

A Sociologist's View of the Trump Phenomenon

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Abstract: The election of Donald Trump has its roots in social trends that have developed since the 1970s and have spread throughout the Western industrial democracies: most notably, a dramatic decline of confidence in government and other core social institutions. This has come in reaction to the general social and economic "opening" of the past fifty years, which has brought nations and peoples into far closer contact than at any previous historical period – but has also disrupted many established ways of life. From this strain two contrary movements have developed: populism, which aims to restore traditional values and relations; and progressivism, which seeks to broaden inclusion and to reduce historical inequalities. Trump has built an often uneasy alliance of populists and traditional conservatives, while progressives have allied with traditional liberals. This divide has fed political polarization, which now constitutes a profound threat to the future and can be resolved only with deliberate efforts at mutual understanding and collaboration.

The Trump phenomenon is one of a set of movements throughout the advanced industrial world aiming to disrupt politics as usual. Like the others, it is not well explained by economic or political analysis. It is not a movement of the poor (or the rich), and it is not driven by existing parties: it crosses economic lines and scrambles the political landscape, and traditional parties are struggling to adapt to it. It is better explained by the sociologist's focus on *community*. The roots of the phenomenon lie in widespread disruptions of identities, relations, and ways of life over long periods. There is good reason why so many feel that they are engaging in a "culture war."

From the sociological perspective, the Trump phenomenon is not a fluke or an isolated event: it arises from long-running and widespread forces that have spawned similar conservative or populist movements in other nations. Yet at the same time a strong counter-tendency is developing: new "progressive" institutions of civil society are also growing at a rapid pace – different from traditional associations, more open and fluid, often making use of new media of communications, often stressing social justice and inclusion..

These two kinds of movement represent contrary reactions to the social strains of the last fifty years. This has been a period of enormous opening up and expanded cultural exchange: the dismantling of the Iron Curtain, the globalization of commerce, the rapid spread of the internet and social media, the change in attitudes towards other races, genders, and sexual preferences. These developments have been extremely disruptive to

established traditions. Many feel that their expectations of life have been tossed out. They have no confidence in what their careers might look like, whether their community will be stable, or even how they should act towards their spouses and workmates. Some have responded by charging ahead: embracing the changes, seeking wider inclusion. Others have responded by pulling back to established values and ways of life, and erecting walls to protect against those outside their traditions. For the former, things are moving too slowly; for the latter, which form the committed core of the Trump support, things are moving too fast and threaten to destroy order and meaning.

This chapter will explore these orientations, and also the possibilities for bridging the divide and reconstructing a healthy civil society.

Conservatives and populists

At one level, Donald Trump is just a normal conservative: many of his supporters just feel that change should proceed with caution, and that more responsibility should be exercised by localities and individuals than by the Federal government. If this was all, he would not be a “phenomenon”: he would represent only another moment in the long oscillation of the past two centuries between the liberal impulse to hasten social change and the conservative impulse to slow it down. Both have given rise to philosophically deep and elaborated views of society - including, for instance, Burke and Tocqueville on the conservative side, Rousseau and Mill on the liberal. In periods of relative social calm, they can work together in a productive interaction, with conservatives restraining liberal haste and ideological oversimplifications, and liberals nudging conservatives - often through governmental action - out of entrenched patterns of injustice and stagnation.

Where Trump is distinctive, and different from his Republican predecessors such as the Bushes and even Ronald Reagan, is that he *also* activates a populist impulse that has been on the rise after half a century of dormancy. This is a disruptive passion that drives the most intense believers in Trumpism as a movement.

Populism in its essence is a reaction against cultural and political elites. It has appeared in various guises in the past two centuries. Currently it is mostly allied with conservatism, but it is in essence neither conservative nor liberal. It is conservative in seeking to defend an existing culture against forces of change; but it is also radical aspect because it strikes back against dominant forces. It is often hostile and angry. While the conservative instinct is to advance slowly and carefully, the populist instinct is to tear down. It is also anti-intellectual and anti-science, because the intellectuals are the core of the elites whose progressive tendencies threaten existing ways of life.

Populism primarily represents those who feel left out - those who have been solidly self-confident members of society in the past but are now out of the mainstream of cultural and economic change; who have done well but feel that they are losing their

place.¹ Its focus is on preserving a valued way of life against an onslaught of outside forces. A 2016 book on the Tea Party is titled *Strangers in Their Own Land*;² the same phrase is used by a historian to describe the 1890s populists, adding a description that could apply equally to both movements:

“... people bewildered by the complexities of the world around them.... Populists saw themselves as cruelly hoodwinked for years, until the third party had opened their eyes. A greedy plutocracy controlled the government and economy ..., and the money kings remained secure in their high places through their success in duping the citizenry.”³

The social historian Richard Hofstadter traces a series of similar movements that have seen the elites as engaged in a vast conspiracy to undermine their way of life – going back to anti-Masonic movements of the 1820s, anti-Catholics of the 1830s, and more recently in the McCarthy movement of the 1950s. He describes populists as feeling “dispossessed: America has been largely taken away from them and their kind, though they are determined to try to repossess it and to prevent the final destructive act of subversion. The old American virtues have already been eaten away by cosmopolitans and intellectuals.”⁴ This is an almost perfect description of the feelings of Trump’s populist base today.

