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Is Canada Broken?

The country seems more polarized than ever. Here's what that means for the next election

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In May, with Brexit chaos and contentious EU elections in the air, more than 5,000 Europeans joined a novel social experiment. In cafés and parks in Poland and Italy, in Belgium and Denmark, they sat down to talk, one on one, with strangers from another country who held opposite views on a slew of divisive issues: Are there too many immigrants? Should Europeans pay higher gas taxes to address climate change? Is the EU good for Europe? This wasn't debate club or a performative exercise; the aim was simply to have a difficult conversation, to share one's experience and listen, for a while, to someone else's.

Europe Talks was a partnership between seventeen European media organizations, including the website *Zeit Online*, which launched the project in 2017 with 600 such conversations in Germany. A UK version followed, billed by its unlikely cosponsor, the *Mirror*, as an effort to “bring the nation back together over a nice cup of tea.” In one rather stiff exchange in Yorkshire, captured on video by the *Mirror*, a third-generation lobster fisherman and a Syrian refugee turned cheesemaker talk about why he voted for Brexit and why she migrated; there's a moment where he murmurs that she's “more Yorkshire” than some people who were “born and bred here.”

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People sitting down to talk—it sounds almost revolutionary, a burst of optimism in a world buffeted with daily evidence of how terrible we all are. Projects like this are an attempt to address the spectre of polarization, a problem of contemporary political life that has become too pernicious to ignore. In the Donald Trump-era United States, the realities of polarization seem writ hopelessly large. The Pew Research Center, in a massive 2014 study of American political opinion, found a marked increase in partisan antipathy, and the idea that the other side represents not only an opposing point of view but an actual threat to the nation. Another Pew survey, updated in 2012, reported that the partisan gap on some forty political questions, on topics ranging from immigration policy to the environment, had nearly doubled. The semiotics of American activism capture the mood—red MAGA hats on one side, those red *Handmaid's Tale* habits on the other, two sides of a coin, never to meet.

Across the Atlantic, a polarized Europe sounds louder alarms: yellow vests in progressive France, a nationalist government in Hungary that has political control over more than 400 of the country's media outlets, the rising far-right Alternative for Germany party, a Poland that is divided over "LGBTQ-free zones" and has passed laws curtailing free speech and discussion of the Holocaust. In Gdansk and Budapest and Birmingham, friends and neighbours stare one another down wordlessly across ideological chasms. Europe's cities, London-based Russian writer Peter Pomerantsev wrote recently in *Granta*, have become places "where people can't talk to each other any more without spitting."

It's all a little troubling, and fears tend to be contagious. So it is no surprise that, in Canada, talk of polarization is in the air. A recent Abacus survey found one in four Canadians "hate" their political opponents. "People are . . . absolutely convinced that they're right and everybody else is absolutely wrong. . . . The middle is the scariest place to be in Canadian politics," the *Star's* Susan Delacourt said recently on CBC Radio, following heated exchanges in Parliament over pipelines. Hate is a national crisis, social entrepreneurs Craig and Marc Kielburger declared in an op-ed for the *London Free Press*. And Twitter is awash in cautions about a white-nationalism pandemic, which are countered with xenophobic vitriol, which is to say Twitter continues to exist. Populism is coming, the racists are here, polarization is growing—and that's to say nothing of the fevered warning of imminent violence issued last winter by Michael Wernick, Canada's top bureaucrat at the time.

It can happen here, a chorus of voices seems to be saying, defying a well-loved narrative of Canadian exceptionalism. The new mantra chafes against our national brand of diversity, tolerance, a "postnational" cosmopolitanism, while also vexing our old national brand of genial politeness. It challenges a widely held belief that Canada's broad progressive consensus and its pluralism will inoculate us from a global trend of divisive politics. The idea that we may be vulnerable to the same troubling trends has generated much debate and some real anxiety.

But part of the challenge of responding to this shadow of discontent—particularly in a twitchy election year—is parsing the realness of some of what we observe on- and offline. Media, social or other, tend to amplify attention-getting views and, in the process, may reshape real-world opinion. So does our society simply feel more divided because there is space for voices that were always there but not heard widely in the past? Or are opinions really polarizing (that is, moving further away from the centre), is intolerance growing, and are citizens, fuelled by changes in belief or the way politics is done, drifting apart?

