Radical Polarization and Effective Communications

By Dorian Scott Cole

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The problem

Many of us just enjoy standing at the dividing line and throwing insults at each other. It's more fun and we just don't care. Our way is right and the others are idiots and evil. If it comes to a civil war, well, it's okay if thousands are maimed, die, are mentally scarred for life, and families destroyed. It's "their" fault.

The peacemaker and communicator in me don't accept this state of affairs. My primary field is communications, and it's inherent in everything I communicate about. I work with attitude change, so I understand the difficulties well. I've found that I have to adopt the Serenity Prayer:

> "God Grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference." – Reinhold Niebuhr

Polarization is normal. We have differences of opinion, and many of us end up at polar extremities. We're always going to have differences of opinion, and we should.

What isn't so normal is radical polarization. This is the point where communication between the two extremes not only isn't possible, they are at each other's throats, refusing to communicate, refusing to work together, and trying to undo what the other has accomplished. Sometimes the next step is war.

There are solutions. In fourteen years of studying this issue, and trying to just communicate with people, I realize that we can find solutions. But the challenge is not changing other people's minds. That isn't going to happen in normal circumstances. In fact, it usually just makes things even worse.

Since 2007, after studying causes of school shootings and extremism in the Orient countries from 1996 on, I've realized that polarization is one of the biggest challenges of this century. It doesn't respond to logic and facts, and is often completely irrational.

I've found that some conservatives and liberals are the same in this respect, at the extreme edges. Maybe 20% of the population is at either extreme. I find it difficult to communicate with both.

How do we address this effectively so that we can live together peacefully and make politics work? One way is to understand the root causes, many of which have been explored. We can make intelligent decisions about how to respond and even whether to respond.

Another way is to understand ways to communicate to get things done despite the polarization obstacle. I concluded my primary study of this very recently. Easy it is not. If it was easy, people would already be doing it and professors would be teaching it. Mostly we stand in our corners with our arms crossed. It's rare that I can find anyone who even wants to know solutions. We want our own way.

We have to understand once and for all that there is no changing people's minds. Period. We have to live with that. For others we have to understand how people change their minds to communicate effectively with them. For others, we have to understand the mitigating factors that imprison people in belief systems, whether they want to be in them or not.

The causes

In researching the vote for Trump in 2016, I found there were two primary drivers. Not everyone agrees with this analysis, depending on what their favorite issue is.

The lesser of the two drivers is that people in rural areas deeply resented being told by "elites" that their beliefs were errant, and they rebelled. LBTQIA+ and abortion acceptance have been major exacerbating factors.

This rebellion has become so extreme that many reject science and fact, which they feel represents the arguments of elites, and which is less important than their faith and their preferred truth.

The primary driver of the Trump vote was economic insecurity, which drives people to become very conservative, holding on to all they can. Economic insecurity is a primary driver, while beliefs are a secondary one that involves rural cultures and identities.

Economic insecurity has also been found as a primary cause by some economists at MIT and other universities, which I studied. We support an economy that is indirectly responsible for a lot of our ills, and we are too divided to deal with this with polarizing screams of "socialism" and "Communism." Socialism doesn't work and the person who wants it is rare. Communism has adopted more capitalistic policies to survive. But that's a topic for a different time.

When people live in fear, their acceptance of anything new goes way down. But some studies have shown that when fear is removed, people's basic values are the same. This is something very important to realize. Generally our values are about the same. Where we differ is on how we get there.

We have many reasons to be fearful. Since the year 2000 we have had the Dot Com Crisis, the Great Recession, Covid recession, and many financial downturns in which people have lost their income, homes, and future. Yet during this time, corporations made record profits. Somehow preventing this from happening to prevent human suffering, just doesn't seem to be a value.

An example of fear is immigration. When people are seeing jobs leave their area, they look for something to blame. They become convinced that immigrants are taking their jobs, even though statistics say it isn't true. Higher economic factors are likely the cause.

> Briefly, *Merger Mania*, which has gone on since corporate raiders started it in the late 1970s, removes jobs from communities, shifting entire industries elsewhere. Because of stock market pressure to increase the price of stock every quarter, companies buy other companies to get their technology and market share. The old company is just a cost, so they eliminate it. And many of corporate jobs are sent to other countries. Our economy isn't viable even if companies do make record profits. And no one is hurt worse by this than people in the heartland. Conservatives.