Many people supported Obama in 2008, and Bernie Sanders in 2016, out of the same deep and diffuse desire for change. But Obama turned out to be a system-repairer rather than a system-destroyer, which was a deep disappointment even to many of his supporters. The fact that Trump is (despite his wealth) so manifestly not a member in good standing of the elite – that the elite so constantly and vocally express their horror and rejection of what he stands for – is in the eyes of populists proof that he is on the right track. He promises to dismantle the system, and he is delivering on that promise, at least on the surface, more than anyone expected.

Populism is not a movement of the *poor* because the truly down-and-out generally do not seek to preserve their way of life. It is a movement of those who have loved their lives and feel that slipping away. It maps more accurately onto the urban-rural split, because rural areas have always felt strongly loyal to their communities, while cities have always been the drivers of change. Today it also maps onto educational level. Trump “sorted” the electorate more powerfully by education than by income – primarily because many working-class voters with high school educations shifted in a populist direction.⁵

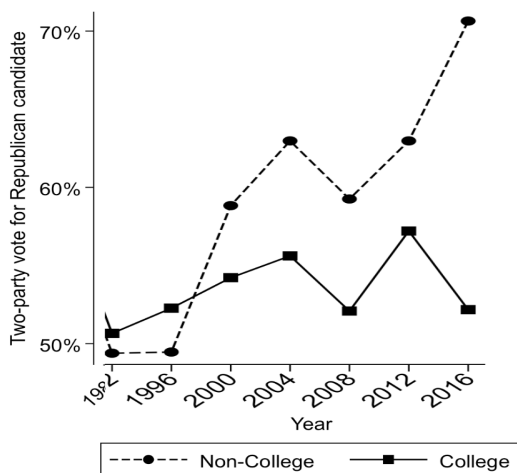
¹ (Mutz 2018)

² (Hochschild 2016)

³ (Turner 1980, 369)

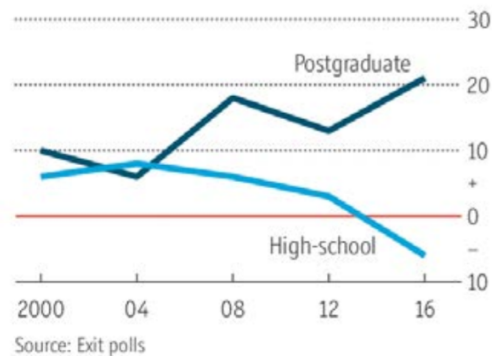
⁴ (Hofstadter 1964, 23; following Bell [1963] 2017, 1–38)

⁵ The first chart is from (Schaffner et al. 2017) - slightly modified to focus on the years since 1992; the second from (The Economist 2017)



Brain gain

United States, Democrats' lead over Republicans in presidential elections, by education level
Percentage points



Many classic conservatives have lamented that Trump is not really of their number. He has abandoned a number of the core tenets of “regular” conservatives, such as free trade. They want to reverse a good deal of the recent rapid spread of liberal legislation, but they wish Trump wasn’t such a crudely destructive force. But so far they have found it on balance better to stick with him than to abandon him, which is crucial to his success.

Europe has also experienced a fierce populist wave.⁶ The triggering issue has typically been immigration. But that fails to explain much: populism has gained strength since about 2012 as the actual incidence of immigration has sharply declined. It has become clearer that, as in the US, the underlying impulse is much more profound: it is about retreating and putting up walls against outside forces in general – not just against immigrants but also against global businesses, international governance mechanisms like the EU, and extensions of multiculturalism. Everywhere the desire to retreat to narrower, more homogeneous, and simpler communities has gained strength.

Characteristic features of populist movements throughout the advanced industrial nations include:

- A focus on strengthening community borders, both real and symbolic.
- A reassertion of traditional loyalties based on shared histories and cultures.
- A turn away from globalism and multiculturalism, both of which threaten the unity of these traditional commitments.
- Opposition to bureaucratic state systems staffed by social elites, and to the social welfare and regulation policies that have been central to the growing reach of state programs.
- Attacks on expertise and knowledge elites as out of touch.

⁶ (Lewis et al. 2018)

- The emergence of new parties or the substantial transformation of existing parties.

Why now? The collapse of confidence in the postwar framework

Though there is no clear breakpoint, the trajectory that leads to Trump can usefully be traced to the convulsions of the 1960s.

