

Everyday Ethics

Radio Commentary on KUFM
Montana Public Radio



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Problems of Polarization

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The sharply contrasting red and blue maps of the United States have become a popular symbol of a polarized America: a country in the midst of a cold “culture war,” where its citizens are divided by values. However, after last week’s elections, many commentators noted that the political map of the United States took on shades of purple—particularly Montana. Governor Brian Schweitzer remarked that Montanans are independently-minded people who sometimes go left and sometimes go right. If this upsurge of independent thinking is a trend for both Montana and the nation as a whole, then I think it is a positive one.

Montana may be a genuinely purple state, but I wonder if it’s premature to retire those popular red and blue maps of the Union. Can we conclude that America is now less polarized? Probably not yet, because the factors driving people towards political extremes are still there. And as I will briefly discuss later, growing factors that reinforce this polarization include developments in communication technology.

When I was in graduate school, a fellow student publicly declared that he could not be a friend with a Republican. Given he was a philosophy student pursuing the Socratic ideals open discussion and rational exchange, his declaration seemed ironic. After all, the great Socrates would eat, drink and examine beliefs with any Athenian who was willing—even if in the end it cost him his life.

It is unhealthy and possibly dangerous for a democracy when its citizens fragment into enclaves and refuse to listen to others with opposing views. Granted, there are times when discussion should stop and the hand of friendship withdrawn, but these times should be rare, not the norm.

The reason why fragmentation into likeminded groups is unhealthy can be partially explained by the phenomenon of “group polarization.” People get together in many different kinds of deliberative groups, for instance through church or various clubs and political organizations. Social scientists have observed that when these groups consist of only likeminded individuals, people’s views become more extreme. For example, if a group of individuals who oppose the Iraq war gather to discuss their opposition, over time their position will substantially change. Their opposition to the war will grow stronger and more extreme. This phenomenon is independent of whether people are on the left or the right. If a group of individuals who support the war gather to discuss their views, their position will migrate to that extreme. The tendency to move toward the poles is most common whenever such a group is closed to opposing views. Conversely,

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if people holding a range of positions gather to discuss their views, polarization is less likely. For instance, if the group consists of some who oppose the war and others who support it, the shift to extremes probably won't happen.

This does not mean that complacent compromise should prevail and that everyone ought to meet in the moderate middle. That would be equally unhealthy for our democracy. It's important to keep in mind that extremism can be justified. As Martin Luther King noted, "Jesus Christ was an extremist for love, truth and goodness, and thereby rose above his environment." And Barry Goldwater famously remarked that, "Extremism in defense of liberty is no vice." However, it does mean that listening to opposing views has a moderating effect and keeps one from drifting unintelligently into radical positions.

Several reasons have been offered to explain why polarization happens. One is that closed groups develop a sense of solidarity and begin to divide the world into "us" and "them," "insiders" and "outsiders," "true believers" and "apostates." Another is that people in closed groups are exposed to a limited set of arguments. This narrow perspective leads them to become unduly confident in their own righteousness. And most troubling is the tendency for members of a closed group to adopt the most extreme position voiced. This means that loud-mouthed demagogues sometimes have too much influence. These blowhards bring to mind a quote from Job, "No doubt you are the people and wisdom will die with you."¹ Clearly, it's not a good idea to exclusively spend time with likeminded people and only listen to arguments that reinforce your views.

As I mentioned earlier, some growing factors that could reinforce polarization are developing trends in communication technologies, such as cable television, Internet blogs, podcasting, and the like. These seemingly limitless choices can actually reinforce group polarization. "People are hearing more and louder versions of their own preexisting commitments."² These new technological developments are making it possible to consistently filter out troubling opposing positions and "disfavored voices."

Discussions with friends who hold similar opinions is easy and comforting, while engaging in friendly exchanges with people with opposing views is often difficult and uncomfortable. But Governor Schweitzer's characterization of independently-minded people can't be taken for granted. Independently-minded people don't shrink from the discomfort of giving a friendly hearing to views that are not their own, and are better off for it.

¹ JOB 12:2.

² Cass R. Sunstein. "The Law of Group Polarization." *The Journal of Political Philosophy*, 10:2 (2002) 175-195.