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# **AMERICA'S DANGEROUS POLITICAL POLARIZATION AND MODERATE STIGMA**

DAN SICORSKY

This paper addresses the underlying causes of polarization and moderate stigma, and proposes methods for increasing the number of nonpartisan politicians. A reemergence of moderate, non-binary voices in representative bodies can remedy Washington's historic unproductiveness and voting center's shameful desertedness. If we do not alter the ways we think, act, and vote, the two aisles will keep bloodily drifting apart, voting will end up an antiquated tradition, and Washington will cement its image as the battleground of unproductiveness.

## **INTRODUCTION**

At the fourth Republican presidential primary debate in November 2015, Kentucky Senator Rand Paul made a hefty accusation against another candidate, Florida Senator Marco Rubio. Rubio had just finished detailing a bullet point in his tax plan about a child tax credit, a concept supported by liberals who like entitlement programs but generally hated by conservatives who don't. Paul, a conservative who thinks any spending is unfavorable, caught this leftist hole in Rubio's otherwise conservative agenda. He quickly interrupted Rubio, jabbing the youngest candidate on stage with this insult: "You cannot be a conservative if you're going to keep promoting new programs that you're not going to pay for." That word — "conservative" — was used by Paul a telling 13 times over a short but intense few minutes, most often in the form, "How is it conservative?" Rubio tried to justify his non-conservative expenditure by invoking family values, but the damage was done ("Transcript: Republican Presidential

Debate"). Paul effectively scraped off some of Rubio's conservative coating, and earned himself all the applause. In front of 13.5 million home viewers (Steel), Paul picked up his opponent and slid him to the left on the political spectrum, closer to the Republican Party's widely-recognized enemy, the Democratic Party.

This confrontation could serve as the epitome of the severe partisan polarization that has plagued American politics for several decades, and not just on debate platforms. Paul's discrediting of Rubio's degree of conservativeness was a smart move, considering evidence that suggests recognized moderate politicians perform significantly worse in state and national elections than their partisan counterparts (Niskanen). The increasingly partisan make-up of Congress is proof of this tendency: A 2013 analysis of House representatives' views found that there were only 12 "independent-minded centrists" (or moderates) in the 112<sup>th</sup> Congress, but almost 200 just a little over 40 years ago, in the 92<sup>nd</sup> Congress (Douglas). But curiously, while a career-crippling stigma against

moderates is erasing middle-grounders from the Hill, more than half of Americans identify as moderates (Timm). Wary of this national disparity, political scientist Morris Fiorina explains in "America's Missing Moderates" that Washington has many extreme partisans, but "There are few 'raging moderates' or 'knee-jerk independents' at the higher levels of politics," which is especially meaningful because "although relatively few in numbers, those in the political class structure politics" (62). This invasion of Congress by political partisans from the latter half of the twentieth century to now has, not surprisingly, produced significant ripples.

This paper addresses the underlying causes of polarization and moderate stigma, and proposes methods for increasing the number of nonpartisan politicians. A reemergence of moderate, non-binary voices in representative bodies can remedy Washington's historic unproductiveness and voting center's shameful desertedness. If we do not alter the ways we think, act, and

vote, the two aisles will keep bloodily drifting apart, voting will end up an antiquated tradition, and Washington will cement its image as the battleground of unproductiveness.

### **FROM SOCIOLOGY TO BIOLOGY: THE CAUSES OF PARTISAN POLARIZATION**

When the debate topic that November night shifted to military spending, an expenditure most candidates argue should be higher but Paul thinks should be lower, the Kentucky senator smirkingly asked his pals on stage, "Can you be a conservative, and be liberal on military spending?" Paul's question carried the implied accusation, "If you're not a point-by-point conservative, then you're not a conservative — you're a moderate." To understand what Paul means, and why candidates despise the 'moderate' label, we must first define the word itself. One entry on the Oxford English Dictionary defines *moderate* as "not strongly partisan; not radical or extreme," while another says the word describes "a person who holds moderate opinions in politics, religion, or any subject of controversy" ("moderate, adj. and n."). The definition of *moderate* is broad and

diversified, but then again, so are the views of the people it describes.