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 COMMON GROUND

The most amplified voices in Canada seem to lean toward the more pessimistic view. Anxieties around polarized politics touch on issues such as carbon taxes or pipelines, but they seem to centre most consistently on the menace of xenophobia and the backlash against pluralism—that profound challenge to our national narrative that is surely influenced by the racially charged dramas unspooling south of the border: Trump vs. migrants, Trump vs. Muslims, Trump vs. nonwhite members of Congress.

There are worrying signs: the Quebec law banning civil servants from wearing religious symbols at work, which Premier François Legault said could have gone even further and catered to “people who are a little bit racist,” but didn’t; the emergence of Maxime Bernier’s People’s Party of Canada, which has lost supporters over concerns it is courting bigots. A polarization of discourse seems to be supported by data showing some real, deepening animosities. A 2016 study for the federal government reported that there are 100 or so known white-supremacist and neo-Nazi groups in Canada. Reported hate crimes rose from 1,295 five years ago to 1,798 last year, with a sharp spike in 2017; last year, the great majority (1,419), according to police reports, were motivated by religion or race. And, though many leaders have condemned extremism, elected representatives and candidates with racist or white-supremacist views have tried to find their way into political parties, notably Alberta’s United Conservatives.

But just how widespread is this xenophobia? A relatively encouraging picture emerges from longitudinal studies by nonprofit research groups or universities. A 2018 global study from the Pew Research Center found 74 percent of Canadians support taking in refugees—a result that seems to fit with the stories of Canadians who banded together in 2015 and 2016 to sponsor Syrian refugee families. An international Pew study from earlier this year found that 68 percent of Canadians—higher than any other population surveyed—say immigrants make the country stronger with their contributions. And on surveys such as the Canadian Election Study, a university research project carried out in nearly every election year since 1965, support for immigration has *risen*, if only modestly.

Here’s another promising view: roughly 80 percent of immigrants to Canada since the 1980s have been visible minorities. Some struggle to integrate economically or socially due to racism or structural inequities. But it would seem Canada is generally a good model for psychologist Gordon Allport’s contact hypothesis, the idea that greater intergroup contact (under certain conditions) lessens prejudice and promotes understanding. Mixed marriages or unions have been rising gradually, particularly among those forty-five and younger, and immigrants continue to better integrate into the economy. Since 2014, the proportion of employed immigrants who have lived in Canada for a period of five to ten years has surpassed the proportion of employed Canadian-born people. This doesn’t cover underemployment, and the Canadian-born population fares better in key age groups, but considering the pace of demographic change, things have gone pretty smoothly—though both racists and antiracist activists may dispute this.

An astonishing array of recent surveys by polling companies insists on telling us otherwise. In an Ekos poll last spring, 40 percent said too many visible minority immigrants are coming into Canada. In a CBC News poll released in July, only 24 percent of respondents complained of “too many” visible minorities—but 57 percent said Canada should stop taking in refugees altogether. “Canadians are divided on immigration,” stated one CBC News story, as if it should be surprising that a country this size holds more than one opinion on a major policy question. Indeed, in the same survey, 76 percent of people said Canada should do more to encourage skilled labourers to immigrate—not resounding empathy for the plight of

refugees but also not a signal of resistance to immigration.

Much of the poll data is more complicated than headlines suggest. The proportion of visible minorities in the Ekos poll who said “too many” minorities exceeded the share of white Canadians who said the same, as journalist Terry Glavin pointed out. And in a Pollara/CityNews poll of attitudes toward different groups, including people of other races or sexual orientations, the view that one’s own group is superior to others was most prevalent among visible minorities—nonwhite supremacy, if one is permitted a joke. The point is that people, wherever they are from, sometimes have prejudices about other people, and a pluralistic democracy navigating rapid demographic shifts may run into them from time to time.

“Public opinion consists of what public opinion polls poll,” the American sociologist Herbert Blumer wrote drily in the middle of the last century. What polls about immigration policy tell us most of all is that pollsters and their media partners and clients are interested in views on immigration policy. They insinuate, but don’t show, that immigration policy is an issue of great concern for Canadians, and they don’t appear to show with much consistency what our views are.

