

# THE POLARIZATION PARADOX:

## WHY HYPERPARTISANSHIP STRENGTHENS CONSERVATISM AND UNDERMINES LIBERALISM

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If President Barack Obama is reelected in November, he will almost certainly face a Congress more divided along ideological lines than at any time in more than a century. Extreme polarization also extends to the states, where vicious battles over budgets and union rights have led to recall votes, legislative walk-outs, and intense protests.

Increasingly, the art of governing and compromise has been replaced by a culture of constant campaigning and relentless negativity, as political leaders prioritize short-term electoral ambitions and small-scale policy fights. Meanwhile, public confidence in government sinks ever lower, as problems such as risky budget deficits, record levels of poverty and inequality, and a dangerous reliance on dirty energy sources go unaddressed.

As liberals, we tell a one-sided story about the complex causes of America's political paralysis. We blame the conservative movement, Fox News, libertarian billionaires, and the "do nothing" Republicans in Congress. Much of this story is true. While both parties have moved toward their ideological poles, the stronger rightward shift of the GOP accounts for much of the increase in polarization.

But there is plenty of blame to go around. Over the past decade, liberals have become more like conservatives, adopting a win-at-all-costs commitment to policy debates and elections. In doing so, liberals have built their own message machine comprised of think tanks, media watchdogs, mega-donor networks, and purposively designed echo chambers that rally strong partisans while demonizing the other side.

The inclination to fight fire with fire is understandable. How can liberals be expected to embrace compromise and moderation when there is no one left to compromise with? This view — along with the nagging suspicion that the

failure to offer a robust liberal alternative to modern conservatism has resulted in the pronounced rightward shift of American politics in recent decades — has led many liberals to conclude that they have no choice but to attempt to beat conservatives at their own game.

The strategy has been dangerously misguided. Extreme polarization has served conservatives very well, driving moderate leaders from politics, promoting feelings of cynicism, inefficacy, and distrust among the public, and forcing Democrats to spend huge sums of money on canvassing, texting, social media, and celebrity appeals in order to turn out moderates, young people, and minorities on election day. Less clear is how America's escalating ideological arms race will conceivably serve liberals. Instead of going to war against the Right, liberals will better serve their social and political objectives by waging a war on polarization.

## 1.

In general, higher levels of education and political engagement turn out to be no defense against ideological tribalism. Indeed, the opposite is the case. The most politically attentive and knowledgeable Americans tend to be the most partisan and polarized. As political leaders have increasingly packaged almost every issue in terms of clearly defined ideological differences, party labels have become brand names, each standing for a distinct set of conservative or liberal positions. The highly educated and politically attentive are the most polarized because they are better at recognizing these ideological labels, more likely to react to these cues in ideologically consistent ways, and more skilled at offering arguments to support their initial gut responses.

The implication, warns social psychologist Jonathan Haidt, is that the best-educated partisans excel at “my side” reasoning but often fail at critical self-reflection. “Smart people make really good lawyers and press secretaries, but they are no better than others at finding reasons on the other side,” he notes.

Polarization has been further strengthened by dramatic changes in the media system over the past decade. In the era of the 24-hour news cycle, commentators and bloggers rely on the latest poll result, insider strategy, negative attack, or embarrassing gaffe to appeal to ideologically motivated audiences. “We have created a system in the media in which the pure malevolent glee and demonization and dirty tricks and kinetic heat of the horrible last days of particularly brutal elections can happen all year round now,” admits MSNBC host Rachel Maddow.

The hypercompetitive battle to win audience attention incentivizes “brawling, aggressive outreach by bloggers, organizations, and smaller publications to

keep viewers, listeners, readers, and donors agitated,” write Tufts University scholars Sarah Sobieraj and Jeffrey Berry. This “outrage industry” specializes in provoking emotional responses from audiences, trading in exaggerations, insults, name calling, and partial truths about opponents and reducing complex issues to “ad hominem attacks, overgeneralizations, mockery, and dire forecasts of impending doom.”