We arrive at this unsolicited answer to Senator Paul's rhetorical question: You *can* be conservative on some things and liberal on others, but as politicians are increasingly pressured to choose a party and stick with it for *all* the issues, a mix-and-match approach to the issues is becoming increasingly rare. This is because elected officials are conditioned to stick with the party they committed to, even in the face of an issue with which they would have naturally sided with the opposing party. This dangerous partisan tendency is brought on by group polarization, political entrepreneurs, social conformity, and biological fulfillment, among other forces.

It's hard to believe, but nevertheless true: Democrats are not born Democrats, and Republicans are not born Republicans. A quick look at the red shade of North Dakota on national election maps might suggest all children born there are stamped 'Republican' before leaving the hospital, but this is not the case. Although limited indicators of

political ideology are found in genetic makeups (Edsall), nurture heavily trumps nature when it comes to molding a person's beliefs and values. In other words, the earliest influences on a person's party identification — and the degree to which they identify — are not biological, but rather social. It is through institutions like the home, church, and school — where conformity to the norm is hard to resist — that views, political and otherwise, are passed down from father to son, pastor to churchgoer, teacher to student. The social sphere of the family is of particular importance, as parents' and relatives' partisan alignment is the strongest influence on a young adult's party siding (Lyons). When seeking their family's approval, young adults portray themselves as siding with the family's party, just as they would promise to attend a father's alma mater. Both are the result of the decider conforming to surrounding social pressures that invite him to follow the norm. Pressures to conform in social spheres like the family create what one scholar, Dipak Gupta, labels "captive participants," which are "those whose primary motivation



to participate in collective actions is fear (cost of nonparticipation)” (xii). So while conservatives are not born in Montana, nor liberals in Delaware, each state very much *creates* Democrats or *creates* Republicans, because in the social spheres (especially family units) present in these environments, conforming to the trend means adopting a certain political view — or more often, political extreme.

Social settings are also breeding grounds for another phenomenon, group polarization, which could be described as the brainwashing and indoctrination of the masses, by the masses. More academically though, it is “a striking empirical regularity [where] deliberation tends to move groups, and the individuals who compose them, toward a more extreme point in the direction indicated by their own pre-deliberation judgments” (Sunstein 1). These “extreme points,” in the political sense of group polarization, are the Republican and Democratic ends of the political spectrum. The “deliberation [that] moves groups,” then, could take the form of gun-wielding veterans bonding over their collective despise of President Obama's

pacifist foreign policy, or a group of social justice warriors at a coffee shop condemning the vitriolic antics of refugee-hating Republican governors. In both cases, people with pre-established (but modest) beliefs participate in echo chambers of identical opinions where they solidify their previously moderate position on the issue. This happens because instances of group polarization are devoid of disagreement and debate, necessities that would otherwise push group members to check themselves and their views. Instead of healthy conversation and challenging views, shared hate and reinforcement take the stage, and the final product becomes a more extreme-minded and far-right-*or*-left position on the issue. The veterans come out hating Obama even more, and the social justice warriors are further convinced of the Republican governors' wickedness. Ubiquitous and unannounced, instances of group polarization drive conservatives to be more conservative, liberals to be more liberal, and moderates to be anything but that.