But narratives of division can be politically expedient for both sides. Maxime Bernier promised to shut down corporate welfare and supply side management but has since zeroed in on “extreme multiculturalism” and “Canadian values,” presumably as a way of attracting voters who find the Conservatives too culturally progressive. Meanwhile, liberal pundits and several government officials have flogged a crisis of “white supremacism.” (This seems to be the preferred term in Liberal messaging, versus the less charged “racism,” as John Geddes and Jason Markusoff noted in *Maclean’s*.) Prime Minister Justin Trudeau’s strikes against white supremacism—though undeniably useful as a signal of what Canada won’t tolerate—have conveniently incorporated jabs at Conservative leader Andrew Scheer. Indeed, opposition to white supremacism has become part of Liberal branding, amplified in the wake of the SNC-Lavalin scandal, in a way that serves the party but doesn’t in itself help solve any increase in white supremacism.

The rhetoric of division belies the fact that on the policy front, even with election campaigns in full swing, there are few signs of a sudden yawning chasm at the centre. The Liberals have taken a page from the NDP’s playbook on their proposed plastics ban and from the Conservatives’ on pipeline building and so-called asylum shopping. The Conservatives, for their part, have finally presented a plan for climate change, albeit one so vague as to be meaningless and not remotely enough to address what, by most scientific measures, qualifies as a bona fide crisis. The party’s commitment to address climate change in theory but not practice seems in step with the mainstream: Canadians, notorious energy hogs, seem loath to make sacrifices—by paying a tax, driving less, or turning off the air conditioning—for the admittedly modest reductions that citizen action effects. As for our growing far right, a group of white nationalists attempted to form a political party last year, the Canadian Nationalist Party, but it appears they couldn’t gather the 250 signatures needed. They are trying again this year.

There are real differences between the major parties, but much of what’s happening in Canada doesn’t look like American-style polarization; it looks mostly like a battle for the middle. Which makes sense: in a high-stakes race, neither the Conservatives nor the Liberals can afford to stray too far from the reasonable centre. The Conservatives seem afraid to alienate more reactionary elements in their base, thus their early flirtations with the populist right: Scheer’s appearance at a United We Roll rally, that Conservative ad about asylum seeking that featured an ominous image of a black man approaching an opening in a fence. But these backfired, and the party has seemed to tweak its message since then. Scheer ended a May speech about any hints of intolerance in his party with Trudeauian flair: “There’s the door,” he orated. And he has come out (quietly, much like the PM) against Quebec’s secularism bill, a strategic and quite possibly sincere stance that stands in contrast to the agitations about “barbaric cultural practices” that animated the last federal election.

ALL THIS DOESN’T mean politics isn’t polarizing in Canada. It is and has been for a few decades, says Richard Johnston, Canada Research Chair in public opinion, elections, and representation at the University of British Columbia. An authority on political behaviour and practices, Johnston has documented a general shift to the right in Canada, beginning in the 1970s, as the Progressive Conservatives began to lean more and more that way, and continuing on to the early 2000s with the consolidation of the Reform, Alliance, and Progressive Conservative parties. The Liberal Party, by staying where it was, has effectively moved closer to the NDP and further away from the Conservatives. There is a

gradual widening of the gap—though, in a sense, Canada has long been more polarized than the US simply by virtue of having the **NDP**, a party that is more of a true left-wing alternative than the Democrats ever have been.

The polarization that is growing here, then, comes from partisan identification rather than a groundswell of climate-change denial or anti-immigrant sentiment or any organic shifts in voter ideology. “The commentariat is correct to pick up tensions,” says Johnston. “But to put it in terms of a rising tide of populism doesn’t get it right at all.” The real change is that the parties have forged more distinct paths, and voters have followed. “Thirty years ago, there were culturally conservative New Democrats who could find the Conservatives a more congenial alternative than the Liberals,” he notes. Now those who self-identify as Liberal are unlikely to vote Conservative, and the converse is as true. Liberals and New Democrats report cooler feelings about the Conservatives, Johnston said in a recent paper delivered at an academic conference, and Conservatives went “from being almost indulgent toward the Liberal Party to disliking it as much as they do the **NDP**.”

