

Latest in-depth discussion at Cato Unbound

Can We Trust Each Other in a Polarized Era?

E edited by Jason Kuznicki, senior fellow at Cato, *Cato Unbound* is a monthly journal in which scholars can tackle big-picture discussions. Each month, one scholar, who is chosen from a mix of Cato experts and invited guests, publishes a lead essay, which is followed by a series of responses throughout the month. The idea is to create a hub for wide-ranging, open-ended discussion to flesh out important ideas and debates.

The February 2021 issue addressed an especially important problem in contemporary American life. Political polarization and the decline of public trust in institutions has been an accelerating trend for decades, with disputed causes and wide-ranging consequences.

Kevin Vallier, an assistant professor of philosophy at Bowling Green State University and the author of *Trust in a Polarized Age*, provided the lead essay, arguing that “a warlike politics is the greatest threat to liberty.” He contends that the evidence shows high levels of social trust are correlated with many desirable social outcomes, and that the decline in trust associated with the hyperpolarization of American politics has real and deleterious consequences.

“I fear that classical liberals are enemy #1 for both sides,” Vallier writes, adding that advocates of liberty “are too distracted by rooting for the red team or the blue team to preserve liberalism from them both.” As politics escalates into something ever more resembling civil war, classical liberals must unite around strategies including federalism and pluralism to ratchet down the tensions.

Steven Horwitz, a professor of economics at Ball State University and the economics editor for *Libertarianism.org*, sees a different path to depoliticizing our lives. In contrast to zero-sum politics, which divides us, he finds a blessing in the way in which markets depoliticize our interactions and bring positive-sum gains to the table.



TRUST, POLARIZATION, AND LIBERALISM

KEVIN VALLIER • IRINA SOBOLEVA
MARTIN GURRI • STEVEN HORWITZ



Horwitz notes that in his neighborhood, which is split very nearly 50/50 between Republicans and Democrats, there is little evidence in daily life that indicates who voted which way. Even though he adamantly opposed Donald Trump and his brand of politics, Horwitz notes that half of his neighbors disagreed, and these are the same people with whom he interacts peacefully every day.

The same scenario plays out on a national and global scale. “Markets have an important role to play in overcoming differences and helping to create social trust,” and classical liberals and libertarians can “remind people of all the ways in which they do, in fact, deal in a trustworthy manner with people who might see the world very differently than they do. The anonymity of the marketplace can be helpful here.”

Martin Gurri, a technology analyst and the current president of Five Wave Analytics, is more skeptical that politics is the underlying cause of our division. Rather, he sees the rise of the unmediated internet as having undermined institutions that once played a healthier role. “The default rhetorical posture of the web has become the rant,” he laments. Not that the old ways were all that good either, with top-down authoritarian impulses effectively stifling dissent.

Lastly, Irina Soboleva, an assistant professor of behavior science at Duke Kunshan, Duke University’s new campus near Shanghai, China, offers a paradoxical observation: Americans are highly polarized

but not necessarily all that ideologically divided on important policy issues. Rather, affective polarization is led by parties and politicians who stand to benefit from it.

Soboleva calls for the defense of a “buffer zone” around apolitical aspects of life to stop the creeping politicization of everything. One of the key tools for that is decentralization—that is, pushing more decisions to more local and less divided levels of government. Cultural affiliations and things such as sports and entertainment should, to the degree possible, be removed from partisanship and tribal affiliation with one team or another in a raging culture war. “Most people are united in their affection for their cities and states,” she explains, “in their support of common sports teams, their desire to give their children the best education possible, and their love of Beyoncé and Tom Hanks, so long as these are not mixed with politics.”

While expressing differing viewpoints and through exploring disagreements, *Cato Unbound* offers its own contribution to the cause of civil discourse and free and open discussion. While declining trust and rising political polarization are driving us apart, Cato stands by its commitment to the power of ideas, the unhindered search for truth, and ways to build a better life. Ultimately, that commitment itself might prove to be a crucial part of the way forward. ■

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