When they aren't passing legislation, shaking hands, or kissing babies, politicians are tending to another of their major duty: recruiting believers. Through a tacit process that resembles the incessant marketing war between Coca-Cola and Pepsi, officials from the Democratic and Republican parties actively work to mobilize both existing and potential supporters to join their respective "teams." Gupta calls these key players "political entrepreneurs," and explains that they unite followers and breed political extremists mainly by doing two things: establishing symbols and rituals for their party (112), and bashing a scapegoat (the opposing party) for problems both small and large. In the political world, the first of these unification methods, the use of symbols and rituals, can take the form of national conventions, celebrity endorsements, the "The Democratic Party" Twitter account, 'Raised Right' bumper stickers, rallying colors and flags, and even politically-charged tunes like Johnny Cash's climate-change-themed 1974 song "Don't Go Near the Water." The breadth of these examples suggests that political entrepreneurs are not

exclusively high-ranking politicians, but rather any influential persons who, in their circles, promote messages that rally an audience behind a specific contested issue or party. Gupta links the creation of rituals to the other frequently-used unification method, bashing the opposing group: “In our history, culture, philosophy, and folklore, we not only glorify our collective, but also, at the same time, vilify somebody else as the other. This entrenched feeling of ‘them,’ which is constantly being reinforced through the process of life experience and conscious or unconscious policies of governments, political elites, and cultural icons, leads the way to collective madness” (15). Gupta speaks of ‘us versus them,’ a phenomenon involving a group (the “us”) that recognizes its shared similarities, and contrasts them with the similarities of another group (the “them”). When “us” and “them” come to mean Democrats and Republicans, what results is a feeling that a polar divide exists between each side’s persona. The natural human tendency to identify and vilify a “them” is exploited by political entrepreneurs, according to Gupta. He writes that they

"frame the past and present of a group's history into an overarching mythology of 'good' and 'bad,' 'heroes' and 'villains'" (xi), and that they "present a coherent story of historical injustice and exploitation by the opposing group," even if this story isn't necessarily true (106). By designating rituals and scapegoats, political entrepreneurs establish the in-group out-group phenomenon, which creates love for the within and hate for the outside. Today's partisan political climate suggests they've commendably kept to their job descriptions.

A more interdisciplinary understanding of the forces driving polarization recognizes that belongingness comforts more than just the mind; the physical body enjoys the effects of being one of "us," too. Research transcending neuroscience, psychology, and biology suggests that individuals will showcase their views to like-minded people for a simple, evolutionarily practical reason: It feels good. Berreby explains: "A sense of being them, a non-recognized nonparty of human community, pushes your mind and body toward a jumbled thinking, anger and sadness, and a

shorter life span. So an innate preference for good human-kind feelings over bad ones, for feeling like Us and not like Them, is no sideshow. It's one of life's main events" (223). This explains why centrist Republicans often slowly drift to the right, and centrist Democrats to the left — the mild feelings of belonging are not enough. A human desire for pleasure leads politicians (and constituents) to reinforce their similarities and subvert their differences with a party for the sake of their health. What results are hateful — but very healthful — partisans.

To summarize the causes of political polarization, we look at the case of a hypothetical boy named Harry Gordon. Born and raised in Seattle, Harry lives with his mother and father, Josh and Erica, who met at a social event organized by their liberal arts college's Young Democrats chapter. Prius-driving and almond-milk-drinking, the only religious thing about the agnostic Gordon family is a devotion to weekly family yoga. Also important: Since before they became parents, Josh and Erica have voted for Democrats in all elections.

A few things are likely to happen to little Harry. First, he will be immersed in social circles where parents, family friends, teachers, and virtually all of Seattle's people gush liberal ideals. Back home, competition with a newborn sister for mom and dad's love and acceptance will drive Harry to repeat liberal things he's heard others say. Locked in an echo chamber of identical views, Harry and his friends will drive each other to more extreme liberal ends. Soon, a storm of symbols, rituals, and spiteful rhetoric against conservatives will come out of someone's — a community leader's, activist's, cultural icon's — mouth and attract Harry like honey. Joining forces with these leaders, friends, and community members will naturally feel good to a human body like Harry's, and will encourage further identification with liberal causes. Alas, social conformity, desire for acceptance, group polarization, political entrepreneurs, and biological fulfillment have turned our little Harry into a liberal lion.

Seattle breeds thousands of Harrys. The nation breeds millions. And in the Bismarck's and Oklahoma City's and

Jacksonville's, a whole other pack of lions is created every day. But these are conservative lions. Jimmy's, if you will. When the Jimmy lions and the Harry lions converge in the nation's capital, Animal Planet would be wise to set up camp and film the carnage.