Based on an analysis of television, radio, blog, and newspaper commentary that appeared in 2009, Sobieraj and Berry find that elements of outrage are most prevalent among right-wing pundits and in the conservative media, but are also a staple of liberal outlets and commentators. On TV, they estimate that elements of outrage appear every 90 to 100 seconds, with Fox News’s *Glenn Beck Show* and MSNBC’s *Countdown with Keith Olbermann* leading among the programs analyzed.

“As someone who speaks overtly from the Left to an audience that is not entirely of the Left but which expects to hear liberal opinion from me, the closest thing I know of as a way to goose my own ratings is to showcase some villainous behavior from a media figure on the right,” says Maddow. “The numbers rise then because there is an appetite for hearing that media figures on the right are terrible people doing terrible things...that same appetite is evident on the other side, and I have the inches-thick pile of threats to prove it.”

Yet as news organizations and commentators consistently define politics in terms of cynical and deceitful strategies, losing an election or a policy battle becomes especially divisive for the politically engaged. “A belief that one’s side has experienced an illegitimate loss ... prompts the losing partisans to become increasingly angry,” writes University of Pennsylvania communication researcher Diana Mutz. “At this point it is no longer about differing political philosophies; it is about right versus wrong, truth versus deceit, good versus evil.”

When asked recently to reflect on the factors promoting gridlock in government, retiring Democratic congressman Barney Frank offered a similar conclusion. “Now, the activists live in parallel universes, which are both separate and echo chambers for each. If you’re on the Left, you listen to MSNBC, you go to the blogs, Huffington Post, et cetera, and you basically hear only what you agree with. If you’re on the Right, you watch Fox News and the talk shows, and you hear only what you agree with,” Frank said. “When we try to compromise, what you find is not people simply objecting to the specific terms of the compromise, but the activists object even to your trying to compromise, because they say, ‘Look, everybody I know agrees with us, so why are you giving in?’”

Indeed, the evidence suggests that today’s media enable a spiral of political polarization and mobilization among the most politically engaged, according to communication researchers Wolfgang Donsbach and Cornelia Mothes. They

also suggest that for moderates and those who lack a strong interest in politics, there is a parallel spiral of political *disengagement* and *demobilization*. For these groups, which disproportionately as a cohort include young people and minorities, it is increasingly easy to trade out media coverage of public affairs for entertainment and celebrity news.

## 2.

Over the past 30 years, the best educated have also been the most geographically mobile, settling in areas that match not only their lifestyle preferences but also their political outlook. This geographic sorting has contributed to a rise in non-competitive general elections, with many Congressional seats therefore determined by the much smaller proportion of registered voters who turn out for primaries. Meanwhile, the relative lack of moderate voters and centrist sources of campaign funds and volunteer activity limits the ability of moderate candidates to run and win in primary races.

The Supreme Court's decision in *Citizens United v. Federal Election Commission* has likely worsened this dynamic by enhancing the ability of ideologically driven donors to tip the scales of election races in favor of strongly liberal or conservative candidates. As a consequence, the parties may be more closely aligning themselves with the priorities of super-wealthy partisans.

Changes in leadership and legislative rules have further strengthened the divide between the two parties. Increased pressure in Congress to produce legislative results has driven both parties to boost the power of House leadership to steer legislation, reduce input at the committee level, and reduce the chance of amendments by the opposing party, write political scientists Thomas Mann and Norman Ornstein. Since the 2008 election, the GOP strategy of opposing any legislation that might favor Democratic electoral chances, along with the disciplining pressures of primary races and campaign pledges, has made what was already a difficult compromise process virtually impossible.

Members of Congress also face pressure to "stick to their principles." House Speaker John Boehner suggested recently that compromising across partisan lines inherently means violating one's principles. The only approach to compromise he said was acceptable is to find points where agendas accidentally converge to create "common ground."