Political scientists call this partisan sorting, and it’s distinct from any trend of voters’ ideological positions veering away from the centre. Both phenomena have received little attention in Canada but are the focus of robust research in the United States, which is worth looking at because it may be a sign of things to come here. In the US, too, partisan differences are a surprisingly recent phenomenon. Most Americans in the 1950s couldn’t tell the basics of one party’s politics from the other. In fact, a 1950 report prepared for the US government urged parties to differentiate further to keep democracy healthy. Through the 1960s and ’70s, both Republicans and Democrats were advocates for gun-control laws, Jill Lepore writes in her history of the United States, *These Truths*, published in 2018. Until the late 1980s, she adds, Republicans generally supported the right to an abortion—as did churches and Richard Nixon.

What helped usher in a new era, in Lepore’s view, was the advent of analytics and strategists. In the 1960s, John F. Kennedy’s presidential campaign team, early adopters of the new methods, sorted voters into 480 categories and grouped issues into fifty-two clusters—to obvious success. The approach reached Machiavellian heights in the 1970s in the hands of former Republican strategist Phyllis Schlafly, who was the first to fuse abortion and feminism into a new ideology for conservatives to oppose. “Making social issues into partisan issues took a great deal of work,” Lepore writes. The payoff was indisputable: it won votes and loyalty. American voters have increasingly aligned themselves by party ever since.

What’s clear is that not all Americans have polarized to the same degree. Data from some long-running surveys reveals that US voter opinion on topics such as public health care and defence spending generally did not change from the Jimmy Carter era to 2012, Stanford University’s Morris Fiorina wrote in 2016. But views within Congress and among donors and party organizers did. Fiorina argues that it is in fact political elites, rather than voters, who have polarized. And he doesn’t think the 2016 election altered much—“it has been overinterpreted,” he says.

At the very least, there seems to be a gap between ideological elites and voters—the people that a 2018 Hidden Tribes of America study calls “the exhausted majority.” That may explain the screeching of lawmakers in Alabama or Missouri, even as American opinion on abortion has remained consistent over two decades of polling. Fifty-eight percent of voters still support a right to abortion under most or all circumstances, Pew research shows. Similarly, two-thirds of Americans support moderate to strong gun-control laws, according to a recent Ipsos poll of 6,800 adults, though only a quarter think lawmakers will do anything about it. In America’s more polarized districts, the reasonable middle may be especially exhausted; politicians in those areas, a study found, are least likely to represent median voters’ positions.

But there’s perhaps another gap at play: between voters’ heads and hearts. Polarization is more often a politics of feeling than of fact, and the lack of an ideological basis doesn’t make polarization any less real; it just suggests voters are driven less by the issues than they are by loyalty to their parties and acrimony toward others’—hardly a cheering trend. The elites may have polarized faster, and more substantively, but electorates are following.

Experts are divided on whether this sorting leads to polarization of opinion—and also on what does. Some have persuasively tied polarization to income inequality and the consumption of more partisan media. Several, including the political scientist Alan Abramowitz, author of *The Great Alignment: Race, Party Transformation, and the Rise of Donald Trump*, also argue that polarization reflects a resentment in some quarters about societies becoming more pluralized and inclusive. The decline of local, pragmatic politics across North America, which tends to be characterized by compromise, and the rise of national, ideologically driven politics has certainly exacerbated the trend: outcomes of local American elections now reliably line up with those of national elections—districts vote consistently along party lines in both.

Partisan loyalties seem to make both elites and voters vulnerable to misperceptions. A 2018 study intriguingly titled “The Parties in Our Heads,” published in *The Journal of Politics*, suggests that Americans may have overcorrected from the 1950s. They now have an absurdly distorted sense of their parties: those polled believed 32 percent of Democrats are gay, lesbian, or bisexual (versus the 6 percent who report they are). And they estimated that 38 percent of Republicans make more than \$250,000 a year (only 2 percent of Republicans earn that much). This isn’t a matter of political literacy; the people most likely to get it wrong were the ones who paid most attention to political media. Partisan hostility is now stronger than racial bias in the US, Stanford researcher Shanto Iyengar found in 2014. That rings true in Canada, where many people seem to reserve their greatest intolerance for people with the “wrong” political beliefs rather than for any cultural or ethnic group—progress on racism but not good news for politics.