For three decades after World War II there was throughout the industrial world an extraordinary efflorescence of economic and cultural growth. The French call it “les trente glorieuses” – “the glorious thirty” (years). All through Europe as well as North America, and even in the defeated nations of Germany and Japan, there was a similar wave of prosperity and optimism.

All these nations had a common framework for success: economies built on corporate capitalism, with labor unions acting as an effective voice for workers, and activist governments providing social welfare programs and shaping the economy according to Keynesian economic theories. These essential similarities extended across the many varieties of the industrial democracies and across the political spectrum. They also helped to support a growing set of international institutions like the World Court and the European Union.

It was a period in which people had high confidence in large organizations and their leaders, and in experts with special knowledge, to manage the big systems around them. A well-known study of the small dairy town of “Springdale” in the early 1950s sounds almost impossibly quaint today:

“Springdalers have a decided respect for the great institutions that characterize American society. The efficiency, organizational ability and farflung activities of giant government and business enterprise inspire them with awe. The military might of the nation and the productive capacity of industry lend a Springdaler a sense of pride and security, and the continuous development and successful application of science assure him that he is a participant in the most forward-looking and progressive country in the world.”⁷

I will use the term “postwar framework” for this dominant paradigm of the industrial democracies from the 1940s to the 1980s, with emphases on large organizations as managers of the system – especially corporate capitalism and the welfare state. In much of Europe it was called “social democracy,” though many nations like the U.K., the U.S., and Spain, not usually considered social-democratic, shared its core features.⁸

Conservatives throughout this period were supportive of the broad outlines of this postwar framework. Richard Nixon famously declared (following the conservative economist Milton Friedman⁹) that “We are all Keynesians now”; he sought to extend the

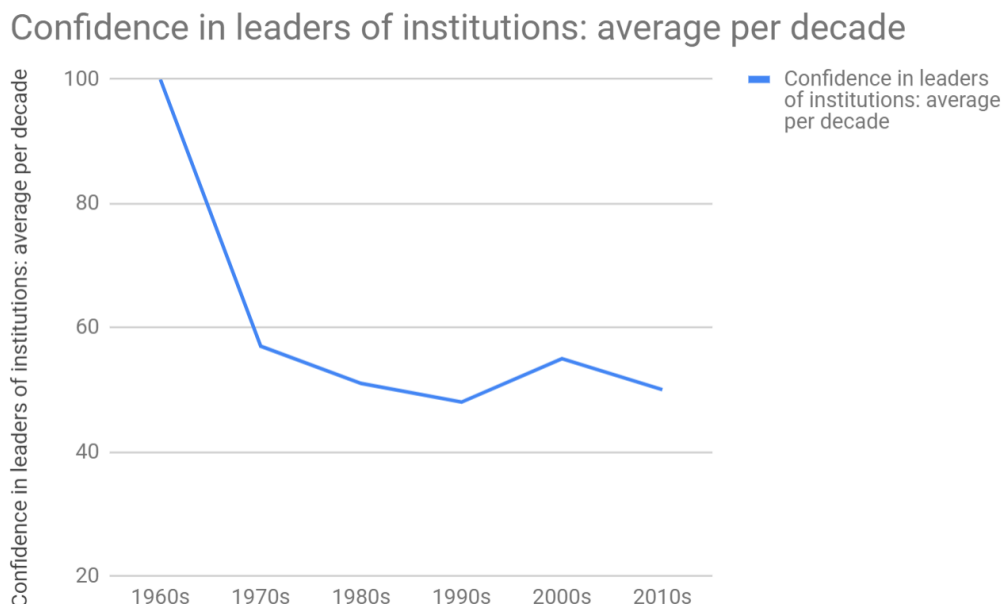
⁷ (Vidich and Bensman [1957] 1968, 79)

⁸ Many political scientists call it “the liberal order”; but in the present polarized environment that term has been distorted and freighted with ideological stereotypes.

⁹ Milton Friedman. “We Are All Keynesians Now”. [Time](#). December 31, 1965

welfare state through a comprehensive health care proposal and an activist economic policy; and he intervened strongly in the economy with a freeze on wages and prices to counter inflation. He also helped to build institutions of global cooperation, most notably with his opening to China. The postwar order seemed untouchable.

But the 1960s were a turning point. Throughout the advanced economies 1968 was a year of huge popular uprisings against the established institutions and elites. In the U.S., which has the most complete polling record in that period, there is evidence, over a period of a few years, of a truly extraordinary collapse of popular trust in the anchoring institutions of the postwar framework: large corporations, unions, and government. In the early 1960s, over 80% of Americans felt that this constellation could be trusted to govern the country; within less than a decade, that had been cut in half, and it has never recovered. Here, for example, is a chart drawn from data of the Harris company:¹⁰



One can quibble about particular methods and wording of survey items, but the essential pattern repeats itself in many polls and other types of data.