Economic problems are going to get worse for us all because over 90% of new jobs created in the US since the Great Recession have required post-secondary education. Getting a college education is only a dream for many. Colleges have priced themselves out of reach. While a third of jobs will still not require education beyond high school, many people are going to find they can't find jobs without additional education, and can't go to cities to find jobs. There are only so many jobs that don't require more education.

In addition to the first two causes, there are these:

Another cause is the pace of change. People universally hate change (World Bank study that I can no longer find). They rebel against it. The pace of change since 1900 has been constant, accelerating, and exponential. In the US, entire areas of the country are all but destroyed by changing job and population movement. People have difficulty getting a grip on anything. But people eventually do accept change, and cross-pollination and adaptation are essential in nature survival.

A fourth cause is that worldwide, personal and cultural identity is a major driving force in what people will accept. People want to have their own identity, and feel very threatened by any attack on it. It's a principal cause of conflict.

A fifth cause is that most people don't want to be "persuaded," or argued into acceptance. They want to hear about things and then make their own decisions. This is especially true for males. Women will generally opt for the most secure position. It's a rough road when government puts a cure on people.

A sixth cause is that people in communities don't want to be at odds with their friends, neighbors, and organizations. We're seeing a lot of people who can no longer visit with their families or religious organization because their religious or political beliefs aren't the same. Differences are no longer tolerated. So an individual can lose their standing in society and family by opposing existing cherished positions, so many who would change seem to endorse what the status quo.

A seventh cause is that some people, usually those at the extremes and public figures, may feel that they can't possibly be wrong, and that changing may cause them to either be eternally condemned or lose their status and position in society.

How then do we communicate effectively with polarized people?

Understand that, "This, too, shall pass." Change occurs slowly across the age demographic. Or as some have said, it changes by death. As the older generations pass away, newer generations with different beliefs take their place. The openminded who are over 40 are not a large crowd. They have their minds set, their "hearts hardened," and will go to the grave with their beliefs no matter what.

Understand that arguing, citing "facts," and other rhetoric, generally will be met with fierce opposition, and often completely ridiculous assertions will be offered in rebuttal. This makes the polarized even more deeply entrenched, so confronting them is counter-productive.

Best advice for the radically polarized is to say nothing and walk away. You're not going to have a discussion, let alone win an argument or persuade them. Understand the things you can't change and be wise enough to know the difference.

Understand that while people representing geographical, religious, and cultural areas often speak like a solid block, they are not monolithic in their beliefs. I was reminded of this in the book, "How Change Happens" by Harvard Professor, Cass R. Sunstein. One example is people under 30 whose ideas aren't yet set and who are receptive to new ideas.

Another example of the non-monolithic is people who secretly believe the same as you, but can't speak up because of fear of losing their place in their group.

Blocks can be broken by leaders who introduce ideas and gain support, overturning the status quo.

People under 30 are generally receptive to new ideas. This is where change happens. For example, a major percentage of younger adults accept LGBTQIA+. They are monolithic in that they refuse to be part of organizations that aren't accepting.

I work with attitude change. It's a coaching technique used in religion and business to help people do what they want to do. For example, when suddenly people are asked to do sales, when that has never been part of their job, you can use a process of training and field examples and practice (that is, change in knowledge, action, emotion).

If you want to change corporate culture, it's more difficult. it takes a lot of retraining and work. Laws and rules, monitoring, reporting, and insistence help.

If you want to change what a company does, it's mission, you ask the employees for permission and involvement to get ownership. You can't make change if people don't buy into it, contribute, and take ownership.

From the world of psychology comes the important idea of "reframing." It means seeing things from another point of view or context. Sometimes it's possible to change context so that things mean something different. Or just tell how you see things. This can help the person change his perspective.

Walk a mile in someone's shoes. It definitely helps understanding. Be like them – walk with them a while. Respect other's opinions – don't attack them or call them names or labels. Accept that people change when they're ready to change, not when you are ready for them to change. Use humor to break through barriers. Don't put people on the defensive.

