as voters from making well-informed political decisions and degrades our value as free-minded voters in a liberal democracy. The failure to make well-informed political decisions has major implications. As voters, we could blindly follow a candidate, believing that since they support Policy A, they also support Policy B. This only leads to disappointment and abandonment of our democratic participation when these candidates are elected and fail to deliver on their promises.

Additionally, the conjunction fallacy not only leads to a failure to make well-informed political decisions but also reinforces our confirmation bias, which is our tendency to favor information that affirms our own beliefs. Confirmation bias, therefore, strengthens our ideological echo chambers through a positive feedback loop. Being surrounded by our own echo chamber fosters greater polarization within the political climate because we limit our exposure to opinions outside of our accepted perspective.

We see the existence of echo chambers today when extremists from both the far left and far right fail to see beyond their existence and mindset. To the world, these individuals are extremists, but they view themselves as activists because they are confined to their echo chambers and unable to see the world through others' perspectives. This stifles ideological flexibility and increases tensions. Limiting ourselves to self-created "echo chambers" fosters a black-and-white perspective on the world, further dividing our communities along arguably misplaced ideological lines.

Today, politicians, mass media, and the communities we surround ourselves in dictate that many ideological lines seem irrational to cross. Our society dictates that we must either be conservative and environmentalists; that we cannot be liberal and pro-life; that we cannot be conservative yet believe in systemic racism. We have fallen into the traps of our ideological mindsets, indicated by the inability to believe that conservatism and liberalism can be big "tents" for various approaches to politics and human belief.

Instead, our society encourages the manifestation of the conjunction fallacy. This is a clear phenomenon during election campaigning. It suggests that if we are minorities, we should support liberal policies; if we are religious, we should support conservative ones; and similar to earlier, if we are conservative voters, we shouldn't support Candidate A because since they support social reforms, they should also support environmental protectionism.

Breaking down cognitive biases and facilitating nuanced discussions requires us to acknowledge that crossing these ideological lines is the solution. This acknowledgment opens the door to more nuanced, informed, and enhances the collaborative diversity of political thought. Most importantly, we must humble ourselves with the knowledge that sometimes, we may be wrong. If we cannot strike down our echo chambers, we cannot begin to learn and engage with others through collaborative discourse to build a future enriched by the diversity of political thought.

Opening our minds and hearts to begin thinking across ideological lines prevents the entrenchment of dichotomous "black-and-white" political beliefs that dominate the mainstream today. However, this journey begins with intentionality. We must push ourselves to move past our cognitive biases, prevent assumptions and stereotypes from dominating our perceptions, and leave behind our echo chambers. Only then can we foster a deeper understanding of ideological complexities and begin to rebuild bridges that can mend our nation's political polarization.

The Importance of a Child's Viewpoint in Today's Political Debates

By Adithi Nythruva

When we think of children, one of the first thoughts that crosses our minds is their innocence. During the earlier stages of life, children possess an immense amount of naivety. The way they formulate ideas is grounded in creativity and joviality. Imagination flourishes through their minds, as they witness a playground transform into a royal castle or a backyard flooding becoming a crystalline stream running through a forest of luscious trees. For children, the world is their personalized oyster, serving as a modem for them to make their vivacious dreams, whether large or small, manifest into truth.

Regardless of others occasionally insisting that their understanding of reality nears the lines of make-believe, a majority of children passionately persist against this. This fantasy world, formulated within their subconscious, has allowed them to staunchly view their environment with either limited bias or no bias at all. Without an external influence, children tend to view a majority of the aspects of their life to be inherently positive, rather than negative. Often, this positivity is the main propeller of the kindness exhibited by children. It is, thus, their innate humanity which attracts adults and children alike to want to share in their experience. The innocence that children intrinsically possess, plays an integral role in their character development. It serves as the "rose-colored" lens, allowing them to formulate and further unique connections with the world, often overlooked by those with more life experience.

This childhood innocence is often preserved when adults, particularly parents, feed into the child's beliefs. For example, if a child believes in the tooth fairy or Santa Claus the parents or guardians in question will often not disabuse them of their belief. Instead, the parents will continue to let their kid hold those such beliefs. However, there are many possibilities in which this bandwagon could abruptly halt. An elder peer from school could tell the kid that the Tooth Fairy is made up or the kid could see their parent rushedly typing up a fake letter from Santa Claus on the home computer. Regardless of this, a majority of parents can be reasonably held responsible, not only for the continuation of a child's naivety, but also for serving as the primary enabler of these ideologies. This can last up till that point when the child is both older and more educated enough to grasp more awareness: both of themselves and the world around them. There is a tendency present that age is one of the factors in the expression of bias as well as the opinions that they cultivate. The younger they are, the more that these children are growing in developing the foundation of these future biases. What drives this development, is that children do not have as much life-experience as adults. Instead, they hold a vague approach in formulating their viewpoints, as opposed to adults with more life experience.

Nevertheless, parents, nor other adults, have the infinite capacity to protect their kindred forever. The saying that "real protection means teaching children to manage risks on their own, not shielding them from every hazard" plays an important role within society. As children grow up, they become more involved with what is presented on the outside. Over time, they lose that innocence and lack of bias that was so deeply ingrained early on. Whether that be within the classroom, listening to the experiences of their companions, or from experiences of their own, it is an inevitable part of the progression of human life. Well-intentioned adults can only go so far as to impose their ideals, which limit the control children have when cultivating their viewpoints. This combined with their emotional and physical immaturity leads to them naturally displaying conditioned reactions to specific situations, thus turning into an aspect of their persona. With these variables present, children cannot perfectly replicate the expectations of their progenitors.

Despite the overall feeling of innocence slowly melting away during the inevitable transition from adolescence into adulthood, there is one aspect that could be carried on. One that could be intertwined with the more serious and vital conversations that shape our world. One that has the potential to be heavily integrated and explicitly remembered within debates of varied, and contradictory beliefs, every day. The concept is that creative purity within children allows them to recognize other children as human beings. Irrespective of the color of their skin, religious practices, gender, race, sexuality, or any other factors within the background scene, children view other children as mere companions, who simply express acceptance towards one another. Potential playmates, whom they can surround themselves with, whose company they can enjoy while creating lifetime memories; while simultaneously recollecting joyousness.

This theme of friendship based on "being human" is often reflected within various areas of the mainstream media. Particularly, it has been expressed in film. In 2018, UCLA Alumnus and Israeli Screenwriter Roy Zafrani, directed "Over the Wall", regarding the ongoing Palestine-Israel conflict. Taking place near the border of the Gaza Strip and Israel, a young Israeli, Nathan, walks home from school, when he notices a hole in the wall surrounding his side of the border. Peaking in, he encounters a Palestinian around his age, Khaled. Even with Nathan speaking Hebrew and Khaled speaking Arabic, the boys form this inseparable bond, playing tug of war, and ball, and sending drawings to one another through that very hole. Their view of each other was that of friends whom they could exchange intense laughs with. There was no hesitation for a second, to think of why that wall even stood between them nor why it was impossible for them to directly interact. Nathan never pondered upon how Khaled was of a darker complexion or how the difference in language made Khaled unable to understand his words. They both simply enjoyed the company of one another and made use of the mode of interaction they had available.