This is a social catastrophe. Complex societies require high levels of trust: they work only when the large majority of citizens basically agree both on the goodwill of the population as a whole and on the legitimacy of the institutions that govern them.¹¹ When that is eroded people withdraw into safer, more homogeneous islands of trust where they feel some level of control. So it is not surprising that political polarization

¹⁰ The left axis is an index set to 100 for the 1960s. So this chart indicates that the mean for the 1970s was about half that for the 1960s. (I built this chart from data in the article "[Confidence in Congress Stays at Lowest Point in Almost Fifty Years](#)"). The best evidence, though not directly comparable, suggests a further significant drop after 2010.

¹¹ (Heckscher 2015, chap. 1)

has also increased since the 1970s, and has reached unprecedented levels in the past decade – once again, not just in the US but across the advanced industrial world.¹²

Though there had always been a conservative critique of the welfare state, it remained marginal until the 1960s. The wider loss of faith in the postwar regime, and particularly in government, began initially among young liberals: they were the first to express their disenchantment with “the system.” The movements of the late 1960s across Europe and the US began as complex stews of issues, including class conflict and cultural issues of race and gender, energized by artistic and musical upheavals; but they all came to focus on government as the main obstacle to change. In the US, Johnson and the McNamara became symbols of an old order; in France it was De Gaulle, baffled by the events and leaving the country during the May riots. In both cases the movements centered in the young and educated, who replaced the faith in the liberal welfare state with a rise of expressivist values.¹³

Confidence in institutions stabilized at the new, lower level during the 1980s and 1990s. Then, starting around 2000, there was another decline – this time led by the older and less-educated, especially in rural areas.¹⁴ This second decline catalyzed a populist reaction, beginning with the rise of the Tea Party. The Trump “phenomenon” emerges from this toxic spiral of mistrust.

Why?

The decline in confidence is not closely correlated with economic or political crises. The latest steep drop – since about 2010 – has happened during a long period of steady growth in production and jobs. Some have suggested that the problem is the rise in inequality since the mid-70s; but the first sharp drop in trust occurred earlier, at a point of historically high economic equity. A similar decline in confidence, moreover, is seen across Europe from the 1960s to the 1980s, though inequality has generally remained lower than in the US.¹⁵ While scholars in each nation tend to blame their own particular circumstances – bad leadership at some point, a particular symbolic break – these come nowhere near explaining the scope and length of the phenomenon.¹⁶

No explanation that focuses on particular nations or particular events will hold. The underlying trend that makes sense of the decline in trust in the past half-century is that the world for ordinary people has grown more complex and insecure, causing a widespread feeling of anxiety across most sectors of society. The Springdalers quoted

¹² (Campbell 2016)

¹³ (Dalton 2005)

¹⁴ (Pew Research Center for the People & the Press 2017; Younge 2016). The decline since 2000 is clearly evident in these US data; I have not seen good data for Europe. The association with this decline with age and lower education is somewhat indirect: I have not seen evidence testing these correlations at individual levels, but there is evidence simultaneously of sharp decline in confidence and of disenchantment among the older and less-educated (e.g., (Foster and Frieden 2017)., who have become the core of populist movements.

¹⁵ (S. J. Pharr, Putnam, and Dalton 2000; Dalton 2005; Korpi and Palme 2003)

¹⁶ For a good overview, see (Hobsbawm 1996)

above would certainly not be speaking now with the same pride in their great institutions: in equivalent studies of recent years, residents of small towns and rural areas speak primarily with anger and often with despair about the decline of their way of life, the spiral of poverty, increasing drug use, and the arrogance of the elites.¹⁷ Twenge's extensive studies have documented a sharp rise in anxiety, and sense of loss of control, since the 1950s.¹⁸ This is felt especially keenly among middle-aged white males: Princeton researchers were shocked to find a sharp increase in mortality among that group between 1999 and 2013 – mainly from alcohol poisoning and suicide.¹⁹

The rural Springdalers of the 1950s were just beginning to become aware of the larger world of powerful institutions, but still felt they could remain separate and self-determining. In the intervening decades that faith has broken down. Before World War II the vast majority of people stayed within narrow social circles for their lifetimes, rarely if ever venturing beyond their towns and hearing the news of foreign lands only as a distant echo. Today they have in their faces every day, on TVs and social media, a world of strangeness and horror: fearful battles, terrorists slaughtering innocents, enormous cities in foreign lands humming with activity, terrifying natural disasters, wrenching images of poverty. During this same period, other bases of security have been whittled away. Large corporations that used to provide stable employment and benefits for a large segment of the population have abandoned those commitments.

As government was the focal point of the system in the 1950s, it became the focal point of disillusionment with the system in the subsequent period. The reach of government, and its expenditures, have grown enormously without creating a corresponding sense of confidence. It clearly feels to most people that the future is out of control, and that government is not helping. The systems that undergirded a feeling of optimism and energy in the 1950s have lost their magic.