Focus on outcomes, not the methods. For example, often Democrats and Republicans can agree on a goal, but horribly disagree on how to achieve it. The goal is much more important than how to get there. That often can be worked out through compromise. But if the attitude is, "My way or the highway," then things have to be gotten through exchange or manipulation.

There are other relevant examples in the religious and political realms of ways people can manage to live together despite highly polarized beliefs, as described in the following.

Jesus was a master communicator

Jesus brought radical change to Judaism, while walking in a world full of mine fields. Much of it didn't stick. Many would only accept a military leader to free them from the Romans and bring back kingship. Many leaders only wanted stability, and a radical change-maker was not stability. Religious-political leaders wanted everything to stay the same. And while Jesus opposed the Sadducee leaders as hypocrites and snakes, he didn't butt heads with them.

In fact, Jesus often couched his words in ways in which they couldn't create conflict. He spoke in parables that illustrated important concepts. For example, would God turn the lost away? No, the shepherd left the flock and went after the lost sheep.

He used illustrations that were poignant and soul stirring, such as, "Who of you has no sin, cast the first stone." No one had reached perfection – they realized they were really no better than the person to be stoned.

Jesus often turned the question back to the questioner, asking them what they thought. There was nothing there for them to counter. They could just state their opinion.

Jesus demonstrated the way of love for them. It wasn't about words and arguments. It was about doing.

Jesus deconstructed the Jewish belief and helped people understand what is important. The laws were made for man, not God, and necessity made it okay to break them. He and his apostles broke them without guilt. Like Socrates, he made them think deeper. Of course, they made Socrates drink poison, and nailed Jesus to a cross. You can only push thinking deeply so far – people don't like it, especially if it challenges cherished beliefs, culture, and identity.

Preserving identity is important. Neither Jesus nor the Apostles asked the Jews to drop their religious traditions and become like others. Nor did they ask others to adopt Jewish traditions. People want to be who they are. They are best left to be who they are, and what they identify with.

Jesus went to the oppressed, the rejected, and the poor. He said to them to follow him because his way was easy. Rather than adding a burden to people about changing their religion, or working harder at their religion with its numerous daily tasks and 613 laws, he lightened their load. Sometimes we can lighten others' loads and gain their support.

The world of politics is full of examples.

The Russian idea of "Détente" lessened tensions during the Cold War and allowed much more normal contact between leaders and segments of society. "Peaceful coexistence." People agreed to disagree, but still lived peacefully with each other. Competition, not war. We have to learn to do this with radically polarized people.

The Catholic-Protestant conflict in Northern Ireland was very difficult (impossible) to resolve. They wouldn't even talk to each other. US Negotiator George Mitchell helped them make peace, and it's held.

Leon Ury, one of the most influential voices on human conflict, and Co-founder of Harvard's Program on Negotiation, introduced the very effective "Third Way" method. There aren't just two opposing sides. There is a third way.

And then there is Israel and the Arabs. Internal forces within each group won't let any viable solution take place to end their conflict. The US political divide is a lot like this.

Sometimes the only solution is to keep groups contained so they can do no harm. Comparing North Korea to North Vietnam is helpful. When the US pulled out of Vietnam and that vicious war, the country went on to become a manufacturing power as the leading Asian economy.

When the war between South and North Korea ended with an armistice, North Korea continued to be belligerent, hostile, aggressive to South Korea, and harmful. South Korea is the world's seventh largest exporter of goods, while the North Korean economy is ranked last in the Asian region.

Cuba suffers similarly because it sanctions violent political activity designed to change countries to Marxist political ideologies, in which it had a strong role in Venezuela. But Cuba does well for its citizens despite US sanctions used to contain it.

Iran similarly gets contained through sanctions because it exports terrorism and political instability in the region. Whether countries get contained or do well has everything to do with their aggressive behavior.

Containment is one way of maintaining a more peaceful world. Sometimes it's the only thing you can do with some individuals. Since WWII, most countries have been stopped in their aggression toward other countries without going to war. Unfortunately, armed intervention is one possible solution still in use.