## 3.

While the roots of our increasingly polarized politics are long-standing and run deep, it seems clear that conservative leaders have worked strategically to make

the situation worse. Three men on the right have played an outsized role in promoting polarization and dysfunction. The first, Newt Gingrich, came to the House of Representatives in 1979 determined to unseat the decades-old Democratic majority. Initially lacking resources and power within his own party, Gingrich brought ethics charges and exploited scandals that provoked Democratic leaders “into overreactions that enraged Republicans and united them to vote against Democratic initiatives,” Mann and Ornstein write.

The second, Grover Norquist, turned anti-tax pledges into a powerful weapon for maintaining party discipline, limiting the ability of Republican moderates and others to work across party lines. Republicans find that they must sign the pledge in order to win primary elections, and that they must stick to the pledge in order to keep getting reelected.

The third, Karl Rove, used the George W. Bush presidency to bring White House leadership fully in line with the conservative polarization strategy. As journalists Mark Halperin and John Harris describe, Rove positioned Bush as a “national clarifier,” standing “forthrightly on one side of a grand argument” and then winning the argument by “sharpening the differences and rallying his most intense supporters.” Rove believed that an election won by even a single vote could shape history by leading the country in a new ideological direction, regardless of whether a proposed agenda held majority public support.

Rove’s goal was to sharpen ideological differences between the parties, mobilizing the conservative base, and forcing moderate voters to choose a side. The bitterly negative campaigns that this strategy begat had the added bonus of turning off to politics minorities and young people, who trend Democratic. Republicans didn’t need a majority of these constituencies to vote for them; they just needed them not to participate.

Rove also introduced a number of innovations that dramatically altered how conservatives and liberals practice politics. First, there was the enhanced sophistication of the 2002 and 2004 GOP campaigns, which deployed expansive voter databases and micro-targeting strategies to mobilize voters. In this new approach to elections, few Americans were truly considered swing voters; instead, elections would be won by registering and turning out voters already inclined to support Republicans.

Second, Rove and other conservative operatives aimed to create and reinforce communities of like-minded others. These echo chambers — led by Fox News, political talk radio, and the Drudge Report — would reinterpret every issue and event through an ideological lens and with political ends in mind.

Finally, the goal of a campaign, for Rove, was not just to define everything in terms of an ideological power struggle, but also “to persuade voters (and

donors and viewers and readers) that an opponent lacks the character and credibility even to deserve a place in the contest,” Halperin and Harris write.

## 4.

The decisive defeat of the Democrats in the 2002 midterm elections convinced many influential liberals that they needed to emulate the strategies of conservatives and rebuild the Democratic Party around a progressive power base. Rob Stein, a Clinton-era political appointee, was a major catalyst behind liberals’ embrace of a new style of politics. Stein researched the conservative movement’s network of donors, think tanks, and media outlets and started showing progressive activists and donors a PowerPoint presentation detailing the “Conservative Message Machine’s Money Matrix.”

The “money matrix,” Stein explained, was composed of roughly 200 mega-donors, whose first loyalty was not to the GOP but to a radical conservative ideology. Think tanks like the Heritage Foundation and the Cato Institute served as the “conservative message makers,” cultivating ideologically consistent ideas, experts, and talking points, which were then funneled to conservative magazines, talk radio hosts, and Fox News. During the 1990s, in total, the conservative message machine had spent an estimated \$1 billion generating and promoting conservative ideas.

“This is perhaps the most potent, independent, institutionalized apparatus ever assembled in a democracy to promote one belief system,” an admiring Stein told Matt Bai of the *New York Times*. In comparison, liberals had come to the battle largely unarmed, Stein explained, spending substantial amounts of money in an uncoordinated fashion, with no particular ideological or strategic objective in mind.