### **REDUCTION OF MODERATE STIGMA WOULD BENEFIT U.S.**

The factors that contribute to partisan polarization also encourage the public's disillusionment with (and the off-putting nature of) moderate status. A moderate presents a tricky situation for partisans who typically classify every person at the dinner table into "us" and "them," because a moderate is neither. He isn't — *can't be* — an "us," because he disagrees with us here and there. But he also isn't a "them," because he agrees with us on this and that. Rather than take on the mentally-taxing job of creating yet another category for this person — although humans have a knack for categorizing — the partisan extremist casts the person off to the side, labeling him instead by the mentally-soothing term "moderate." This delegitimizes moderate



status, and by effect, delegitimizes the moderate mind and viewpoints as well.

The more than half of the country that identifies as "moderate" surpasses the sensations of belonging and the self-reassuring feelings that glamorize partisanship. This independent majority communicates its views without fear of partisan disloyalty, since they are party-less. Gupta calls them "conscientious objectors." They are those who transcend social pressures to conform, those "who can see individuals in the mass of the collective enemy. [They are] immune to the pandemic of collective madness" (118). Brave and determined, these conscientious objectors do not have it easy when they seek political office, as is suggested by the declining, almost inexistent share of moderates in legislatures nationwide. A long-established disregard, even hate, for moderates is one of the most dangerous tendencies in our political system today. This moderate stigma has made fissures in the political system that are in urgent need of reparation.

The first reason for advocating moderate status involves a national disgrace — the American voter turnout rate. The 2014 midterm elections saw the lowest voter participation level since 1978: Only 42 percent of Americans voted (McElwee). As if that weren't telling enough, the Pew Research Center makes clear that when it comes to turnout rates among developed countries, "the U.S. lags most of its peers, landing 31st among the 34 countries in the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD)" (Desilver). Voter turnout is indicative of a healthy democracy, so it seems fitting that America, a nation that prides itself in its democratic principles, would work to augment the dismal showing at its voting booths. One way to do this is by introducing moderate candidates to ballots. The presence and popularization of moderate candidates on election tickets will skyrocket turnout rates because moderate voters who regularly do not vote would see candidates who, like them, inhabit the abyss of opinions, even if these are not necessarily the same. What will attract these voters is not the similarities in opinions with the

candidates, although these are sure to exist, but rather the presence of someone who also defies tempting calls for partisan polarization in our political system. This will elevate moderates' election success rates, as well as voter participation rates. The laughs from other OECD countries who are watching our messed-up voting system will subside.

The second, and perhaps most important motivation to erase moderate stigma and elevate moderate politicians is directly tied to the livelihood of our legislative chambers. The House and Senate are more polarized today than they have been in over a century (Steinhauer). Unproductiveness in Congress has reached the highest levels in over a century (Desilver). This strong negative correlation between the disappearance of moderates and the increased partisan gridlock is no coincidence. In fact, the trends go hand in hand: Debate is stratified because both sides duel persistently for their ideas and leave little room for compromise. Conscientious objectors are key to remedying this partisan gridlock in Congress, as these moderates can

recognize the middle ground on an issue and take a position of informed ambivalence that allows them to see the goods and bads of proposals from both sides of the aisle. By taking the podium to facilitate compromise, moderates will propose solutions that can appease the unwavering partisans sitting below.

The third reason to elect and popularize moderates is given by the title of Gil Troy's book: *Why Moderates Make the Best Presidents*. The answer, in summary, is that moderate presidents (who, according to Troy, have included only six presidents, Reagan being the most recent) are able to rule from the center while still advancing significant legislation. Troy writes on his personal website that "Challenges like managing the debt, preserving the environment, fighting terrorism, improving education — in short, protecting America today and building toward tomorrow — require the kind of consensus that can only come from leaders who seek the center." But Troy's collection of successful moderate presidents stops in 1990. The reason: No

moderate since then has overcome the stigma that impedes getting to the White House.