Conflict resolution

There are many courses on conflict resolution that offer ways to resolve conflict in marriage, between people, groups, and between nations. Often there is a compromise or negotiation that works. Many times we simply aren't going to agree or get our way. But that doesn't mean that the conflict has to go unresolved so that tension, anger, and explosive situations exist. We can find ways to peacefully coexist. Conflict resolution techniques work.

Radical polarization doesn't reflect reality. We know better than to enter into another's insanity. It can only have a bad outcome. What we're seeing is irrational behavior and we're confronting it on a daily basis. If we don't understand the causes, we're only stomping out the fire, and it's only getting worse. There are definitely drivers, such as changes in educational requirements for jobs, that are going to make it worse.

Conclusion

Communicating between sides is doomed to failure, if people are radically polarized. If we stick polarizing labels on ourselves, we can't communicate. And this is what we have ingrained in us about what communication is about: Debate, winner takes all. But this doesn't mean that the world is doomed to failure.

It's more than about ourselves self-identifying through labels. In any conversation, people stick labels on you if you differ from their opinion in any way. People are that desperate to have their own way and so radically polarized they can't see straight.

I've tried to be the person in the middle many times. Inevitably if I'm to the right or left of someone, I get branded with a label.

Being in the middle, or a peacemaker, doesn't mean having no opinion. I have opinions that are hard as concrete. But they are neither left nor right. What it means is not letting your opinion stand in the way of reaching a solution. Sometimes it means offering a solution that no one had previously thought of.

I have no trouble understanding what conservatives want. They are the heartland of America, where I live. Economic and social change have moved people out, eliminated jobs, destroyed communities, and changed what they believe, since 1900. And the change is exponential. They want freedom from excessive regulation and others telling them what to believe. They want small government and low

taxes. And they want good paying jobs to keep a roof over them and feed their families. They want change to stop.

Liberals want equality for all people, period. It's that simple. They want fairness regardless of political, economic, or religious belief. And if something is destructive to people and our world, they want it regulated.

Does the following statement reflect liberal or conservative values: "The fundamental ideals of freedom of speech, freedom of the press, freedom of religion, the separation of church and state, the right to due process and equality under the law are widely accepted as a common foundation of …."

Liberals and Conservatives cite many of the same values. But liberals are more likely to use government intervention, while Conservatives don't want government involvement. For Conservatives, small government, protection, and low taxes are their major goals. Is there a compromise solution?

All of the other issues surrounding this divide are mostly blown out of proportion to get votes.

Currently politics is so radically polarized that Democrats and Republicans can bring up legislation on an issue that people in both parties want, and it will be voted down simply because of animosity toward the sponsoring party. It can be the identical legislation. A hotly debated example was ACA, which was patterned after a Republican State's working example, and Republicans favored it, but it was proposed by Democrats, in an atmosphere where Republicans decided to make Obama a failed President.

The primary sticking point was how ACA was to be funded, and Obama. Republicans didn't want government funding, but Democrats felt this would leave too many people unprotected. Now a thousand reasons are cited for opposing ACA. Both parties wanted the same thing, but they were and are determined to kill the other party's legislation to please their voters, no matter how much it hurts them.

If either party enacts legislation, the other party comes into office and removes it, or defunds it, or finds other ways to undermine it. Neither Democrats nor Republicans can legislate. If the label Democrat or Republican can be stuck on it, it's in never-never land.

The question becomes, "How do we stop the blinding, radically polarized labels?"

It's difficult when people think that anyone to the left or right of them, who doesn't agree exactly with them on an issue, is their natural enemy. They immediately slap a hate label on you.

I've never liked labels. They are arrows to shoot at other people to stop meaningful discussion and avoid having to think. But none of us fits well in a label. We are all different and have different opinions on issues.

We have label making machines all around us.

The press media is predatory, especially on cable and talk radio. They want high ratings, which means dedicated followers. When they see an issue that raises blood pressure, they go for it and hype it up. They thrive on labels that are shortcuts to misusing their listeners. It's irrational. It's very inflammatory. It lacks context and perspective. It's horribly divisive. And it's a major cause of radical polarization.