In 2003 — around the same time that Stein began recruiting donors to support a new liberal message machine — former Clinton chief of staff John Podesta launched the Center for American Progress (CAP). Podesta modeled CAP after the Heritage Foundation and other right-wing think tanks, with the goal of developing and branding a liberal vision across issues and elections. According to Podesta, despite the many environmental, civil rights, and other single-issue groups that were flourishing on the left, policy strategy and message were uncoordinated, and few of these groups could deliver in elections.

Podesta modeled CAP on the Heritage Foundation in another important way as well, dedicating much of the center’s resources to media and communications. CAP collected an impressive roster of scholars and former Clinton administration appointees to burnish its image as a serious think tank. Yet at its core, CAP would operate less like the prestigious Brookings Institution and

more like a campaign-style war room. “Others strive to be objective, we don’t,” Jennifer Palmieri, then CAP vice president for communications, told Bloomberg News in 2008.

Today, CAP, along with its affiliated CAP Action Fund, is a \$40-million-a-year operation, employing 250 people and spending more than a third of its budget on communications and grassroots campaigning. The heart of the operation is arguably the organization’s blog, Think Progress. There, a collection of intensely partisan bloggers and journalists churn out opposition research and liberal interpretations of news and events, relentlessly reframing every policy issue in terms of a broader ideological struggle for the future of the country.

In 2004, Media Matters for America joined CAP at the center of the new liberal message machine. The media watchdog was founded by David Brock, who had begun his career as a conservative writer for the *American Spectator*, famously labeling Anita Hill as “a little bit nutty and a bit slutty” in one article and investigating Bill Clinton’s alleged sexual exploits in others. In 1997, Brock publicly broke with the conservative movement, and in 2002 he published the mea culpa memoir *Blinded by the Right: The Conscience of an Ex-Conservative*. In 2004, he followed with *The Republican Noise Machine: Right-Wing Media and How It Corrupts Democracy*, which he concluded by outlining his vision for a new liberal counterweight to the conservative movement.

Media Matters is now a \$15-million-a-year organization with 90 employees that monitors Fox News, talk radio, and other media outlets and turns out 20,000 pieces of content annually. Media Matters claims credit for campaigns that have forced the conservative pundits Laura Schlessinger, Don Imus, and Glenn Beck off the air. Yet much of its daily output is aimed at countering any perceived conservative slant from the 24-hour news cycle.

Following the 2004 election, all the major elements were in place to remake Democratic politics in the image of the Right. With liberals reeling in the aftermath of John Kerry’s loss, Rob Stein gathered prospective donors at a strategy meeting in Washington. “The US didn’t enter World War II until Japan bombed Pearl Harbor. We just had our Pearl Harbor,” a co-organizer told those gathered. If the Democratic Party were to survive, Stein and the other organizers warned, liberal donors were going to have to start making long-term investments in a new progressive infrastructure. In 2005, Stein and his colleagues formed the Democracy Alliance to serve as an investment club for about a hundred mega-donors, with the initial goal of raising \$200 million.

The network gave away more than \$50 million in its first nine months, selecting 25 organizations out of more than 600 applicants. Among the most influential Democracy Alliance donors were a small group of liberal billionaires who have become familiar names in political circles. George Soros, Peter Lewis,

and the Hollywood producer Steve Bing have poured tens of millions into the liberal message machine. According to news reports, CAP's founding owed much to Soros, who would donate an estimated \$15 to \$25 million to the organization over its first five years. By 2008, between 30 and 50 percent of the Democracy Alliance's members had donated to CAP or its affiliated CAP Action Fund. Independent of the Democracy Alliance, CAP also benefitted from an estimated \$20 million in support from billionaires Herb and Marion Sandler.

The same group of liberal mega-donors was also instrumental in creating the prototype for today's super PACs. In 2004, in an effort to bounce Bush from office, Soros, Lewis, Bing, and the Sandlers donated a combined \$73.7 million to independent expenditure groups, with nearly \$60 million of this total supporting groups affiliated with MoveOn.org, Americans Coming Together, and the Media Fund. The latter two groups coordinated voter turnout and advertising in battleground states, collecting a total of \$196.4 million in donations, mostly from wealthy individuals and labor unions.