Later on at school, when Nathan is warned that terrorists have infiltrated the kibbutz, instead of following his teacher's instruction towards the hiding place, one of the first things Nathan does is go to that very wall to warn Khaled. Even when Khaled is on the "enemy" side, Nathan genuinely cares for him. This same concept can be traced back to other films, particularly Director Mark Herman's "The Boy With The Striped Pajamas." Set in World War 2, eight-year-old German Bruno, and his family move near a concentration camp for his father being promoted to commandant. Feeling lonely, he befriends a Jewish boy, Schmuel, who lives on the other side of the home, encapsulated by a thick, barbed wire fence. Amidst his tutor Herr Liszt attempting to indoctrinate him on how the Jews are bad, Bruno had his doubts about those teachings. He believed that the Jewish people were nice, since Pavel, the Jewish slave who worked for his family, helped take care of him after he got hurt. Similarly to Nathan and Khaled, Bruno and Schmuel continued their friendship through that hole in the fence regularly, playing ball, exchanging food, and sharing stories. Bruno, like Nathan, cared about Schmuel to the point where he helped him look for his lost father, even when it meant crossing that fence to do so. In both cases, the children are not entirely aware of the dire situation surrounding them. They knew that there were some uncontrollable circumstances circulating. They knew that by word of mouth, or through the news outlets, the "other side" was somewhat "bad". However, despite this, they still maintained the collective view that being in the presence of other children is a window of opportunity for friendship which continually blossoms. They exhibited this sense of empathy towards one another. They delved into this chance to grow close with someone with similar ideals, creating a relationship that was placed on a higher pedestal than any of these seeming differences.

Beyond this world of film, friendships of contrasting backgrounds have continued to flourish more frequently than ever. In Miami, two preschoolers, Jia Sarnicola and Zuri Copeland, made their mark on the news, when they claimed to everyone that they were twins. Despite Jia being white and Zuri being black, they claimed they were twins for mainly three reasons: similar height, being four years old, and having birthdays that were "practically the same day". Even at a birthday party, when an older peer told them that "they could not be twins" due to their skin color, Jia powerfully asserted "You don't know what you are talking about. We're twins because we share the same soul". This is a soul that connects them. A soul which drives them to continue their story and friendship. A soul that is the same, no matter the external factors.

When embarking on adulthood, upon first coming across news outlets or worldly occurrences, the beliefs we develop can be categorized towards the extremities, intentionally or not. This is especially prominent with the recent bias ingrained into the media. A slight difference in morals or instilled values can lead to heated conflicts that can be the catalyst towards the brutal ending of a long-term friendship, or ending even relationships with family members. These family members could play an integral role within one's life. When individuals hold such strong beliefs, with no room for alternatives, it can be complex to make way for breathing room, and thus, finding this seeming or easily placed, middle ground. The rise in technology has made it a more common occurrence for individuals to swipe past videos where two extreme sides debate on a popular issue at hand. Even displayed on the more influential social media sites, it is "required" to take a side, if you refuse to do so you are objectively either a traitor or a supporter. This action of choosing can positively or negatively impact your life, whether that be personal, or even within the context of the workforce. This partisanship could allow one to keep the job that is a necessity to provide for the family, or resign from work with the hopes that another entity will welcome one in.

However, underneath those differing views and-factors that make every individual a unique living being, is simply another human being. A human with emotion. A human who endures hardship, and the inevitabilities of the life they were placed into. We tend to forget that the person we sit across from when debating, is simply another human being with value. There is a tendency to picture most things in life as absolutes. That a compromise or commonality is impossible to reach. That contrasting "sides" in general, are more necessary than not. However, this "impossible" compromise can be this whole idea of existence as a human. The very compromise that these same, younger children employ daily. That individuals, regardless of those differing morals, are still at the core, living and breathing human beings. The trinity made up of humanness, joviality, and creativity, naturally frameworking the breadth of children, are aspects integral to further molding and continuing into adulthood. The necessity for reaching that middle ground is taking this mental step back to those times of childhood, when there was a full, compassionate regard for humanity.

Rediscovering Political Friendship in Contemporary America

By Juletsi Zuniga

Plato once said the worst evil that can befall any political society is faction, as it would lead to the dissolution of social harmony. This ancient issue has modern relevance, as seen in the socio-political climate of the United States. Founding Father James Madison diagnosed this issue in Federalist Paper 10, where he warned against the dangers of factions while offering practical solutions. The notion of you are either with us or against us pervades contemporary American society. The division between the two main parties has significantly increased over the years, to the point that 66% of Conservative Republicans believe that Democrats' policies threaten the well-being of the country; policies threaten the well-being of the country, and 50% of Liberal Democrats believe the same about Republicans ("Political Polarization in the American Public", Pew Research, 1). This level of polarization raises the question: is reconciliation or agreement even possible in the United States? The three major Greek Philosophers: Plato, Socrates, and Aristotle, reveal the answer to be yes.

In The Republic, Plato defines a faction as a state of disharmony where actions and interests are not aligned for the common good. This disharmony allows a minority or majority to prioritize their interests and cause division in the political sphere. The disharmony to which Plato refers to is present within American politics, as the two major parties and their candidates base their campaigns upon attacking, bashing, and discrediting the other because they see them as the enemy. Investing money in attack ads or using social media to engage with potential voters is becoming progressively common. Instead of promoting principles and values within their parties, the priorities have shifted towards one-sided politics. Most Republicans and Democrats characterize their own party in positive terms such as respect for democracy and honest and ethical governing. Each party believes to be in the right and the other party to be wrong. Thus society finds itself within a Culture War that creates division along the lines of ideologies.

In Culture Wars: The Struggle to Define America, James Hunter discusses the conflict between those committed to morals of the past and those who prioritize change and flexibility and their corresponding ideologies ("In Culture Wars: The Struggle to Define America", Hunter, 3). These two extremes find themselves in disagreement due to their conflicting opinions and policy preferences. Social media's influence on the Culture War has increased the scope of polarization as it has made the flow of information (or, more aptly, misinformation) more accessible to everyone. Although accessibility itself is a positive characteristic of a society, since it allows for individuals to be connected, it can have a polarizing effect on users. Social media allows individuals to share pictures, infographics, links and articles, therefore connecting society at a national level since all these types of social media posts can be posted and shared within seconds. An individual doesn't have to go through any review or critique of their posts to verify the information and posts they're sharing, thus increasing their own bias and increasing polarization.

The constant flow of information provided by social media has also caused an increased deficit of attention within people. New information is perpetually flowing, and thus, individuals have little or no time left for contemplation. Because of the lack of time to think, there is an inconsistency within thoughts. Such inconsistency is characterized by people lacking an understanding of why they think or know things. Rather, they accumulate attachment to a wide range of opinions, and their beliefs become logically inconsistent. This inconsistency of beliefs and values manifests itself in both the political and private spheres, as it can both explain polarization and growing confused identities. People's thoughts and conceptions are no longer aligned due to overstimulation and overflooding of information and no education on how to handle such stimulus. This is because not all the information that is shared on social media sites is true. Because of the lack of true political information on social media, individuals have little to no time to think about what is true and what is false. Individuals find themselves building "like-minded" online communities to engage in enclave deliberations on particular issues. When individuals engage in discussions within their like-minded communities, they become more exposed to pro-attitude messages and less exposed to counter-attitude information. Therefore they only see information that supports their ideological stance and reinforces their beliefs. Essentially they find themselves, categorically, in echo chambers. Both motivated reasoning and confirmation bias are reinforced within echo chambers Within these echo chambers, individuals limit their ability to reach a common ground within politics due to being exposed to only one kind of information, although it might interfere with one's ability to filter out bias in information, through reflective thinking and agreements.

Filtering information is key for being able to develop critical thinking and learn to differentiate statements that contain bias or are false. An individual must be willing to be skeptical of all statements and consider their validity in order to seek the truth.Thus philosophy becomes necessary to resolve bias. The like-mindedness prevalent in social media's online communities is a stark contrast to the one Socrates proposes, as the latter serves to combat polarization while the former actively perpetuates it.