Any gap between elites and garden-variety voters does not appear to be uniquely American. Morris Fiorina, earlier this year, found general agreement among academics in Chile that the country’s parties had polarized. “Yet the surveys they run out of their university said the voters hadn’t changed,” he says. “It’s the same situation as the US. So I don’t think this is a process we understand.” In Canada, too, partisan sorting seems to be more organizational than ideological: conservative voters are not actually becoming more conservative; more of them are just identifying as Conservative. To borrow from Jerry Seinfeld’s joke about the illogic of sports fandom: same people, different shirts, boo! In politics as in baseball, this is not a matter of mere semantics. It may not matter that partisan animosity is not matched by actual deep differences. As the American political scientist Lilliana Mason wrote, “A nation that agrees on many things [can be] bitterly divided nonetheless.”

In other words, the story that we are more divided—rather than the actual multiplication or intensification of divisions—is actually making us more divided.

Polarization at its essence is not so much two sides having less and less in common as it is two sides *thinking* they have less and less in common. The storyline matters. There is an unexpected lesson here from the world of marriage psychology and counselling; in a 2008 study of “relationship stories,” a group of academics discovered a surprising indicator of health in a relationship: how the two people describe the way they met. The story of that first meeting, the usual stuff of rom coms, was, in a sense, the deeper story of the relationship; those who might describe it with a shared sense of humour, for example, or fondness, or wonder, or harmony, had a better chance of a healthy relationship than those with a more negative or divided story.

The details of a political narrative are obviously different, as are the challenges. National narratives that paper over difficult histories and inequities in favour of a happy story can, without looking polarized, create or extend enduring injustices and problems of their own. But it is also risky to make those inequities and divisions the only narrative.

THE STORY of a divided Canada is, nevertheless, an oft repeated one these days. “We are now looking at perhaps what will be the most divisive and negative and nasty political campaign in Canada’s history,” Trudeau said at a Liberal fundraiser last fall. Scheer, in turn, described his chief rival as the most divisive prime minister in Canadian history. July’s bun fight about Canada’s Food Guide was thus both a reassuring sign of the health of Canadian politics (nothing to fight about but milk!) and a troublesome symptom (we’ll fight about anything). Another troublesome symptom: Alberta premier

Jason Kenney handing out earplugs to his MLAs during a debate on a collective-bargaining bill; the other side doesn't even get a hearing. And, speaking of populist smoke signals, in an analysis of Hansard, the Canadian parliamentary record, presented in the Samara Centre for Democracy's biennial Democracy 360 study, the percentage of sitting days in which an MP complained about "elites" rose from zero in 2008 to 13 percent by 2015—and has remained there ever since.

Voters, it's worth noting, don't seem beset with elitism fatigue. Populism and polarization are often spoken of in the same breath, but the former seems a chimera in Canada. There are few signs of mass disenchantment with politics or civil institutions: We score well on the Edelman Trust Barometer, an eighteen-year global study of citizen faith in governments and civil institutions. And three-quarters of Canadians polled by Samara said they are satisfied with the way democracy works in Canada.

Polarization panic notwithstanding, Canada, so far, isn't the United States or Europe. Even Europe isn't exactly Europe—that is, it isn't one monolithic bloc of voters. The anti-immigrant, far-right Alternative for Germany is on the rise mainly in economically depressed former East Germany, which is struggling with low wages, an aging population, and impoverished, abandoned cities. (One dwindling village of about fifteen people was recently sold at auction to a buyer for a trifling 140,000 euros.)

A few factors have constrained polarization in Canada. Immigration is actually one of the biggest, notes UBC's Richard Johnston. Some 20 percent of Canadians are foreign born, and immigrants typically become Canadian citizens within five years. Many of them (by whom I mean us) vote—and thus represent a bloc that is sizeable and not to be ignored by any party. Accusations that the Conservatives are courting xenophobes may underestimate the substantial political influence of new Canadians—some of whom wholeheartedly embrace conservative ideas. Illegal border crossing, for instance, a dog-whistle issue in the current Canadian election campaign, has been viewed by progressives as a racist preoccupation, but Johnston notes it is also frowned upon by some immigrants who perceive it as queue jumping. The presence of immigrants, with all the nuance they add to the political landscape, helps keep our bubbles porous.