Soros, Lewis, Bing, and the Sandlers sought to bypass the traditional party apparatus in an effort to bring their own voices to bear on election outcomes and the ideological message of the Democratic Party. Their apparent goal and that of the Democracy Alliance was not just to help Democrats win elections but also to break with Clinton-era centrist politics, which they criticized for being too accommodating and for failing to articulate a clear progressive vision for the country. This, as much as winning elections, was what the Democracy Alliance and liberal mega-donors sought to change.

## 5.

For many progressive activists and donors, Barack Obama's 2008 presidential campaign represented the evolution of their efforts to surpass Republicans in campaign sophistication and remake the Democratic Party as a liberal force. Notably, to win the primary and general election contests, the Obama campaign adopted strategies from MoveOn.org and the 2004 Howard Dean campaign. Dean had used the Web to recruit thousands of "Deaniacs," organize face-to-face gatherings of his supporters, and raise more than \$25 million.

The 2008 Obama campaign team sent an estimated one billion e-mails and generated a list of 13.5 million supporters. The campaign Web site and e-mail strategy served as a powerful pro-Obama echo chamber, engaging voters while bypassing the news media, reframing events from the campaign's point of view, and recruiting volunteers to voice their support for Obama and attack Republicans. These tactics were highly effective at increasing participation and turnout by minorities, young people, and other groups predisposed to vote

Democratic.

But Obama's victory was ultimately the result of his success at both expanding his base and appealing to moderate voters. Obama displayed more the "national synthesizer" style of Bill Clinton than the "national clarifier" style of Bush. Clinton had sought to blur, disrupt, and ultimately bridge partisan differences, not to clarify them. As journalists Halperin and Harris describe, Clinton selected "the best ideas from all parts of the ideological spectrum," and assembled them in ways that served the needs of an electorate believed to be motivated by results, rather than by ideology.

Obama went to painstaking lengths to indicate his willingness to compromise and cross partisan lines. In his speeches, he has used a "post-partisan" moral vocabulary to transcend ideological boundaries, showing "himself to be a liberal who understood conservative arguments about the need for order and the value of tradition," Haidt argues.

Obama also strove to distance himself from deeply partisan political strategies. As early as 2005, in a post to the Daily Kos community, he challenged the liberal narrative about the need to create a rival infrastructure and a disciplined message machine, perceptively warning of the effects on political discourse and culture:

According to the storyline that drives many advocacy groups and Democratic activists ... we are up against a sharply partisan, radically conservative, take-no-prisoners Republican Party.... In order to beat them, it is necessary for Democrats to get some backbone, give as good as they get, brook no compromise, drive out Democrats who are interested in "appeasing" the right wing, and enforce a more clearly progressive agenda.... I think this perspective misreads the American people.... To the degree that we brook no dissent within the Democratic Party, and demand fealty to the one, "true" progressive vision for the country, we risk the very thoughtfulness and openness to new ideas that are required to move this country forward.

As the 2008 general election launched, David Brock, John Podesta, and George Soros each planned their own independent expenditure campaign on behalf of Obama. Yet Obama publicly and privately discouraged the efforts on his behalf. This was, no doubt, in large part due to the fact that he didn't need them. His campaign was so flush with cash that independent efforts at best were redundant and at worst risked becoming counterproductive. Obama raised

\$745 million across the primary and general election campaigns, more than doubling the \$368 million raised by McCain.

But Obama also understood that the liberal donors and activists spearheading the independent efforts had their own ideas about what liberalism and the Democratic agenda were supposed to be. The Democracy Alliance and its wealthy donors clearly favored progressive groups over more centrist organizations like the Democratic Leadership Council and the Truman National Security Project, a preference that did not, in many circumstances, help Democrats actually win elections or govern effectively.