The divisive press does the same as Internet groups that inflame people to acts of violence, whether they are ISIS or a school shooter. People get wound up and feel helpless and hopeless, and can't find relief until they either take action in verbal conflict or cause destruction to make a statement. For the press it's simply about setting off the fireworks to make money.

Divisive politicians don't care so much about what voters want, they care about pleasing the extremists in their base who whip up votes by driving radical polarization. This type of political action contributed to the start of the Civil War that left people maimed, dead, mentally scarred, and families and communities destroyed. Today it's contributing to a very uncivil war of words and acts of retribution. The press and politicians don't care what comes of this – it's all fun for them.

We have people in our population who are experts at creating polarization. Day in and day out they work on polarizing people. Even the Russians have become involved in creating polarizing propaganda. This truly is the issue of the century.

Labels are a symbol of division and animosity that stand in the way. We can find solutions to problems if we can drop the labels and work together without the animosity that labels cause. We're all different, but we have more in common with each other than we have differences.

We have to understand that the problems that drive us apart are important to each side. We can't diminish those, but we can find common ground on other issues. On an issue like gun control, most Americans are for gun control regardless of party, while divided on how much gun control and where. Politicians would rather let the issue fester because it's divisive in their favor.

The answer to the question, "How do we communicate effectively with radically polarized people?" is that we can't communicate about some issues to which they are stuck like glue. Communicating with people on these issues only inflames their passions and makes them worse.

We can overcome polarization by using useful and effective methods to communicate about other critical issues such as gun control and climate change.

There are many ways to get to agreements that make our world better.

1. Drop the labels or use independent or bipartisan working groups to create legislation that both parties can support. This is a semiotic issue. We can find ways to avoid using labels in our conversation, or create new ones that are politically non-aligned. (Although they soon get demonized.)

2. Groups are not monolithic. There are both Democrats and Republicans in all areas. There are people in each group who have varying degrees of belief and group loyalty, and if enough people begin to change, they will too. Younger adults generally are more open to considering other ideas, and they are displacing the older people. Momentous changes can occur if you convince and organize people who are not stuck like glue.

3. Reframe and relabel problems in terms that aren't bipartisan, and that can be described to engage many groups' agendas. Use independent groups to do this. (All labels eventually get demonized by one side or the other, so expect that.)

4. Use an intermediary who can offer a "Third way," as William Ury did in several international negotiations that resolved intractable problems. There aren't just two sides. There is usually a third way that both parties can agree on.

These four ways of communicating to make the world better are not a panacea. They aren't easy, and extremists on both sides will try to undermine them because control and chaos are their stock in trade.

Keep in mind the solutions these methods bring are likely to get branded with a label if the extremists in a party don't like it, or politicians want to pander to their base to polarize elections, or the press is out to get a reaction. They will destroy joint initiatives simply to pander to their base for votes and viewers.

These methods can help bring the temperature down and let the embers cool over time. A third party that stands in the middle could help bring people together. The US is alone in the world with its two-party system that ends up being one party when an election is won.

I'm grateful to the many professors and social psychologists who have done primary research on polarization and related issues. I often intuitively understand, but I can't do primary research; all I can do is read them.

I found this article most recently helpful: *Social psychology reveals what creates conflict among groups and how they can come together.* BY LEE DE-WIT, SANDER VAN DER LINDEN, CAMERON BRICK | JULY 2, 2019

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Alienation Series. https://visualwriter.com/HumanCond/Tomorrow.htm

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Preparing For the Future Of Work, Education, Economy.
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Notes

The following notes are text that I copied during note taking in study. They are not made grammatically correct, but simply presented as taken. For more information, consult the article or book.

From the book, The Art of Communications in a Polarized World

Ultimately meaning is not static. It can be contested. Our goal is to engage in that process of contesting meaning, shifting people's perspectives—our perspectives—so that the world we already know appears a bit off. That is, it is about shaking up the world we know so we can see what an outside viewer can see but we cannot. The tool to make this possible is cultural translation.

Cultural translation, as I describe it in this book, is a way to come to understand an object or text whose meaning derives from a shared interpretation of the world. It takes place through conversation and exchange.

Cultural translation is a form of a give-and-take over meaning, or as I describe it elsewhere, in ways more in line with my scholarly argot, a semiotic economy where signs are exchanged for other signs on a basis negotiation rather than equivalence.