The news media, too, have inoculated Canada from more extreme polarization. In the United States, the explosion of cable news, in particular, created a demand for constant content and the ideological silos we are all stuck with today. Canadians can thank the absence of our own homegrown version of Fox News or Sean Hannity—and, presumably, strict CRTC cable-licensing rules—for sidestepping some of those trends. We now have the far-right Rebel Media, and the Post Millennial, whose chief marketing officer, Jeff Ballingall, started Ontario Proud, the Facebook group that helped topple Kathleen Wynne and elect Doug Ford—and now, as Canada Proud, has its sights on Trudeau. But, as deeply partisan organs more interested in activism than journalism, they remain modest in reach.

Much discussion of polarization centres on social media's pernicious effects—ideological bubbles, confirmation bias, the flourishing of hate—but their influences can be overstated. These platforms do drive divisions, as seen in the well-documented echo chambers of Facebook, the riggable engines of WhatsApp and Twitter, the upvoted stories dreamed up in Macedonian content shops, or the sneering posts by bots (and their human cousins). Even real content online, contributed or posted by sincere people on both left and right, is heavily torqued—often unwittingly so. A quarter of Americans who said that they share social-media posts about politics have significantly more distorted views of the other side's views than the population at large, according to the recent "Perception Gap" study, part of the Hidden Tribes project. A lot of political content on social media, then, comes from an extreme perspective, which further drives divisions: studies show that following Twitter feeds of people from the other side of the political aisle, rather than increasing tolerance, in fact maintains or even entrenches existing beliefs. It all confounds our best instincts about how to break down barriers. If more exposure to our own side hardens our beliefs and more exposure to the other side does the same, what's the answer?

Well, a heartening fact is that the segment that shows the most polarization in America—the same is likely true in Canada—is the group aged sixty-five and up, which is the least engaged on social media and also the most likely to vote. That is to say there are other levers besides social media, with all its logistical, political, and regulatory dilemmas, with which to effect change.

One answer for reducing polarization might be traditional media—but the decline of traditional print media is affecting the quality of the conversation. Take the explosion of opinion journalism in both new and legacy media, a result of changing business realities as well as social media’s influence. Reported news has the potential to ground divisive questions in facts and data and human stories and to trigger real policy change. It also has the capacity to be less inflammatory. (In the Perception Gap study, those who got their information from sources such as ABC or CBS had a far lower “perception gap” from reality than those who consumed the more opinion-driven Fox News or *Huffington Post*.) But it is faster and cheaper to run a short piece of commentary. In a digital-publishing environment in which remuneration is tied to audience size, a provocative column or op-ed can also yield dividends in page views and social-media traffic—sustenance for news media in a world where content, unlike small-batch ice cream or the iPhone X, “wants to be free.” Local news has been hit particularly hard, with real consequences. “All Politics Is National Because All Media Is National,” reads the headline of an article Dan Hopkins wrote on the political-analysis site FiveThirtyEight. The lack of coverage of local issues has a direct electoral effect. Communities that have lost their local newspapers, a 2018 study in the *Journal of Communication* found, see an uptick in polarized voting.

An effective counter to polarization might be a robust media that runs more reported journalism, shines more light on vital local issues, and is less focused on chasing fickle online readers. We all bear some responsibility for the reality that we have instead—the media companies that perhaps did not adapt quickly enough to the digital marketplace or don’t innovate enough and the readers who have been more willing to take what we get online than to pay for what we might actually want. But some recent experiments suggest a more hopeful path: a cluster of enterprising media startups focused on quality journalism, the sheer staying power of a global web of fact-checking projects launched by media companies, universities, and nonprofits over the past five years. There is clearly a will to reverse a trend of polarizing misinformation and an audience interested in the results. (One senior politician in Argentina recently apologized for sharing a story that was corrected by that country’s fact-checking unit.) In another sign, the UK’s *Guardian* newspaper announced an operating profit this year and its highest revenues in a decade—all on the strength of good journalism and an engaged audience. The problems of polarization are supersized, some of the solutions available to voters oddly simple: pay for better journalism, spend a little less time on social media.

AS CITIZENS, we face a couple of conundrums. What partisans gain from a polarizing politics is clear, but why have electorates been led so easily? Is it in part a psychological response to an increasingly complex world? Are we buckling under the pace of sheer civilizational change by reverting to an atavistic politics that feels safe in a world of remote, supranational structures?