## 6.

After Obama's victory, the liberal message machine went to work in an unfamiliar context. In 2009, for the first time since the earliest years of the Clinton presidency, Democrats controlled not only the presidency but also both houses of Congress. Led by CAP and Media Matters, the machine featured a heavily staffed war room focused on "driving the White House's message and agenda," reported Greg Sargent at the Plum Line blog. The strategy was to coordinate messaging among liberal groups and reduce complex policy questions to "talking points and narratives that play well in the media and build public support for the White House's policy goals." Bolstering these efforts was MSNBC, which had fully embraced its position as the prime-time ideological counterweight to Fox News, adding a major cable news platform to the liberal message machine.

Faced with an opponent that had surpassed them in both money and sophistication, conservatives now had to rally in response, escalate their spending and strategies, and "take back their country." But whatever Republicans may have lacked in terms of money and infrastructure, they more than made up for in ideological coherence. Conservatives had worked to drive moderates from the party, a dynamic further reinforced by GOP electoral losses in Senate states and House districts over the previous two election cycles. As a result, Republicans were able to quickly coalesce around a strategy of determined opposition to the Obama agenda.

Senate minority leader Mitch McConnell and other conservative leaders realized that the fate of the struggling American economy, which Democrats had largely inherited from their Republican predecessors, would largely determine Democratic electoral fortunes over the next several cycles, particularly if Republicans stayed united. By refusing to cooperate at all with the Democratic agenda, Republicans successfully limited the scope of the stimulus package and other programs and forced Democrats to run on the success or failure of economic measures that Republicans had unanimously opposed.

The Republican strategy received a huge boost with the rise of the Tea Party, which provided a master narrative about big government and a genuine grassroots base to pressure Congress and enforce party discipline. As Harvard University researchers Theda Skocpol and Vanessa Williamson describe in their book *The Tea Party and the Remaking of Republican Conservatism*, Fox News in particular helped create a “community of meaning” for the movement, broadcasting consistent narratives that connected Tea Party supporters, activists, conservative commentators, and leaders in a common discourse about national politics and events. The network branded the Tea Party as a natural extension of the “Fox Nation” and invited viewers to go to the network’s Web site, which served as a hub for finding related local events in a viewers’ area.

These efforts crested in August 2009 with protests against “Obamacare” and “socialism” at congressional town meetings. With the loss of Ted Kennedy’s Senate seat to Republican Scott Brown several months later, Democrats lost their filibuster-proof majority in the Senate. This forced them to enact Obama’s top policy priority, health care reform, through a budget reconciliation measure. As a consequence, even with the law surviving review by the Supreme Court, the bill remains vulnerable to repeal if Republicans take back control of the Senate and the presidency in 2012. Brown’s victory also hindered the effort to pass legislation to cap US carbon emissions and presaged the heavy losses that Democrats would suffer in the 2010 midterm elections.

By 2011, it had become clear that the creation of a liberal message machine to match the Right’s had not heralded the dawn of a new age of progressive policies and governance. Instead, the machine had contributed to political trench warfare. Across Obama’s presidency, enormous resources have been expended, but the resulting electoral and policy victories can simply be reversed with the next turn of electoral fortune.

## 7.

As the 2012 election approaches, there appears to be no end to the escalation. Liberals and conservatives speculate endlessly as to the fundraising prowess of the other side, each warning of dramatic disparities as a way to mobilize their respective donors and activists. Based on Obama’s 2008 totals, conservatives argue that Obama may raise more than \$1 billion for his campaign. Liberals counter that the Supreme Court’s *Citizens United* decision has opened the door to \$500 million in spending by Karl Rove’s American Crossroads and groups supported by libertarian billionaires Charles and David Koch. Future election cycles promise even more spending by the liberal and conservative message ma-

chines, which will strengthen their ability to apply ever more advanced technological tools to mobilize their bases and demonize their opponents.