Socrates' like-mindedness refers to individuals being psychologically similar, thus sharing the same core beliefs with disregard to their "pronounced epistemic and ethical differences among different classes. Thus it serves as an effective way to combat factions from within an individual so that it can be counterattacked in communities. Thus, Socrates' philosophy serves as a cure for factions in both private and public contexts. Essentially, it targets intrapersonal psychological factions to target interpersonal psychological factions. Therefore, it allows for "the possibility of good, well grounded and virtuous agreement" for the common good. This is what Car R. Sunstein refers to as incompletely theorized agreements ("Practical reason and incompletely theorized agreements" Sunstein, 267). Incompletely theorized agreements refer to agreements in general principles. These kinds of agreements are incompletely theorized in the sense that "people who accept the principle don't need to agree in particular cases" ("Practical reason and incompletely theorized agreements" Sunstein, 267). In other words, Sunstein's diagnosis provides the opportunity for the development of the Aristotelian concept of political friendship.

According to Aristotle, the concept of political friendship denotes a kind of friendship "where the search for utility doesn't prevent people from displaying other qualities like cooperation, trust and loyalty" ("Between advantage and virtue: Aristotle's theory of Political Friendship" Irrera, 565–85) This kind of friendship is different from the typical friendship, in the fact that it focuses on shared advantages based on ethical behavior. Although this idea may seem difficult to imagine , it is possible. A friendship can be composed of individuals with different characters and political ties while still being grounded on virtue (arete). Aristotle also makes a further key point when he argues that friendship is a very necessary aspect for living well. Necessary in the sense that without it, life is impossible and also in the fact that good cannot be or come to be without it ("Between advantage and virtue: Aristotle's theory of Political Friendship" Irrera, 565–85). In other words, this kind of friendship is based on both virtue and civic responsibility. Citizens have the ability to come together and find common ground without having to go into specifics, thereby creating ambiguous agreements or incompletely theorized agreements.

Taken together, these theories prove political reconciliation to be possible. While it may not be an easy path to take, it appears to be the most effective one. Although its path may be arduous, it can be effective in creating a healthy political society. By reflecting upon the ideas of Aristotle, Plato, and Socrates, the nation can learn to think actively and be skeptical of the material that they are being exposed to in echo chambers through social media, which infects the political sphere. Thus individuals would be more likely to be skeptical and question whether the kind of information that they're constantly being presented holds any true value. This combined with the idea of Aristotle's political friendship where individuals regardless of class, race, gender and age can form bonds that rely on compromise for the common good. However the compromise, as Socrates mentions, will be based on a different kind of like-mindedness that doesn't refer to specific ideological beliefs but rather on basic unspecific principle or virtue.The result according to Plato would then be a society in harmony. Essentially polarization in contemporary America could be resolved through the reflection upon the works of the three major greek philosophers, making social media where individuals can come to an agreement and not find themselves trapped in echo chambers.

Navigating the Middle Ground: The Lincoln-Douglas Debates and Contemporary Political Debates

By Noah Cook

On August 21, 1858, a gaunt and soft-spoken Republican from Illinois took center stage in his bid for Senator to debate about the Union's first existential threat: slavery. This man was Abraham Lincoln, and he argued against the pre-eminent Stephen A. Douglas over issues like popular sovereignty, free soil doctrines, and the immensely controversial Dred Scott v. Sandford (1857) decision. [1] These debates generated epic spectacles; the telegraph, railroad, and significance of the candidates' arguments drew crowds of up to 20,000 people. [2] Political polarity over slavery, which had proliferated since the nation's founding, was galvanized by the Lincoln-Douglas Debates. By pressing the exigent questions regarding American nationhood, Lincoln and Douglas did not forestall the eventual war, but they did force the nation to confront its existential impasse. Lincoln and Douglas approached slavery from their opposing sides with modesty and erudition to create an environment where ideas that were nevertheless contentious could be presented to audiences in a clear and direct fashion. It is crucial to examine these debates for what they can teach us about moderate civil discourse in our age where ad hominem retorts, media vitriol, and personality flair are prioritized over substantive argumentation. Civil discourse is at its best when the debate format requires a focus on relevant content and demands personal rather than third party moderation.

At its heart the U.S. Constitution was a compromise between abolitionist and pro-slavery sentiments expressed at the Convention of 1787. [3] But what began as a legal bargain in the late 18th century soon transformed into a perfervid moral debate regarding America's socio-economic trajectory. The culmination of this tension was pressed through Lincoln and Douglas who argued on behalf of their oppugnant camps. Those in the Illinois crowd watched each debate begin with an hour-long statement from one candidate, an hour and a half-long response from the other, and a half hour rebuttal from the first candidate. [4] There was no moderator and no give-and-take between candidates. [5] Audiences were treated to lengthy, focused, and cohesive monologues. By comparison, the 2024 Republican presidential primary debate provided a candidate "one minute to answer each question" posed by a moderator, and 30 seconds for follow-up questions. [6] Structured like argumentative lectures, the Lincoln-Douglas Debates placed an emphasis on substance over style. While the debates were still filled with personal retorts, the time format prevented either candidate from abusing quippy language or belittling accusations and instead demanded coherent, relevant arguments. Ad hominem attacks were averted not just by the orators' restraint but also by the format of the debates, which Lincoln and Douglas had agreed to beforehand. [7]

While starkly opposed, Lincoln and Douglas were able to find common ground. In Ottawa, Illinois, Lincoln stated that he did "not expect the Union to be dissolved," but that he expected it would "cease to be divided." [8] Lincoln here approached slavery with an urgency that acknowledged the country's divisions; the future Union would inevitably resemble only one of the debaters' visions of America, but it could not sustainably prolong both. Douglas' advocacy for popular sovereignty was also grounded in his commitment to maintaining the Union. Douglas espoused the view that the U.S. government was "made on the white basis by white men." [9] Douglas argued at the Freeport debate that the government was established for the benefit of white men and appealed to a shared understanding of the nation's more racist principles. Political debates, exemplified by Lincoln-Douglas, should test the strength of contrary ideas regarding the direction of the nation. Lincoln and Douglas were against the Union's dissolution, but the Union's survival was contingent on one of their opposing visions triumphing over the other.

The Lincoln-Douglas Debates must be juxtaposed with contemporary political debates to understand how political discourse has changed, and how we can apply the lessons learned from this comparison. Contemporary political discourse is largely influenced by partisan news and social media, both of which circumvent moderation and the articulation of nuanced ideas in exchange for rapid fire identity politics. The 2020 U.S. presidential debates—which are models for televised contemporary debates—between Donald Trump and Joe Biden were characterized by personal attacks and interruptions rather than relevant policy discussions. [10] The Commission on Presidential Debates (CPD), a nonprofit, nonpartisan debate network that hosted the Trump- Biden Debates, framed the debates around fifteen minute segments with two minute answers from each candidate

for the first question, and open discussion for the rest of the segment. [11] The deficiencies in this style of debate prevailed during the open discussion; each candidates began to deploy accusations that the opposing candidate was forced to rebut. For example, Biden accused Trump of trying to "generate racist hatred" and "division." Trump accused Biden of being "a liar," and inculpated Biden's family of corruption. [12] The pillories bandied between candidates wasted time, were unfocused, and failed to address the moderator's questions. By focusing on the ruination of an opposing candidate, polarity is inflamed, and it becomes impossible to find the middle ground through civil, argumentative discourse.

Of course, Lincoln and Douglas too were not immune to the allure of ad hominem attacks. In Jonesboro, Illinois, Douglas referred to Lincoln as part of a "bee-hive of abolitionists" in an attempt to frame Lincoln as radical and out of touch with mainstream society. [13] Douglas also accused Lincoln of inconsistency and dishonesty for not "boldly and openly" saying "whether he is for or against" popular sovereignty. [14] Lincoln too accused Douglas of "blowing out the moral lights around us," painting Douglas as an enemy of progress and national morality. [15]

Perhaps it is unfair to compare the Lincoln-Douglas Debates to contemporary debates by virtue of the latter's peripheral technological influences absent in 1858. But the U.S.'s ideological schism in the time of Lincoln-Douglas resembles modern political polarity over a gamut of issues like healthcare, immigration, climate change, abortion, etc. [16] The Lincoln-Douglas Debates were more effective than modern political debates precisely because of their format. The erudite, well-researched monologues required by the Lincoln-Douglas format demanded cohesive arguments. By comparison, the Trump-Biden Debates provided an atmosphere that encouraged slanderous ripostes; these debates became denigration competitions rather than policy-testing disputes. What the Lincoln-Debates managed to preserve in the spirit of civil discourse is now overshadowed by partisan bickering and ideological echo chambers prevalent in society and reinforced by poorly formatted political debates.