It is evidently in our best interest to alleviate the stigma against moderates. A reemergence of middle-of-the-road politicians would augment voter turnout rates, alleviate partisan gridlock in legislative chambers, and make for more effective presidencies. Fortunately, some simple changes could facilitate the reemergence of moderates.

#### **HOW TO ALLEVIATE THE STIGMA**

Gupta recommends, above all, an increase in “free discourse,” or free speech. He theorizes that an encouragement of divergent views will open the floor to non-polar speakers (xii), and I agree. But there is one other change that must occur if free discourse is to take us down any valuable path: Brave free speech must not be followed by intense judgment from those who still inhabit the mental “us” wonderland. Moderates should feel comfortable speaking without fear of any restraint, censoring, and judgment from those at the outer reaches of the political spectrum. Uncorrected, polarized speech will undoubtedly

hinder future attempts at speaking the mind, which evidence — not academic, but rather cultural and historical — suggests is more multifaceted, and less polar, than any one political entrepreneur would suggest.

Second, steps must be enacted so that moderates can regain the confidence to run more election campaigns. This will fail, of course, if the same barriers that have historically stood in their ways continue to impede victory. One of these barriers, an absence of free speech devoid of judgment, has already been discussed. Another, the biased design of elections themselves, must be addressed. Twenty-three states and the District of Columbia hold closed or semi-closed primaries where only party-affiliated voters can participate. Although in a handful of these states independent voters can still vote on Election Day, the restrictions and impediments put in place to discourage unpredictable voters are glaring ("Congressional and Presidential Primaries: Open, Closed, Semi-Closed, and Others"). Additionally, ballots are structured so that big-name, big-party candidates appear on top, with lesser-

known contenders appearing a few lines down with no glowing party affiliation to shine alongside them. If moderates are to reappear in the political world, the roadblocks to election — primary's and ballot's designs — must be corrected to strip them of the blatant advantage they give to partisan candidates.

## **CONCLUSION**

Partisan polarization is a danger that, named or not, surrounds us daily. Some days ago, for example, two weeks of climate talks in Paris between 196 countries produced a deal to cut down greenhouse gas emissions, a move scientists and environmental officials have hailed as "landmark." The accord was a major victory for President Obama, who has made climate change legislation one of the biggest goals of his presidency. Pictures from Paris showed legislators embracing and throwing hands up in celebration of a victory for the environment. On the other side of the Atlantic, though, tensions erupted across party lines. Democrats, in a show of support for their party's president, applauded the deal for its language and promise of

effectiveness. They stuck together behind their leader and their party. On the other side, Republicans criticized the plan because of the group tendency to demonize all moves made by the opposing side. They stuck behind a common hate for the other party's leader, Obama. This instance represents just one example of a partisan divide without any clear middle ground, though one surely exists. Visit any major news outlet, read the top story of the day, and notice the tendency for issues to be split in two, with one side arguing that the other side is utterly wrong, and vice versa. Whether climate change, ISIS, or gun control, the story of the day is generally assigned two sides, one for the Democrats and one for the Republicans. A 'middle side' is often out of the question.

The effects of stringent partisanship and moderate stigma are catastrophic — or will be soon. We've seen how the forces that shape the political polarization of America range from social conformity to group polarization to biological fulfillment. The causes of moderate stigma stem from this affinity for belongingness, and uncorrected, will



prolong dismal voting turnout rates, government unproductiveness, and presidential ineffectiveness. Luckily, all of these dangers can be averted by re-entering moderates into politics, which can be done by increasing free discourse and restructuring elections. It is tragic that there are only 12 independent-minded people in the House of Representatives today, and that the last moderate president presided almost 30 years ago. By eliminating the stigma toward conscientious objectors, centrists, independents, moderates — whatever label you want to assign them — we can raise a white flag to end the ongoing, bloody, partisan-defined Battle for Washington.

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