Yet by defining almost everything in politics as “us versus the radical fringe” and centralizing resources within a handful of organizations, liberals have institutionalized a bunker mentality that rewards groupthink and substantially reduces opportunities for developing innovative ideas and practical approaches to governing. Liberals who break with conventional perspectives or attempt to cross the fault lines that polarization has etched into our political culture are too often “debunked” as misinformers, labeled contrarians, or accused of aiding the enemy. Extreme polarization has also led to public disgust with politics, government, and “Washington.” The resulting damage to our civic culture disproportionately harms liberals, whose core social and political objectives almost always entail government services, investments, and interventions in private markets.

The ideological arms race with conservatives also risks putting Democrats at an inherent electoral disadvantage. Over the past decade, surveys of the general public show that conservatives consistently outnumber liberals by almost 2 to 1, and this advantage decreases only slightly among those Americans who vote on election day. This means that Democrats have to appeal to a much broader coalition of voters than Republicans and must rely on support from a strong majority of moderates. Protesting limits on Plan B contraception access or fighting the approval of the tar sands oil pipeline are admirable actions that inspire wealthy liberal donors and core constituencies, yet they are either uninspiring or problematic for moderates, the very voters whom liberals need to win over in order to prevail in elections.

Similarly, Democrats have increasingly come to depend upon young people and minorities, who make up a growing proportion of eligible voters. But among these potential supporters, intense negativity and extreme polarization promote feelings of cynicism and inefficacy while likely adding to the propensity to tune out the news. In order to mobilize young people and minorities, Democrats are forced to spend ever-greater resources each election cycle on canvassing, texting, social media, celebrities, and narrowly targeted appeals.

## 8.

In the aftermath of a 2012 election that is likely to be among the most brutal campaigns in history, liberals would be well served to turn more attention and resources to rebuilding our civic culture, reconstructing a vital center in American politics, rather than investing ever more heavily in the liberal message machine. Reforming our civic and political institutions in ways that create some

possibility for moderation, deliberation, and crosscutting discourse should be a high priority for liberals, who must recognize that without a functioning civic culture, there can be no progressive governance.

A place to start is the primary system, which remains a central mechanism creating pressures against compromise. The ways in which both parties choose candidates need to be reformed so that incentives favor candidates who appeal to a more diverse cross section of voters instead of a narrow, ideologically consistent constituency. California and Washington, for example, are experimenting with “top two” primary models. These and other innovations merit careful consideration.

Specific to presidential elections, Harvard University political scientist Thomas Patterson has proposed shortening the primary season, moving the primaries closer to the party conventions, and giving every state a meaningful say in candidate selection. By potentially reducing the demand for fundraising, a shortened campaign season could also benefit efforts at campaign finance reform. Similarly, eliminating barriers to voting — especially by moving to online voting — would dramatically reduce the amount that campaigns have to spend on voter turnout.

But fixing our electoral system is not enough. Our most critical need is to rebuild our civic infrastructure, investing in institutional reforms that enable interaction with people who are politically not like ourselves. In particular, strong regional newspapers have historically helped citizens identify and understand important regional interests that cut across partisan and ideological agendas, serving as a partial counterweight to partisanship in Congress. With the decline of our regional newspapers, Americans’ capacity to confront problems, make informed political choices, participate in decision making, and forge compromise has been dramatically weakened.

Former Washington Post editor Leonard Downie and Columbia University communication scholar Michael Schudson have suggested a number of methods for supporting local news reporting, with the goal of fulfilling the function of our once great regional newspapers. These include allowing newspapers to shift to a nonprofit or low-profit designation, creating university-based news organizations, and increasing local reporting by public media organizations. Further, they call for a shift in outlook from mega-donors and philanthropists, who “should consider news reporting of public affairs to be a continuous public good rather than a series of specific projects under their control or a way of generating interest and action around causes and issues of special interest to them.”