Modern civil discourse is encumbered by failed attempts at moderation. Moderation requires a commitment to civility and a willingness to engage with opposing ideas. Examples like the 2020 U.S. presidential debates reveal the limitations of moderation when candidates prioritize personal attacks over substantive discussions. Moderation, as evidenced by Lincoln and Douglas, does not require the installation of a moderator. As a concept, moderation must be reframed in the context of personal restraint rather than moderation by a third party. Lincoln and Douglas, despite some pointed ad hominem attacks, exercised moderation in criticism. The addition of a moderator at political debates implies that discourse cannot be healthily conducted without external arbitration. This distrust in the inherent civility of debaters restrains candidates from exercising their own moderation and effectively qualifies the polarity of American society. If a moderator is necessary in political debates, organizations like the CPD, Fox News, and CNN vindicate the extremism and intemperance of American politics, which reinforces polarity.

Navigating the middle ground in political discourse is difficult, but not impossible. The Lincoln-Douglas Debates underscore the importance of the middle ground and debate structure. To foster moderation and nuanced discussions in political debates, debate format must be institutionally re-engineered to promote restraint of the kind exercised by Lincoln and Douglas. By embracing civil discourse, we can strive for constructive political dialogues that honor the spirit of moderation exemplified by history while meeting the demands of our contemporary political landscape.

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Political Polarization in American Politics Today

By Kailey DeLorenzo

Politics in America have become increasingly polarized within the last decade. The two main parties have distinct beliefs and will die on any hill "supporting" their side - even if that means backing their opinions with false information. In effect, the two parties are moving further apart as each seems to be pandering to their more extreme contingents. In today's world, it is difficult to see any sort of compromise in politics. If more people practiced Aristotle's "potluck argument" and opened their minds, we would see less polarization and more understanding and consensus-building in politics.

In Book 3, Chapter 11 of "Aristotle's Politics," Aristotle states, "The many, of whom none is individually an excellent man, nevertheless can when joined together be better- not as individuals but all together- than those [who are best], just as dinners contributed by many can be better than those equipped from a single expenditure" (page 79). Aristotle argues that if people were to come together and discuss their viewpoints, they could reach a proper conclusion that addresses significant concerns or problems with the issue at hand. It may take some time to conclude, but eventually, through meaningful discourse, a compromise could be achieved. Having an open mind is crucial for this idea to work, for to reach consensus many boxes must be checked. The main problem with using these techniques in today's politics is that many people believe their opinion is the only valid opinion. They then find others who agree with them and surround themselves with similar thinkers, further cementing their views and preventing the exploration of alternate viewpoints. Without challenge and debate, it is impossible to gain an understanding of an opposing side. How can one ever expect to improve if they never allow themselves to be challenged?

Sadly, politics are no longer concerned with the good of the people, but rather focusing entirely on the good of a viewpoint or ideology. While the United States is still a democracy of sorts, as it is considered a federal republic, sometimes it feels more like Aristotle's definition of an oligarchy. Aristotle stresses the importance of knowing the difference between regimes, and the citizens that live within them. All regimes have different politeia, or goals for their regime, and the citizens within these regimes work to achieve them. In a democracy, Aristotle states the citizens hold the majority of the power, while in an oligarchy only a few hold the power, although he considers both to be deviations from the ideal type of rule. The line between these two regimes is becoming increasingly thin regarding controversial positions today.

A past president of the University of Houston's Student Government Association (SGA) participated in some actions that correspond with Thrasymachus' definition of justice. Thrasymachus claimed that the definition of justice was the "advantage of the stronger" in "Plato's Republic" (Book 1, 338c, Plato's Republic). This definition is consistent with Aristotle's definition of an oligarchy, in which the stronger (regarding social status) have a greater amount of power. The SGA is intended to replicate the structure of the Texas legislature. Democracy, according to Aristotle, means that the people have the majority of the power, and whomever they elect should be working in their favor. However, the former SGA president changed the policy for the president's term to be indefinite and had the donation cap raised to $10,000 instead of the previous $1,200. Some may argue that he was just playing the game, and got away with these actions because that is just how politics work. However, according to Aristotle, in terms of a government that is supposed to operate in the interests of the people, his actions did not represent the will of the people, but rather his own self-interests.

The biggest problem with his actions was the dishonest way he went about them. He snuck these amendments into other bills that the SGA was planning to pass, and they all signed it without diligently reviewing all the details. A more appropriate approach would have been to raise questions about the term limit and donation limit and debate with his colleagues so they could jointly reach a decision. He would have likely been more positively received during the recent election, and his chances of being re-elected would have been higher. By doing this, he would have implemented the lesson from the potluck argument, showing that the strategy is the best to reach a satisfactory conclusion.

The issue of leaders putting their own interests first is occurring not just on our campus but throughout America. For instance, the Tennessee legislature passed a bill in 2023 banning drag queen performances in public, after making their issues with drag queens one of their main focuses. Meanwhile, during this time frame, there was a shooting at a private Catholic school in Tennessee. It is evident that elected officials are more concerned with their own personal beliefs, rather than what is best for the citizens. If they had spent more time discussing gun control and having open minds about the subject, perhaps this recent shooting could have been prevented. That is the issue with those who only care about power being in office, they just care about how they can drive their personal agendas rather than acting in the best interest of their citizens.

An important question to ask as Americans is why this polarization has happened in the first place. Why have we become so strong in our opinions, so much so to the point where we won't even listen to the other side's argument? Aristotle would say that the extreme division of classes is a factor. These days, the classes have become so separated, it is no longer lower, middle, or upper class. Rather, the classes have become narrower, and these classes require specific needs. That in itself is so complicated, it only makes sense for all of the classes to have their opinions of how the country should work. Each class has its own needs and they all think theirs matter the most. A similar stratification has occurred regarding left vs. right ideologies in American politics today.

Along with the potluck argument, Aristotle states, "… the middling sort is best is evident. It alone is without factional conflict, for where the middling element is numerous, factional conflicts and splits over the regimes occur least of all." (page 116). Here, he is arguing citizens from the middle class are better fit to lead since they understand the daily life of the average citizen. This way, they can achieve things their citizens want, rather than pursuing their own agenda which could lead to factional splitting.

Aristotle handles the class idea differently than other philosophers, namely Plato. In "Plato's Republic", Socrates believes dividing the classes by the myth of the metals is the most logical and fair form of hierarchy to implement. He claims those who appear to be the most physically, intellectually, and musically fit and pass certain tests should be the ones in charge, and there should be citizens under them. This idea doesn't sound too outlandish, but it is based on a myth and built within an impossible utopia, so it is not practical. Aristotle believes that the true middle class has the best potential to lead and be involved in politics, specifically a class of farmers. He believes this because they spend most of their time farming, so when it comes time to think about politics, they think of exactly what they need and don't have time to think too deeply about little things that are not as important. Hypothetically, this idea is much more practical because the middle class used to take up the majority of people. There weren't many extremely rich citizens and not as many destitute citizens. Nowadays, with the divergence of classes and ideologies, this is a harder strategy to practice. So, the best solution to this polarization is to merge these ideas and make them modern. Keep the Aristotelian democracy and keep an open mind toward all classes, working together to come to a consensus.