The type of cultural translation I am most interested in has clear ethical implications. It must, as Sarah Maitland insists, "have as its primary objective nothing short of the transformation of human hearts and minds."

How do we reach this high bar? I propose that we engage in acts of willful and strategic misreading. As I describe in the following sections, I'm writing to teachers and students. Our task is to return to the work of thinking, to reclaim our engagement with ideas.

This task is complicated (and enriched) by the double status of cultural translation in this book: it is our primary object of study, but it also provides a mode of inquiry. That is, we can ask about the tools people use to arrive at a shared understanding of an object, and we can use those tools to understand the object of cultural translation itself. This reflexivity in turn opens up the question of what it means to communicate.

What we're doing is theory, and we're doing it with the practical goal of changing people's minds by helping them shift perspective so that different facets of the world they know appear. In that respect, this is not a conventional book. It's an experiment.

In this book, we are inextricably imbricated in indexicals, words that point to people or places or moments in time—"you," "I," "there," "here," "then," "now." Our relationship is real, even if temporally complicated. (My right now is not your right now.

> An indexical is, roughly speaking, a linguistic expression whose reference can shift from context to context. For example, the indexical 'you' may refer to one person in one context and to another person in another context. Other paradigmatic examples of indexicals are 'I', 'here', 'today', 'yesterday', 'he', 'she', and 'that'. Two speakers who utter a single sentence that contains an indexical may say different things.

Communication Is Translation (So Please Mind the Gap)

What would a theory of translation look like if it were grounded in the field of cultural studies? The answer I give is as performative as it is expository.

Like every other form of discourse, this chapter participates in an economy of substitution—of trading words, sentences, and ideas for other words, sentences, and ideas. When I speak of translation, that trading is what I mean,

What exactly is translation? To answer that question, I propose three axioms:

  1. To use a sign is to transform it.

  2. To transform a sign is to translate it.

  3. Communication is translation.

the transformation and substitution of signs opens up a space for a politics of invention, where we can rethink our relation to cultural others so that people we once feared can find their place in the communities we claim as our own.

What Are the Solutions to Political Polarization?

Social psychology reveals what creates conflict among groups and how they can come together.

BY LEE DE-WIT, SANDER VAN DER LINDEN, CAMERON BRICK | JULY 2, 2019

Is it simply disagreement over the great issues of the day? Not necessarily. **Recent research by the More in Common Foundation found that more than three-fourths of Americans support both stricter gun laws and a pathway to citizenship for undocumented immigrants brought here as children. Roughly the same number of Americans agree "that our differences are not so great that we cannot come together."**

The More in Common results could be interpreted to suggest that we can build bipartisan support for specific policies by focusing more on their boring nuts and bolts. Unfortunately, however, **voters don't evaluate policies in isolation. Research has highlighted that people actively use partisan cues when evaluating different policies.**

For example, a study by Carlee Beth Hawkins and Brian Nosek shows that **labeling policies as "Democrat" or "Republican" can influence policy support,** depending on the implicit bias of participants toward each party. A 2017 study by David Tannenbaum and colleagues finds that support for policy "nudges"—such as changing 401k retirement accounts to opt-out rather than opt-in—was heavily influenced by whether they were framed as supporting the goals of the Democratic or Republican party. **This was true of regular U.S. citizens and for senior government leaders**. Similarly, a 2018 study by Leaf Van Boven and colleagues finds that the majority of Republicans agree that climate change is happening—but their **support for policy solutions declined when presented by Democrats.**

In other words, people like policies proposed by members of their own in-group—and they don't like ideas generated by out-groups. **This dynamic is not new. Since the 1950s, social psychologists have tried to understand what pits groups against each other—and today, they're applying these insights to figure out what is happening in the United States.** This research doesn't provide definitive answers, but **it does suggest some potential solutions, from changes to the voting system to the development of common goals that might enable groups to work together.**

How morality becomes partisan

The More in Common report illustrates that some of the most divisive topics often involve deep moral beliefs. For example, **different political groups are very polarized on beliefs about responsibility, such as "people's outcomes in life are determined largely by forces outside of their control," or "people are largely responsible for their own outcomes in life."** Similarly, liberals and conservatives are very divided on questions of whether parenting should focus on cultivating a child's curiosity versus good manners, or independence versus respect for elders.