Perceptive scholars began focusing on this quite early. In 1975 the Trilateral Commission issued a report titled *The Crisis of Democracy: Report on the Governability of Democracies*,²⁰ arguing that the multiplication of stakeholder demands was creating too much complexity for current institutions to handle. That same year the German sociologist Jurgen Habermas published *Legitimation Crisis*, arguing that the political system had become unable to produce meaning; “alienation” became a widespread meme.²¹

What we are experiencing, then, is not a peculiar throw of the electoral dice, but the deep ills of advanced industrial democracy. The legitimacy of the postwar order that once integrated virtually all the advanced industrial economies is now severely weakened.

¹⁷ (Hochschild 2016; Vance 2018)

¹⁸ (Twenge 2000; Twenge, Zhang, and Im 2004). See also Michael Maccoby's chapter in this volume.

¹⁹ (Case and Deaton 2015)

²⁰ (Crozier, Huntington, and Watanuki 1975)

²¹ (Habermas 1975; later echoed by Susan J. Pharr and Putnam 2000).

The pace of effects on political parties and events has varied: in the UK, the Thatcher turn happened simultaneously with the Reagan turn in America; in northern Europe, where social-democratic parties were far more dominant, the decline was later and slower. By now, however, even Sweden and Denmark, the purest examples of the postwar liberal order, face strong populist reactions, and the long-standing party systems are fragmenting. Trust in Parliaments is nearly as low as Americans' confidence in Congress.

What Trump's populist supporters like is not particular policies – indeed, his policies are not at all clear, since he changes tack and contradicts himself very frequently. What they like is that he represents something *different* from the corrupt and failing system of the past. Some of them also liked Bernie Sanders for the same reason. As a young lawyer – a lifelong Democrat who swung to Trump in 2016 – said to me, “It suddenly hit me: why would I support anyone who has had anything to do with the last thirty years?”

Populism remains a minority movement, rarely reaching as much as a third of the population in any of the industrial democracies, including the U.S.²² It has had a disproportionately powerful impact because of this wider loss of faith in the postwar framework. The defenders of the existing order are not nearly as dedicated as its opponents: all the old parties are riven with doubts and criticisms, deeply worried about everything from climate change to genetic engineering to racial justice, uncertain and often divided on how to proceed. They tend to share with the populists a skepticism about government's capacity to deal with the complexities.

The progressive phenomenon

Populism cannot be understood, however, without attention to countervailing progressive movements. Populism is a reaction to anxiety that seeks to overthrow the leadership of the postwar elites, to close down the incursion of outside forces, and to return to successful models from the past. On the other side is a movement, primarily driven by the educated elites themselves, to broaden and reach out – to transform society by upending social hierarchies and aggressively pursuing equality of status among all social groups. I will refer to this as “progressivism,” since that is a widely-understood term today, and helps to keep it distinct from the “liberal” postwar consensus already described.²³

Unlike postwar liberalism, progressivism is critical, or only weakly supportive, of the welfare state and unions. Its focus is on cultural inclusion – especially of identity groups of race, gender, and religion – in sharp contrast to the populist focus on cultural protection. Trump's “wall” is a perfect symbol for this difference. Progressivism builds

²² For Europe, see (Gramlich, Posts, and Simmons 2018). For the US: Support for the Tea Party was 27% at its height (Zeleny and Thee-brenan 2011). Strong support for Trump is 31% in late 2018 (NBC News Exit Poll Desk 2018; Quinnipiac University 2018)

²³ This progressivism is, however, quite different from that of the early 20th century.

on what sociologists have called the “expressive revolution” starting in the 1950s, with values including demands for participation, self-fulfillment, embrace of gender and racial diversity, environmental consciousness, and a shift in child-rearing focus from hard work to imagination.²⁴ It has increasingly colored the so-called identity movements. These started as demands for equal rights, but have gradually shifted towards demands for recognition and inclusion. It is no longer seen as enough for blacks, women, and others, merely to have the same rights as white men; the expectation is that white men will move out of the evaluative center, and that norms will be set in part by the new groups.

Progressivism continues to be driven, as it has since the 1960s, by the young and the educated. Yet those towards the left of the political spectrum, feeling gloomy about Trump, tend to underestimate the impact of these progressive and expressive values on the population more widely. The data show massive transformations since the 1960s in cultural norms around race, gender, family, religion, and other pillars of communal values. Few periods in human history have approached it for speed and scope of cultural shift. To pick a few indicative facts:

- Between 1958 and 1999, the percentage who said they could vote for “a generally well-qualified man for president who happened to be Black” went from 38% to 95%. In the South, it went from 13% to the same 95%. Over the same period, the percentage who said they could vote for a woman went from 57% to 92%.²⁵
- In 1967, 95% of law school students were male; in 2011, the gender balance was nearly equal.²⁶
- Since 1950 the percentage of African-Americans who have completed high school has more than tripled (20% to more than 60%) and the percentage completing college has increased ninefold (from 2% to 18%)²⁷
- Families grew smaller and more intimate: those who believed the “ideal number of children” was 3 or more dropped, within a few years in the late ‘60s, from 70% to 43% (Gallup, Inc 1999). A transformation of childrearing practices was catalyzed by Dr. Spock and thousands of successors, encouraging creativity and freedom rather than obedience to authority.
- There was a large decline in church attendance – probably by around one-half, though people tend not to admit this to pollsters.²⁸ Churches have certainly been feeling beleaguered. (The six largest Protestant denominations together lost as

²⁴ The “expressive revolution” at this time was sketched at a theoretical level by Parsons (1974; and 2007, 453), and empirically by Inglehart (01/2008) and others.

²⁵ (Gallup, Inc 1999; “Dataset: “Gallup ‘Black President’ Question” 2016) The race question in 1958 said “Negro” rather than “Black”.

²⁶ (American Bar Association and Others 2007)

²⁷ (National Center for Education Statistics 1993 Table 4)

²⁸ (Gallup Inc 1999) reports a drop from 50% weekly church attendance to 40% in the 1970s.. The evidence that the drop is much greater – to perhaps 20% today – is developed by Hadaway (1993, and 1998),

much as a third of their membership between 1965 and 1990²⁹). Moreover, as Tanya Luhrmann has noted, the character of the remaining religious faith has changed greatly, shifting towards expressivist values (“When God is your therapist,” as she puts it.³⁰) Traditional “fire and brimstone” fundamentalism has retreated to small corners of the society.

In my own surveys in recent years, I have found an unexpectedly solid consensus in favor of a strong notion of multiculturalism. I tested support for two conceptions of diversity. The “melting pot” view, which has a long tradition in the US, welcomes new cultural groups only if they assimilate to the dominant American norms. In contrast, the newer and more demanding multicultural conception suggests that other cultures should be recognized and valued for themselves, and that the dominant norms should *change* to be more inclusive. My “multicultural” questions included: “People from other places and cultures help us to grow, we should learn from them,” and “People should be encouraged to celebrate their cultural, ethnic, religious, and linguistic differences.” I thought these were rather aggressively progressive statements and expected relatively low support for them; but in fact about three-fourths of the population was positive, with Republicans nearly as high as Democrats.³¹ These and similar items were far more consensual than more classically conservative or liberal items like “Government should ensure that everyone is provided for” or “Government welfare programs undermine personal responsibility.”

The basic multicultural sensibility, in other words, is now widely accepted as normatively valid. What’s more, the trend of change has continued right through periods of apparent conservative ascendance. The movement for gay marriage took off during George Bush’s (conservative) presidency: support doubled (from 31% to 62%) between 2004 and 2017, leading to a wave of legislative and judicial successes. And even in the first years of the Trump administration, the #MeToo movement brought about important changes in gender norms. Through all the sound and fury, a new consensus is developing: around ⅔ of the country as of 2018 sees sexual harassment as a very serious problem – including half of Republicans – which is twice the level of ten years earlier.³²

Progressives lament the distance still to be traveled and the gaps remaining, but the magnitude of these changes has been extraordinary. Among Republicans, though the level of support is typically lower than average, the direction of movement is similar and the slope is sometimes steeper. On gay marriage, for example, Republican support increased from 15% to 41% from 2004 to 2017.

²⁹ (Marty 1970)

³⁰ (Tanya M. Luhrmann 2013; see also T. M. Luhrmann 2012)

³¹ There was some difference in *strength* of support, with 70% of Democrats strongly supportive versus 50-60% of Republicans.

³² (Agiesta and Sparks 2018). I also conducted a repeat survey in 2018 which showed little change on the multiculturalism items.

Movements like gay marriage and #MeToo have proceeded so rapidly because this ground has been prepared. There is absolutely no indication of reversal since Trump's election, in my own polls or others, using many different kinds of indicators. Though overt racists and intransigent evangelicals appear to have more political influence than before, there is no evidence that their numbers in the society at large have grown beyond small minorities.

Though progressives have often been leery of politics, they have been growing more active. They are now a major force in the Democratic party in the U.S., which after all was in power before Trump, and in the 2018 midterm elections they generated enthusiasm and increases in turnout to counter the energy of the populists.

Polarization

Polarization from 2000 to the Trump era has coalesced around the cultural divide between progressivism and populism – between expressivist values, with an emphasis on inclusion and multiculturalism, and more traditional religious and nationalist faiths. This gap reflects the demographic variables of education, age, population density, and economic sector (populists are generally less educated, older, from rural areas or small towns, and from manufacturing or extractive industries). They also map onto the of the broad progressive movement starting in the 1960s, and the populist reaction starting around 2000.