The prime use of dialect in this way is by people who are called to jury duty. These citizens are supposed to have no background information on the crime at hand, and they are to discuss it after observing the trial until they reach a decision. People called for jury duty come from different classes, and more than likely hold different opinions and values, but it is their duty to reach a conclusion together. That is a perfect example of a potluck discussion. Furthermore, the Supreme Court is an institution that Aristotle would approve of. The court is made up of nine constitutionally experienced justices who are able to come together and discuss issues at a constitutional level and reach a conclusion that has the well-being of the citizens as their primary concern. They all come from different backgrounds and occupy different spaces on the political spectrum. Using their experiences, they can come together and have a true potluck discussion, reach a solid conclusion. Also, the importance of having nine justices means they won't ever encounter a tie in a case, allowing the majority to rule, just as Aristotle originally stated.

This system seems like an almost perfect solution, except that issues have still risen from the Supreme Court, and the people on the court are not very representative of the average American. All but one of the current Supreme Court Justices attended at least one Ivy League school, something most citizens have not experienced. This does not follow Aristotle's idea of having a middle-class rule, especially since their entire job is to pay attention to politics. But, on the other hand, it is hard to ask for a true middle-class representative in today's world, because the definition of the middle class has completely changed from Aristotle's time.

So, where would Aristotle suggest we go from here? Of course, it is hard to say because of the vast differences in society, but he would still stand by the idea of the potluck argument and middle-class rule. Hopefully, more citizens will recognize the extreme polarization in American politics today and choose to become more open-minded. It is important that all voices are heard, and that political parties are not hijacked by their more extreme viewpoints. Anyone in power should be able to recognize and accommodate different opinions to the best of their ability. There is no way to make everyone happy, but it is possible to reach consensus. It is also important for citizens to be educated about those they are voting for. It is so easy to be persuaded by propaganda and the opinions of others, but if everyone were to do their own research on those in power, they would elect better representatives. Politics today have been distorted and no longer focus on the good of the majority, but pandering to the far ends of the political spectrum. By electing politicians with open minds who are willing to participate in potluck discussions, and politicians who truly care for their citizens, America could go back to being an Aristotelian democracy.

Foundations of Autonomy: The Nexus Between Free Will and Education

By Nick Stees

To exist within modern and contemporary society has erroneously become an act that requires effort. Existentialist foundations of free will have accounted for the determinants present within biological human faculties and laws of the universe, but these determinants are natural and organic. Determinants of contemporary society are now purposefully posed against the individual. Control of these institutions, as a result of Duverger's law, is held by two opposing responses to the perceived disparities of marginalized people based on economic, political, and social circumstances. Liam Kofi Bright calls this the culture war, in which the intention of each institution is to influence, control, and perpetuate the conflict between each other. French Aristocrat Alexis de Tocqueville foresaw the evolution of the nature of American institutions through his analysis of American political principles, and calls the phenomena we see "soft despotism" in which control of thought occurs through the illusion of choice. It is no longer material knowledge that we can trust, rather political and philosophical methodology must be emphasized to develop critical thought that transcends the walls that control thought. Education of such methodologies offers hope to bridge the gap between contemporary controversies and provide a foundation for neutral political deliberation.

Education of democratic principles is integral in initiating progressive repair of our political system. Renowned French scholar Alexis de Tocqueville elucidates each tenet of democracy within his book Democracy in America. The love for equality and equality itself grow proportional to each other; as the degree of difference between people weaken, the significance of the differences become more substantial. An individual and his neighbors become increasingly alike, erasing the significance of self that was once established before. Proportionally, the significance of one's equals is erased with it, thus the "penchant of each to blindly believe a certain man or class diminishes"(DA II.1.2). The equality that brought power and purpose to the individual thrusts that same individual into a state of debility, "and his debility makes him feel…the need of the outside help that he cannot expect from any of them" since they are all just as isolated and powerless (DA II.4.3). This erosion of significance causes the lines between the individual and the common to blur; the motivations, goals, and desires of the individual become aligned with the whole. The whole, being expressed by the central power, becomes necessary to warrant the wills and the desires of the individual; the people furbish "the prerogatives of the central government," out of the "fear of disorder and love of well-being" that has risen from individual isolation (DA II.4.4). As the centralized power "becomes the sole arbiter of happiness," the little remaining power of individual free will degrades into nothing (DA II.4.6). American lust for equality has blinded the individual to the loss of freedom. As the tendency of democratic principles have been perverted, American society exists within a web of soft despotic institutions; a system of deceptive rhetoric and propaganda.

Though, Tocqueville gives hope. By isolating each principle of American democracy and elucidating each principle's relationship to each other, a path to relieve and fragment the power that hangs over us via the education of how to operate through these principles. The sense of political/civic responsibility has decreased vastly. Simple education on political concepts such as Tocqueville's work would rebuild this sense of responsibility, alleviate political tension/polarization, while also increasing efficiency/proficiency of our ever so gridlocked system. His analysis is critical to understanding the state of affairs in America now, but even more valuable to understanding how to operate within the system itself.

The path that gave way for institutions to gain such power has resulted in a polar divide among Americans. Liam Kofi Bright analyzes the attitudes towards perceived racial disparities of white political elites as a result of differing economic, political, and social circumstances of which they find themselves in. Characterizing both sides of the divide, he forms two opposing archetypes; the Repenter and the Repressor. Both of these archetypes represent white political elites that have a position of power within institutions that have a political or social platform. Each archetype has the responsibility to be involved in the culture war, and influence it to the benefit of their party. Repenters and Repressors embody the majority of wealth held by white elites. This wealth translates into power and control over the cultural institutions which play a significant role in the public sphere. Notably though, neither is motivated to create genuine social change towards a more egalitarian society. Their profit incentive is in fact the conflict they perpetuate. Controversy and conflict garners attention towards themselves. Thus manipulation of the truth to manufacture conflict is inevitable. Repressors are naturally predisposed against the suggestion of repenter behavior or arguments, leading them to be "skeptical of any large scale reforms" (Bright, 13). This causes Bright to form a theoretical archetype in an attempt to offer hope of reconciliation between the two archetypes. He calls this archetype the "Non-Aligned person" in reference to the Cold War (Bright, 14).

This character represents someone with no partisan identity that is attempting to navigate the circumstances they are in, and the situation of the world. They are in a position in which they cannot trust their institutions, and must perform what is called "conceptual decolonisation" of their information, in which they cautiously evaluate the credibility and relevance of information and its sources (Bright, 15). Non-Aligned persons attempt to bridge the ideological divergence by developing a "habit of considering issues with a stoical dispassion" in which they disconnect from "pervasive white psychodrama" (Bright, 21). Non-Aligned persons serve to eliminate the contradiction of ideological aspirations and material reality present within the institutions dominated by Repenters and Repressors, thus weakening the power they derive from. Bright uses the Non-Aligned person to open the door to epistemic philosophy as a way to detach from the soft despotic constraints imposed in our overly centralized government.

The education of philosophy is synonymous with the education of moral responsibility and practicing critical thought to; navigate through a world filled with mechanisms designed to shape you. Psychological research has provided extremely thorough documentation on the cognitive mechanics of in-group/out-group bias and otherwise that determine our behavior. Arguments for diversity of experience offer hope to reconcile the faults of our faculties, though a plan of action is nuanced and complicated. The study of philosophy is a means of liberation of such confines inherent to the mind and its relationship with the world. The realm of epistemology and the schools of thought within it can be utilized in order to develop a different relationship to knowledge that is not rooted within your sense of self. Understanding this methodology is important to understanding rhetoric and propaganda that take advantage of our psychological functions. When Bright says "stoical dispassion" he is referencing a skeptic's emphasis of one's inability to ever truly know something. Rather the skeptic argues that we only know the appearance of something. Additionally, understanding the faculties in which our consciousness perceives knowledge of the world can help us grasp the way in which we understand our place within external reality. Immanual Kant developed his theory of epistemology called transcendental idealism in which he characterizes time and space not as existing concepts, but rather as filters of how external reality is perceived; time and space are constructs of the mind. The philosophical tangents this concept leads to are neverending; the significance of this concept is to illustrate the way in which the inherent faculties of both our psychology and consciousness create everything that we "know." The overarching idea within the debates of epistemology is thoroughly examining what it is you know and believe. Contemporary information communication systems do not teach people how to understand the responsibility they have as citizens, rather, they are trained on how to take advantage of our minds, and foster power towards the web of soft despotism.