As a complement, we need to also increase investments in civic education and digital media literacy that address the effects of our like-minded social enclaves and our addiction to ideologically congenial media. Most promising is

the prospect for a national civil service program for high school graduates that would send them to work with others from a mix of political and social backgrounds and to live and engage with communities not like theirs.

We would also do well to formally encourage greater ideological diversity in our intellectual institutions. Haidt, for instance, has observed that the lack of ideological diversity among social psychologists means that certain research questions about politics and moral reasoning are pursued over others and that results are selectively interpreted and translated. He has called for increasing the number of conservatives among university-affiliated social psychologists over the next decade, and we would extend his critique to other social science fields, including communication, political science, and sociology.

Our studies among scientists in engineering, chemistry, and physics show that even after controlling for experts' professional judgments, personal ideologies influence how they interpret the policy implications of their work. And there is no reason to believe that things are different in the social sciences, especially when analyzing ideologically divisive policy debates. In our experience, peer review is an imperfect safeguard against groupthink and ideological bias. Increasing the ideological diversity within our ranks can only benefit our research.

Similar principles should define the convening of forums and meetings among think tank intellectuals, civil society leaders, philanthropists, journalists, and creative professionals, not only at the national level but also across states and regions. TED meetings, Aspen Institute events, SXSW, and Sundance are billed as "thought-leader gatherings" where 'rock stars' emerge from their 'silos' to learn about 'disruptive' ideas that have been carefully 'curated,'" as *New York* magazine recently described. Yet most of these forums are sponsored and populated by the very same donors, leaders, and voices that fund, organize, and benefit from the liberal message machine.

In the end, the various policies and other actions we might adopt to address polarization are probably less important than our own posture toward the problem. In questioning the liberal reaction to our increasingly polarized politics, we offer no defense of conservative leaders who appear to be deliberately stoking the partisan fires in order to paralyze our political process and discourage engagement by young people and minorities, thereby boosting the influence of a mostly white Republican base.

But for better or worse, as the party of government, liberals have greater incentive than conservatives to reach across the aisle and pursue pragmatic solutions to America's problems. But liberals need not do so passively. Compromise and reasonableness can be every bit as potent a weapon for liberals as polarization has been for conservatives. Liberals need to reach out to conser-

vatives by addressing legitimate issues with current liberal policy preferences and programs. This also means collaborating on pathways toward achieving legitimate conservative policy objectives. Yet as we do so, we must also significantly raise the political costs of obstructionism.

In this, liberals would do well to consider the lessons that the United States, like other powers before it, has learned when challenged by foes in asymmetrical conflicts. By this we mean that while conservatives have great resources to expend on behalf of their political objectives, they still must fight an uphill battle. Conservatism's central political project has arguably been to delegitimize the welfare state, in the face of a public that still, even after forty years of guerrilla warfare and efforts to "starve the beast," remains deeply supportive of it.

When political scientists Mann and Ornstein identify the beginnings of our dysfunctional politics and government with Gingrich, they are describing a classic asymmetrical strategy. Gingrich's objective was to delegitimize the Democratic leadership that had controlled the House for almost fifty years, and in the process delegitimize the government and welfare state they presided over. Where once Gingrich was a marginal player in the Republican caucus, conservatives in the brand of Gingrich now control the GOP and often the government. Yet they have still proved themselves unable to dismantle the welfare state, even when they have controlled all three branches of government.

If liberals respond to the provocations of the Right with rigidity, vitriol, outrage, and a growing unwillingness to compromise, they only strengthen the hand of their opponents, contribute to the gridlock of our political institutions, provide Republicans with an easy justification for obstruction, and ultimately make the unthinkable — the dismantling of the postwar welfare state — thinkable. Conservatives, in this sense, are playing a long game, happy to starve the beast and delighted by dysfunction, even when they control the government. For this reason, as liberals unwittingly conspire to turn American politics into a zero-sum game, conservatives win even when they lose. /