The rate of technological, social, and cultural change that today’s humans see in a single generation might seem incomprehensible to our prehistoric kin or even to people who lived 400 or 500 years ago. Shifts in family and work and community life in North America in the past few decades alone have brought a social isolation and sense of disengagement Robert Putnam outlined in 2000’s *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*. Those voids are filled easily—and exploited just as easily—with factional political loyalties.

On a more practical level, even if we realize how poorly served we are by divisive politicians or a polarizing media, what is to be done about it? Trust in our institutions is a foundational piece in a functional democracy, and losing faith in media or politicians leaves us more vulnerable to populism. Not only is political polarization a fiend of a problem to solve, it is difficult to fully comprehend. This country has had a single party, the Liberals, govern for nearly seventy of the past 100 years. The political scientist Lydia Miljan, a senior fellow of the Fraser Institute, once described Canada, tongue approaching cheek, as “a one-party state . . . periodically subverted by short-lived Conservative insurgencies.” That’s an unusual political reality, to say the least, and not necessarily a good one. In a similar vein, not all Western societies have moved inexorably toward polarization. In fact, the UK, Germany, and other parts of Europe currently seeing a surge on the right were, until at least a decade ago, *depolarizing*. “Those insurgents are coming into a vacuum created by the depolarization of the major parties,” says Richard Johnston, the UBC political scientist. In other words, as the major

parties became more like each other, they left space on the margins that is now being exploited by players such as the Alternative for Germany.

It's a sprawling problem of many chickens and many eggs, and some researchers are turning to an emerging discipline to understand it. Complexity scholars study self-organizing, self-sustaining systems with many interacting components—living cells, hospitals, underwater ecosystems. Unlike the “eusocial societies” of bees and termites, as one paper in the *European Journal of Physics* put it, human social systems are not well understood. A great number all over the world are now plagued by the kinds of obstinate conflicts that diplomats and mediators and accomplished politicians have not been able to solve. And so sociologists and political scientists are partnering with philosophers and scientists who typically publish papers with titles such as “Haematopoietic Stem Cells—Entropic Landscapes of Differentiation” or “Three Dimensional Ball and Chain Problem by the Hyperbolic Random Walk” to try to understand these phenomena.

Complex and highly dynamic, the political puzzles being studied today resemble clouds more than clocks, suggests Peter T. Coleman, director of the Morton Deutsch International Center for Cooperation and Conflict Resolution at Columbia University and the head of the school's Difficult Conversations Laboratory. The clock/cloud comparison is an idea from philosopher Karl Popper; the point is that these problems are less likely to be understood or fixed by being taken apart than by being viewed as a whole. Humans are trained to simplify the problems, to zero in on a single factor—traumatic legacy, economics—that can be addressed by a single set of solutions. In fact, Coleman argues, focusing on complexity is crucial to understanding problems. Coleman has collaborated for years with an interdisciplinary group that includes an astrophysicist, an anthropologist, and a social psychologist to understand the patterns of intractable situations. The Difficult Conversations Lab began as a means to gather data: researchers have hosted and observed hundreds of conversations on divisive topics hoping to identify the conditions in which more productive ones happen.

Complexity, it turns out, is also part of the solution. When participants were given a thoughtful, multifaceted article on a topic to read before they spoke, they had a more productive conversation, and when they read an oversimplified piece, highlighting polarized views, the conversation was more heated. How an interaction is framed has a significant impact on its outcome. (Even the choice of metaphor, a 2011 study found, can influence views. Articles describing crime as a preying “beast” sparked harsher, more punitive responses from readers than those describing it as a “virus.”)

The more complexity there is in our mental frames, the more of it we are willing to tolerate in others. There's an idea in psychology called social identity complexity, Coleman explains, offering a hypothetical example: “So you say, ‘Well, I'm gay but I'm a conservative Christian, and I'm Republican but I'm really a green environmentalist.’” Someone with those kinds of overlapping group identities, Coleman says, has high internal identity complexity and is generally much more accepting of other groups than someone whose group identities are more consistent.

This complexity, happily, can be cultivated—with what we read, the mix of people in our lives, or just deliberately open-minded thinking. There is much that drives polarization that citizens cannot control: income inequality or the effects of globalization or how our electoral representatives behave. What remains in our hands is our patience for those different from us and our faith in a shared space in the middle—that endangered political ground—in which we can fight about real differences without forgoing the things that connect us.

[About Sarmishta Subramanian \(View all articles\)](#)

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