These are quite different from the orientations of conservatism and liberalism that defined politics in the earlier postwar era. Working classes and the less educated have moved towards populism; educated elites have moved towards progressivism. Political parties across the West have painfully re-sorted themselves to accommodate these energized viewpoints. In the US, the Republicans have moved towards Trumpian populism, while the Democrats have increasingly embraced progressive multiculturalism.

Yet when one looks more deeply into the beliefs of the population at large, the picture is much blurrier. Researchers are confronted by a paradox: polarization of *politics* has evidently increased since the 1970s, but the views of *individuals* remain inconsistent. In fact, for all the fervor of the marches and rallies shown in the news, most people do not hold uniformly Red or Blue views on issues.

According to a 2018 study, less than a third of the country has adopted one of the consistent ideological poles. The rest are mixed, and often ambivalent, confused, and discouraged. They constitute an “exhausted majority,” containing “distinct groups of people with varying degrees of political understanding and activism. But they share a sense of fatigue with our polarized national conversation, a willingness to be flexible in their political viewpoints, and a lack of voice in the national conversation.”³³

³³ (Hawkins et al. 2018, 11)

This exhausted majority is pulled in several directions. Though the postwar framework is no longer consensual and has few ardent supporters, most still feel some attraction to the welfare state and corporate capitalism, with their promise of both growth and security. But *at the same time*, they often agree with populist criticisms of political leaders and elites; and *at the same time* they agree with progressive values of self-expression and diversity.

Earlier I cited the surprisingly strong evidence that multicultural views characteristic of progressivism had become near-consensual. Trump certainly does not represent that view, yet he has succeeded because he *does* represent unusually well another equally consensual feeling: the mistrust of the leaders of our major institutions, especially the government. In 1964, less than 30% of Americans felt that government was run by a few big interests; in 2016 it was over *ninety percent*.³⁴ It is one of the most bipartisan results to be found in the survey world: *everyone* feels that government has lost touch with the people. Virtually *no one*, left or right, feels now that “the system” is working.

Trump draws heavily on that feeling. He is the true political outsider, the anti-system. He generates an intense visceral support from the roughly 30% those who strongly reject the postwar regime and its elites. But he also receives a more partial and conflicted support from the very large segment whose faith in those institutions is weak, though they may oppose many other aspects of his persona.

Aside from a small set of ideological purists on each side, the best description of most of us is that we are confused. We agree overwhelmingly that progressives have a point: we should welcome diversity – and also that populists have a point: we need to get rid of the current leadership elites. This leaves most people struggling to reconcile inconsistencies. The few who take just one of the poles disproportionately drive politics by their certainty.

Bridging the divide

In addition to the two broad agreements I have cited – support for multiculturalism and hostility to governing elites – there is one more: a general wish that the polarization would end. Over three-quarters are bothered by “politics being too divisive and there being a lack of respect for people who disagree with each other” and believe that “it is important to try to understand people we don't agree with.”³⁵

The foregoing analysis suggests that the problem has deep roots, growing for more than half a century, and branches spreading throughout the Western democracies. It does not point to a particular culprit that can be easily tackled. Rather, it points to a breakdown in the relation of people to government, which can be repaired – if at all – only through a long, sustained, and multi-pronged effort.

³⁴ Through 2012 these surveys were administered by the American National Elections Survey. The 2016 iteration asked the same question but was administered by a different group (Kull 2016)). The last ANES data point was in 2012 – over 75%.

³⁵ Data from my own national surveys in 2014 and 2018.

Society will not heal without improved relations across civil society. We need to manage high diversity while simultaneously maintaining the trust necessary to deal with complex issues. As we have seen over the last few decades, this cannot be accomplished through electoral battles. Pursuit of merely *political* solutions – trying to win majorities and offices in the voting process – does nothing to address the gaps. If the Democrats win, the Republican activists will only get angrier – and vice-versa. The underlying dynamics sketched above will only continue to worsen.

Despite appearances, the problem is not primarily disagreement about particular issues. There are of course many differences, but even on the most politically polarized issues there is much mixing and overlap in the public at large. On guns, for example, large majorities of Republicans as well as Democrats agree on the need for background checks at gun shows and private sales; and smaller majorities of Republicans join the overwhelming majority of Democrats on banning high-capacity magazines.³⁶ Those policies would make a significant difference, but we can't get there because we don't trust each other. When it gets turned into *politics*, people have to pick a side – and they pick the side they trust more. The gun owners feel Democrats don't understand them or know anything about guns – so they take the NRA's word over the Democrats' experts. Democrats on the whole know very little about guns – fewer than 20% own one; they hate the NRA, though, so they know what to oppose.

Climate change is similar. Only 12% maintain that there's no problem: almost two-thirds believe some action should be taken on it, and another quarter say they don't know enough.³⁷ There is very wide support across the spectrum for encouragement of renewable energy, and majority support among Republicans as well as Democrats for greenhouse gas regulation and fuel-efficiency standards for cars.³⁸ But again, we can't get there because of the gulf in relations: Republicans, especially rural voters, feel that proposals coming from Democrats necessarily fail to understand their concerns and so can't be trusted, and everyone fears that government involvement would be misdirected.