Philosophy and politics must coincide; understanding the political science of democracy through credited literature such as Alexis de Tocqueville and the philosophy of epistemology through the pillars of classical thinkers like Immanual Kant is crucial to the full realization of your agency as a citizen or free will itself. Education of these two sciences provide a foundational understanding of contemporary issues, and offer a means of alleviating the political polarization we see today. Free will starts with education.

Attention and Moderation

By Josh Curtis

Many living in the United States recognize the intense political climate we face today. Polarization and political division are part of the status quo. Both the political left and right have campaigns against the opposing side. Each views the other as an other, where the opposing political party becomes a stubborn barrier in need of removal. This kind of discourse is unsustainable. Indeed, it is detrimental to our interactions as citizens of the same country, not to mention the resultant corrosion of our humanity. Thus, our primary concern should be focusing on dismantling the stark division between political parties' dialogue. Addressing this division is not for the sake of finding some politically moderate solution. Instead, the goal of addressing the political divide should be for the sake of restoring our perception of humanity in others, especially those of the opposing side. To support this thesis, I will draw on Simone Weil's conception of force as well as her assessment of the power of words. I will argue that our society in the United States objectifies other humans via force and the power of words. It is this force that turns other people into objects that need to be addressed. To conclude, I will explain how the remedy is a call for attention towards others: not in the typical sense, but in the sense the Weil describes. This attention towards others directly opposes the use of force and the power of words by putting in focus the humanity of others.

In her essay The Iliad or The Poem of Force, Weil argues that the concept of force is central to understanding the Iliad. Force "is that x that turns anybody who is subjected to it into a thing." Essentially, force is the imposition of one's will directed at other people. Imposing one's will onto another subject treats them as if they were a physical object without any subjective will. Force is that which allows for one human to kill another, turning a person from a subjective human into mere matter. Thus, Achilles reduces those he kills, including Hector and Priam, to mere objects. Similarly, force that does not go as far to kill still reduces the status of another into mere matter. By treating a subject as if they were an object, the subject begins to embody the status of an object. They lose their subjectivity, their humanity, at least in the eyes of the person using force. Eventually, the person being forced begins to identify with this objectification. This non-killing force imposes a state of living worse than death by creating a harsh necessity of either enduring the will of another or being killed. Such is the case for the captive slaves in the Illiad, which are reduced to the status of objects.

Notably, though, Weil argues that force also reduces the imposer of the will to a sub-human status too. Those forcing others into objects are slaves to a lack of reflection. Indeed, it requires a lack of reflection to be able to impose force onto another. Hector, Ajax, Agamemnon, and Achilles all let force drive their motivations and actions as if they were incapable of reflecting on the murders they commit. Weil acknowledges that it takes a "god-like generosity" to reflect and consider justice and prudence as options for acting, and not just succumbing to an act of force. So, just as becoming the slave of someone else reduces one to an object, so too does the act of reducing another to a mere object. For this reason, Weil argues that the Iliad is a scornful bitter account of the horrors of force. Unlike the Illiad, the United States is not in a present state of war. Nonetheless, the lack of reflection in cross-party interactions is still fertile ground for the sprouts of force. The eventual inclination towards aggressive acts and uses of force is in part fueled by our righteous belief in abstract concepts. This fuel is what Weil calls the power of words.

In The Power of Words, Weil argues that our ability to glorify abstract ideas leads us to create "conflicts with no definable object." If there is no definable object, then victory lies in the eradication of the opposing side. Contrast this with definable, concrete, objectives in a conflict. With concrete goals, one side will cease fighting once this clear object is attained. For example, if 1935 Germany wanted to expand its borders 100km2 into France (for whatever reason), the Germans would have fought fight until they achieved this concrete objective. In this hypothetical, since there is no commitment to an abstract goal, once the land is attained, the fighting stops. However, if Germany decides to expand their borders in the name of some unattainable ideal, like Nazism, then there is no end for the fighting. The fighting is no longer fueled by a concrete desire like land. Rather it is fueled by some unattainable ideal that fuels people to fight at any costs. The Germans committed horrific acts in the name of this abstract ideal that was fundamentally unattainable. Thus, via the power of words, the conditions for victory eventually become the eradication of the opposing sides.

Weil gives many similar examples to emphasize the power words hold over us when they represent abstract objects. This was the case in the Trojan war, when they spent 10 years fighting over Helen, despite only one person truly caring about her. Most in the trojan war fought for honor and for respect of their nation, unattainable ideals that are not fulfilled through war. This is likewise the case when nations have gone to war in the name of Democracy, Socialism, Capitalism, Communism. The unclear success conditions for these -isms turns conflicts in the name of them into wars without end.

This is why Weil writes that "to clarify thought, to discredit others by precise analysis…strange thought it may appear, might be a way of saving human lives." When the abstract ideologies are deflated by clear definitions, they no longer become worth the cost of a war without a concrete aim. Reflection upon these abstract ideals takes away the power of those words, reducing the possibility for one to succumb to the will forcing another into subhuman status.

From the characterizations of these concepts, the lack of reflection enables both the use of force and the power of words. There remains a further question of what the relationship is between force and the power of words. An irreflexive agreement to a set if core beliefs gives power to words. If one doesn't reflect upon why they have certain beliefs and what they would risk to defend their beliefs, then they will unreflexively defend their beliefs at all costs. Included in these costs is the ultimate price of using force on another. So, it sees that the lack of reflection is a function of a blind buy-in to a certain ideology. This blind buy-in results in the use of force to impose one's will onto another to get their way. All of which takes place in the name of the defense of the ideology. So, if force is a lack of reflection, and the power of words enables a lack of reflection (via creating blind buy-in to the concept, then the power of words is a facet of force.

The commitments to certain ideologies, like conservative or liberal agendas, exacerbate the lack of reflection on these commitments. And, when feelings of anger and frustration bubble up, the result is a situation where the use of force seems like the only feasible option to defending the abstract ideologies. Thus, instances in which a situation appears to call for the use of force is due to commitments to abstract ideologies. In other words, the blind commitments to the power of words demands the use of force. A case of this type of force is the January 6th storming of the capital. In this case, we see a community of individuals resorting to the use of force to override their opponents in government. Rather than reflecting on the cost of breaking into the capital, their commitments to their ideologies inhibited their value judgements. Though they may have sought to uphold Conservative ideals of democracy and fair elections, their actions represented the exact opposite. Though this particular example is of the political right, examples are present from both sides. Take for example ANTIFA riots that become overly destructive. A lack of reflection enables the defense of ideological commitments to go too far.

Since a lack of reflection gives power to words that result in force, reflection is required to avoid this use of force. The objectification of others reduces them to subhuman status. Similarly, the objectification of an entire class of people that are ideologically opposed to oneself is very dangerous. Rather than attempting to reflect on the ideological differences, the defense of one's own abstract concepts calls for the drastic use of force. Thus, force makes entire groups of people objects in need of removal on the way to success. To achieve this abstract success, fundamental respect of people's humanity is lost and disregarded. Both the political right and left are striving for the betterment of the United States. However, each side makes the other out to be the primary reason for subpar status of the nation. Rather than just viewing the other party as an other, a separate class of entities that needs removal, we ought to cultivate a reflexive attitude towards our beliefs and the beliefs of others. Rigorous contemplation needs to go into why one is committed to a set of core beliefs. Likewise, one ought to contemplate why others may have their completely alien set of core beliefs. Reflection on the core beliefs that allow us to identify with these ideological commitments are necessary to engaging in political discussions with the opposing side. As presented by Weil, this kind of reflection defuses the power of words and avoids the use of force. This kind of reflection is embodied by her concept of attention.