In a new study published this year, Annemarie S. Walter and David P. Redlawsk directly pitted people's moral concerns with their partisan identity. What they found, however, is that it wasn't the nature of

the moral violation that was most important. Instead, it was the political allegiance of the violator. Democrats in the study were prone to giving Democrats a pass; the same was even more true of Republicans.

U.S. politics has entered into a vicious cycle, whereby the moral and emotional language used to galvanize one side is directly antagonizing the other. The us-and-them nature of the debate has led to such a breakdown of trust that even hearing a policy proposed by the other side can be enough to trigger opposition to that policy.

What are the solutions?

This suggests that while there might be various political seeds that have helped drive the recent spike in polarization, it has gotten to a point where polarization is being exacerbated by some of the psychological processes that shape how we interpret identity and groups. This is a significant point to understand because it highlights that if we are to address polarization, we need to think not just about political solutions, but also solutions that are grounded in our understanding of social psychology.

One promising civic model for enabling more meaningful contact between groups in conflict involves **"Citizens Assemblies,"** where representative citizens are brought together to deliberate over challenging social or political issues. These assemblies can be thought of as a kind of jury duty for political deliberation, and they offer a platform for different groups to discuss issues in a way that can highlight where common ground exists and how it can be acted upon.

For example, Ireland has run several Citizens Assembles since 2016 that made policy recommendations that have been credited with advances in Ireland's approach to climate change. Indeed, participants in a recent Citizens Assembly on Brexit, run by Alan Renwick and colleagues at University College London, came to a compromise that could resolve the current impasse surrounding the U.K.'s decision to leave the European Union.

Perspective taking. Perhaps one of the most important aspects of contact is that it might enable one to see things from another's perspective. The promise of perspective taking was recently illustrated in an experiment to attempt to change support for issues faced by transgender minorities. In this intervention, a brief exchange exploring a range of issues from the perspective of a trans individual was sufficient to shift people's attitudes on this controversial topic. Indeed, the attitude change seemed to persist even six months later, which is unusual for brief psychological interventions.

Considering the revolution in communication technology in our lifetimes, **social media may have done more to promote taking sides** than seeing the world through the eyes of another. Social media companies, and the governments that regulate them, clearly need to reflect on the extent to which these platforms encourage "side taking" instead of "perspective taking."

Superordinate goals. Superordinate identity. One of the clearest solutions from the psychological literature is that identity-based conflicts require common goals or a "superordinate" sense of identity to bring people back together. In other words, **we need a large sense of ourselves that is able to bridge**

smaller differences. This need to create a superordinate identity has clearly been intuitive to rulers for centuries, who would use various traditions and ceremonies to help build alliances between different countries and cultures.

Proportional voting. While searching for psychological solutions to polarization, it's important not to ignore the context in which political decisions are made, and to think about the way in which different political systems will engage with, and exacerbate, aspects of our psychology.

The U.S. is one of the few countries to be dominated by just two political parties. This fact is almost certainly a reflection of the "winner take all"/"first past the post" voting system. Many countries employ a proportional (or mixed) system, which means that if a party gets 5 percent of the popular vote, they will receive 5 percent of the seats in a given representative body. In the U.S., this party would almost certainly get no representation—which could worsen the us-and-them dynamic of the U.S. political system.

Voting for policies, not for parties. Another potential solution to identity-based policy preferences is to hold direct referendums on specific issues. Among large territories, California and Switzerland both regularly use referendums to address complex policy topics. if a clear majority is reached, they can signal a new social norm that can help a country move forward.

From reframing issues to tap into a superordinate sense of identity, to promoting forms of contact that encourage perspective taking, social psychology does offer some useful ideas for thinking about how to tackle polarization.

I think this is the most informative article I've found to date, since 2007, on bridging the polarization gap to get to effective communication. It brings to mind William Ury's "The Third Side" method of conflict resolution, which has been effectively used in intractable world conflicts. We need to drop "labels" from our identities to get to a superordinate identity. Excellent.