An age of high diversity and interdependence creates new challenges for trust. We can't rely, as we have for most of human history, on assumptions of shared traditions and culture. We have to build trust deliberately through some form of public conversation – by *talking through* differences and building relationships.

But is this practical?

Many are trying. The Bridge Alliance lists, as of mid-2019, 27 member organizations with a specific mission of bridging the political divide, most national in scope.³⁹ For example, Better Angels conducts workshops – spreading quite rapidly across the

³⁶ (Pew Research Center for the People and the Press 2018)

³⁷ NBC News survey, Sept 14-18, 2017.

³⁸ (Mayer, Adair, and Pfaff 2013)

³⁹ https://www.bridgealliance.us/our_members_bridging_ideological_divides - retrieved July 9, 2019.

country – in which equal numbers of “Reds” and “Blues” exchange views of each other and probe for deeper understanding of how they view the world. Living Room Conversations, the Village Square, and the National Institute for Civil Discourse, and many others have demonstrated activity and effectiveness. As far as I can tell, this spread of deliberate bridging is virtually unprecedented: it was virtually unheard of through most of human history, and the practice has accelerated only in the past decade.

On the other hand, these efforts are also, for now, very fragile and uncertain. While they often succeed in building some sense of connection among participants within the dialogue, they don’t have effective strategies for building from there. They have certainly not made much of a dent on the overall political climate. And they are all very incomplete, each making use of only pieces of the available knowledge about how to build bridging conversations.

There is now a very large academic literature on public dialogue, ranging from deep philosophical works to experimental social psychology and historical cases. There is also a set of practices and techniques that have largely been invented in the last fifty years.⁴⁰ Techniques of process management, scenario-building, active listening, peer feedback, perspective-taking, reframing, and many others have been developed only since the 1960s, and have spread widely through corporations and other organizations. Some have penetrated civil society through best-selling self-help books and “Anonymous” groups. There is already a record of many community dialogues that have used these techniques

Distilling from that enormous array, three key types of discussion must be combined to build a sense of trust and open exchange across wide differences in views. For each of these, a large set of techniques and tools is already available to facilitate discussion.

- **Understanding:** placing oneself in others’ shoes, expressing one’s views in a way that they can identify with – without denying the differences. It includes both emotion and rationality. Such dialogues explore where people are “coming from”: their valued traditions and experiences. They do not seek *agreement*: one can continue to disagree with others yet increase one’s understanding of their perspective.
- **Visioning:** building a shared image of a desirable future – where we’re “going to” – in which all participants can see themselves. Whereas understanding preserves differences, visioning is unifying: ideally, everyone should be committed to common purposes, while maintaining distinct identities.
- **Collaboration:** working together to solve problems, moving towards a shared purpose. This where talk turns to action: it often helps move a conversation beyond platitudes. It does not need to be long-term or grandiose. The Anglican

⁴⁰ Google ngram of references to “public dialogue” in books takes off from near-zero in the late 1950s: see <http://bit.ly/2E5tPM9>

term “walking together” is appropriate: participants can take a step or two in the same direction, without committing to a long journey.

My suggestion is that over time, a network of civil society organizations with membership across the political spectrum could be developed to improve citizen capacity in these three areas. Groups like Better Angels and others have already established the foundations. They have started with a focus on improved understanding; in time they could engage in collaborative search for agreements on public policy at local and even national levels. Broadly-based citizen groups could develop legislative proposals with general support; they might displace special interests, single-interest groups, and professionalized associations that push their narrow views onto an overwhelmed legislature. In the long run, this could connect civil society and government in a new way: not just through parties and votes, but through continuous exchanges that would engage citizens much more widely than at present.

This suggestion has some affinity with notions of “deliberative democracy”.⁴¹ But unlike many of those, it is not a very optimistic view for the short- to medium run. We know that broad-based community deliberation *can* sometimes work – there has already been enough success for that; but we also know that it is difficult and time-consuming and often fails.⁴² It seems unlikely that it can spread quickly to a larger scale.

A story (surely apocryphal) tells of Voltaire in his old age seeking to plant an allée of oak trees in front of his house. Informed they would take a century to achieve the height he wanted, he replied: “Then we’d better start immediately!”

The coming decades are likely to continue to be full of strife and anger. But through continued efforts to talk across the divide and to build understandings, civil society groups incorporating wide diversities of views could in time become a regular part of the political process. For all the difficulties, this seems the only path to repairing civil society and restoring its support for government.

⁴¹ See, for instance, (Elster 1998; Mansbridge et al. 2012)

⁴² This statement is pieced together from many partial assessments and experiences. See, eg, (Helling and Thomas 2002; Heckscher et al. 2003)

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