For Weil's concept of attention, we focus less on our relationship to external objects, and focus entirely on the good and the bad; the pure and the impure. Weil argues that by facing both sides with an equal amount of selfless attention, we will naturally be drawn towards that which is good. Despite the notions of good and bad being abstract, a similar attentive strategy can be applied to our beliefs. One can attend equally to two opposing views without imposing a concept of the self. By equally viewing two opposing views, say pro-choice and pro-life, and giving each serious consideration, one is then actively reflecting and resisting the power of words. This type of attention gives each viewpoint respect as a valid viewpoint and enables one to seriously consider the pros and the cons of each view. This is contrasted with excluding certain viewpoints due to some inherently opposed ideological grounding.

Thus, to reinstate the humanity of the opposing side, we need to be able to reflect on the positions being advanced on both sides. A blind coherence to a political party's tenants fails to spark the necessary reflection to truly cultivate an engaged individual. If one fails to reflect, force becomes the ultimate answer to resolving conflicts. Not only does this force erode the founding values of the United States, but it also contradicts the ideals of both political parties. Thus, Weil's concept of attending towards both positions will combat this use of force. Objectification is evaded and humanity is cultivated.

Pluralism and Our Present Day Politics

Clarke Foster

The polarization of modern politics is a symptom of a lack of pluralism within political leadership. The two party system and populism imply more homogeneity in the American people than truly exists. The actors which make up parties and the public as a whole have specific interests. Politics aiming towards an elevated common interest runs the risk reproducing the factions of those closest to power. Rather than focusing on common interest vs self-interest, a focus on the constituent actors in political movements and institutions and the dynamics between them can shift focus towards an actionable pluralism. This centers political action and discussion as means of mobilizing the public to enable self expression and organization. Limitations on political self expression and direction run deep in the American political system, favoring representation of plural interests within the two parties and even active hostility from the parties towards organization outside of them. Creating a more pluralist politics requires opposing and changing the politics of ruling factions inside parties, in electoral law, and even regarding the Constitution. Such pluralist politics favor not a single common political project, but the means of political groups to represent themselves outside of and against the dominant two party system. Such politics may seem counterproductive to fighting polarization, but rather point to the depth of the problem and the complicity of the two parties in the problem. The scale of the dissatisfaction with present politics needs to be addressed with efforts to present new framings and legitimize political action, just as the ruling parties will continue to do.

Common interest is a popular ideal for organizing political action. However, common interest is only as useful as it is realizable. Aristotle suggests that the common interest can be best approached through bringing together the interests of all actors in a society (1297b37-1298a33). Government in the common interest should see many voters of many backgrounds settle on candidates who best represent their shared interests and the same occurs between representatives in the legislature. Here an approximation of a common interest is arrived at in a liberal democratic state. This model accepts that voters act in self interest, but that legislators should not. In practice, representatives also act in self interest, and like any specific voter, have an interest informed by their place in society, including their place as a representative. A unique characteristic of representatives compared with the voters is their ability to make enforced political decisions. This is key to forming the interest of a representative. Voters and representatives will group together out of shared interest as well as strength in numbers. This is more important for representatives than it is for voters as representatives cannot make decisions alone, but voters must alone make one decision. Formation of parties lets political actors find those with shared interests and gain the numbers to make decisions.

Focusing on self-interests over one common interest acknowledges political diversity as well as specific interests of decision makers. Striving for common interests runs the risk of being in practice indistinguishable from the narrow interests of the ruling faction. A society of plural self-interested actors does not need to threaten a stable democracy. Ernesto Laclau, a theorist of populism, understands democracy as existing with the populace directly who organize themselves as democratic subjects to fulfill their specific demands derived from their interests (106). Because of the different actions and interests of democratic subjects, Laclau's democracy is ideally decentralized and pluralist so each subject can enact their demands themselves (107). To act effectively in centralized decision making systems, democratic subjects join together into populist subjects. The populist subject consolidates the demands of the democratic subjects and aims to implement them centrally (106). The bonds between democratic subjects emerge through discourse using the equivalence logic, identifying common experiences, mainly status of demands as unmet, and differential logic, identifying different experiences especially relating to treatment by decision-making institutions (106). These form the people-elite perspective associated with populism. Empty signifiers appeal to democratic subjects and bring them into populist movements' equivalential chain without them needing to buy into every view of every member in the movement. These movements then contain significant heterogeneity. In Trump's movement social conservatives could latch on to the movement for the potential of removing protections for abortion and LGBT non-discrimination without committing as strongly to other facets of the narrative like opposition to NAFTA. Some may not endorse many facets of the movement, but support it as a means to political power.

Populist movements centralize disparate political actors to prioritize political effectivity in centralized institutions (Laclau 108). Parties will strive to achieve majorities to ensure they can act alone. Ineffective leadership could fracture a ruling majority if some demands are met, but others are not (Laclau 106). To limit internal fractures, homogeneous ideology can align interests and ensure political actors don't take their narrow victories and abandon the movement. These ideologies are often treated as synonyms with the common interest. Trump's Republican Party has developed a unifying nationalism to keep in line and motivate its actors towards change and the enforcement of an image of the Constitution.

The Democrats position themselves as the sole vehicle for the defense of democracy, the Constitution, and a liberal society. The parties' interests generally bias towards the interests of party leaders through control of political capital such as funding, committee assignments, and legislative priorities. Recent examples include Trump's removal of Ronna McDaniel as head of the RNC and the continued role of superdelegates, high ranking party members, in selecting the Democratic presidential nominee (Haberman). The Democrats did reform this system in 2018 after allegations that they helped bias the 2016 primary for Clinton (Stewart). These limit how much voters and elected officials are able to operate inside the party against leadership. When a faction is unable to gain a majority, its leaders must make concessions and cooperate to rule. Both the Democrats and Republicans approach politics as though they should both necessarily rule by majority, acting to prevent minorities from forcing them to powershare. Inside the party, these factions do exist such as the Freedom Caucus or the progressive left. Between parties, they have generally accepted the right of each other to rule as a majority, and prevent other parties from requiring them to form coalitions. By ensuring they are the only routes for their voters to realize their political goals, they limit the concessions the leading party interests must make in government.

The underlying diversity of populist movements and the public generally could be leveraged to the benefit of pluralism. The current composition of the parties and the identities associated with them could be weakened if constituent actors in the political parties had more credible options to choose from. With more options, Black voters, environmentalists, Catholics, or libertarians may form their own parties forcing renegotiation of the ruling coalitions and diminishing the centralized power of the Democrats and Republicans. Minority political actors could be a check on larger ones by necessitating cooperation to take action. The American public in polling appears open to politics outside of the two parties. As of 2023, 40% of Americans identify as independents and 28% of Americans viewed both the Democrats and Republicans unfavorably (Gallup, Pew). Despite this, 3 members of Congress come from outside of the two parties and all caucus with one. If the American public is so internally diverse why does the political system offer only the two options? Two party rule is self-perpetuating, driven both by the form of the American electoral system and the actions of the two parties. All political actors want their demands met, but in the US, only the Democrats and Republicans can reasonably access the halls of power. This causes citizens to strategically vote for the two parties. Those representatives will be subject to pressure to conform to the party as to maintain legislative majorities. Lacking the formal coalition agreements common in multiparty systems, minority factions within parties are not treated as equal partners in government, but expected to show up to support the party. Without other options to achieve power, a legislator must commit to the party to be effective. This changes legislators' interests in ways voters are not subject to. Donors and lobbyists will also influence their interests. Through Citizens United v. FEC regulations on political donors were significantly weakened, making more money available largely to the two parties who can access power. This and the money from the parties themselves make it preferable to remain with a major party. These insulate ruling factions from minority grassroots pressure, although upsets like Trump can gain sufficient power in a party to force it to change. Trump also demonstrates that large internally diverse parties don't necessarily moderate, with more traditionally moderate Republicans often supporting the polarizing leadership to maintain access to power. With more routes to power, political allegiance would not have to be a binary opposition.

Multiparty politics that might empower these minority actors find themselves at a disadvantage in the American political system. The first past the post electoral system tends toward two parties who offer democratic subjects the best chance at proximity to power (Myatt 257). The need for these single party majorities are seen in the Presidency and Congress as well as most state level systems. The choice in these elections determines control over executive agencies and the legislative process and very importantly the courts. While the courts are less directly influenced by the parties, their influence over the constitutional system make them central to enacting political change. Voters are unlikely to risk using their vote on a candidate unable to reach these leading roles. Aside from the barriers produced by the current electoral system, the parties routinely take hostile action against third parties. The parties often try to block ballot access of third parties, mainly Libertarians and Greens, while claiming their measures protect the integrity of elections against fraud (Schoenbaum, Svitek). When third parties or independents do manage to gain moderate support, the losing major parties will routinely blame the third party for their loss as in the cases of Perot and Nader (Campbell, Salazar). Whether intentional or not, this implies an entitlement of the major party to the voters of the third party seen as closest to the major party.

Efforts to strengthen third parties have been introduced, mainly by Democrats, but to limited scope and effect. Fusion voting, allowing candidates to appear on ballots under multiple party affiliations, has been implemented in several states and upheld by the Supreme Court in Timmons v. Twin Cities. Minor parties within a major party have been able to gain concessions one would expect to see from coalitions in multi-party systems (Kantack 292). Fusion voting offers a means for more diversity within the two-party system, but has not been successful in moving beyond it.

In New York, the Working Families Party has seen moderate success organizing in the left flank of the Democratic Party. The Green Party, positioning themselves similarly ideologically but independent of the Democrats, have not seen such traction (Fertik 52-53). In more recent years, reformists have proposed ranked choice voting where voters rank the candidates weakening strategic voting. Some local governments and the whole of the states of Alaska and Maine have adopted ranked choice voting, but the dominance of the two parties remains. Democrats and Republicans alike in various jurisdictions have fought ranked choice initiatives with some Republican states going as far as banning the practice (Austermuhle, Dunlap). In total 3 of 435 representatives and 4 of 100 senators are elected by ranked choice. Existing independent politicians are largely expected to toe a party's line on major votes and caucus with a major party (Friesdorf). All members of the House are Democrats or Republicans. The continued dominance of the two parties requires those who are more independent to still rely on the parties to get things done without much leverage to get concessions. Third parties have not gained enough strength on a national scale to challenge the two party system. Without significant and widespread changes to the electoral system third parties are unlikely to bring the change needed to build pluralist multiparty politics.

The weakness of and hostility towards third parties accounts for some of the difference between interests expressed by voters and those enacted by political institutions. Beyond elected representatives, limited means of popular participation is a problem of the larger constitutional system. Voters and elected officials alike offer desires and descriptions of the Constitution which do not reflect the Constitution as it exists. In political rhetoric the Constitution is almost an empty signifier. Claims of defending and maintaining the Constitution are ubiquitous and bolster policy goals more than they comment on the constitutional order. The Constitution is then a sacred embodiment of their image of American liberty, regardless of the meaning of the text given by the courts. For Locke and the founders, liberty precedes and must inform all politics. All governments, reliant on and subordinate to the people, must respect liberty. Any action, including revolution, can be justified if liberty is violated (Locke Sec. 222). By treating the Constitution as inviolable as liberty, allegations of violation of liberty by the constitutional government are not indicative of a weakness in the Constitution or a failure of it to reflect liberty as the democratic subject understands it. The Constitution as an ideal takes precedence in rhetoric over the Constitution as the system perpetuating perceived systemic problems. The sacred status of the Constitution in political discourse protects constitutional political processes from attempts at significant direct change like the framers undertook, even as general change is being demanded. Since the 50s, the change has been largely directed through the courts, seeing introduction of new rights through judicial activism. Today populism looms large with efforts for commanding majorities to impose demands against the political system.

The meaning of and means to change the Constitution lies officially almost exclusively with the Supreme Court. While the text of the Constitution can be changed according to Article V this is immensely difficult and rare. Voters unhappy with current politics will additionally find this process locked behind state and federal legislatures controlled by the two parties. Functionally, the Constitution can be changed by the Supreme Court in ways comparable to amendments. The differences in the constitutional systems under Plessy v. Ferguson and Brown v. Board represent similar changes to the US as before the 15th Amendment and during its enforcement. The reconstruction amendments are good examples here because their function changed greatly depending on the actors in power. The Constitution is inseparable from the self-interested political actors with the power to realize it. When this does not occur the courts should be enforcing actors. But this ability to compel constitutional compliance means the ability to change the operations of the constitutional system with a change in interpretation of the text alone. This power to change the Constitution drives interest in the court, but also endangers its legitimacy. Democrats after Dobbs v. Jackson and Republicans over the events at the Texas-Mexican border have been calling for political measures to override these decisions of the Supreme Court (Paz, Choi and Downen). Given the way the Supreme Court has become synonymous with constitutional authority, this seems to imply a desire for a Constitution subject to more democratic control. As of now, political control over the courts and the Constitution lie largely in the hands of the two parties.

The matter of changing the Constitution was central to the framers. The Constitution replaced the Articles of Confederation because its inability to change posed a threat to the Union (Publius No. 15). At the same time, frequent and easy amendments would weaken the power of the states and be subject to political zeal (Publius No. 85). The occasional power to amend delegated to the people is rarely evoked. Frequent and politically charged changes enacted without much participation of the public and the states are now the norm through the Supreme Court. As the public desires greater political representation and control, widespread change will likely be necessary. With the minimally impactful effects of changes in small states to the two party system, multiple large states would likely have to sign on to give enough momentum for third parties to gain effective power.

At least a party would have to participate, though referenda for such amendments may to some extent shift power away from the parties in those processes. Efforts at a federal level would likely require constitutional change. The decisions in Breedlove v. Suttles and Oregon v. Mitchell prevented major congressional change to state and local electoral laws leading to the 24th and 26th Amendments. Given the threat to the two parties' power presented by a change in favor of stronger third parties, political organization and action inside and against the two parties by independents and advocates of pluralism would be necessary to obtain sufficient support for amendments, state or federal.

The final means of change realistically exists only as a rhetorical tool. That is for the people to invoke what Madison did in 1787, the necessity of organized political action outside the system where the system is unable to change itself and preserve the Union (Publius No. 15). As an empty signifier, this appeals to the national narrative and rhetoric of popular sovereignty. When combined with a movement to mobilize voters and pressure the parties to change. Compared to populist movements who aim to realize the myriad demands of it democratic subjects, the comparatively narrow policy demand of a movement for such electoral reform makes it difficult to split, although incredibly difficult to implement. Reforms towards a multiparty system could appeal to groups across ideological lines as the future vehicle of their political projects. All that is easier said than done. Such a movement would be in a very weak starting position and constantly fighting to not be seen as a mere spoiler to the parties in power. Although difficult, this is not unprecedented. Progressives and populists won the direct election of senators, suffragists won women the right to vote, black activists got their constitutional rights enforced. None of these movements overthrew political orders entirely and neither would a modern political movement. But their higher standard of democracy which was not compatible with their status quos guided their activism within and against the ruling factions of their days. When people approach politics with the belief that they have the right and means to condition their support of the political system, their beliefs will either display a chasm between their interests and the actions of political leaders or pressure them to participate in change. It is time to act to ensure that change.

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