

# The Many Polarizations of America

Three new books cover the different ways and reasons that we've ended up divided.



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Jan. 28, 2020

This month has brought a surfeit of interesting new books about American politics, most of them attempts to explain exactly how we reached our current era of gridlock and demagoguery, in which disliked establishments and disreputable populists clash by night.

This task means that they are necessarily studies in polarization, in the roots of partisan hatred and ideological mistrust. And it means they usefully be read together, and against one another, to try to get a holistic sense of the forces tearing us apart.

I'm going to do that with three of them in this column, starting with the one that formally takes polarization as its theme, Ezra Klein's "Why We're Polarized." Klein's book is political and sociological, but its primary interest is psychological: how the tribal impulse shapes our interaction with news and information, how the partisan brain protects itself from unwanted data and uncomfortable truths, how "the press secretary in your mind" finds a way to spin discomfiting developments so that your side comes out on top.

This means the book is at its best when Klein is puncturing the kind of simplistic centrism that imagines that the cure for division is just to educate people about the Right Answers™ to complicated policy disputes. In fact education can increase polarization, because the more tools you have to interpret the world, the easier it is to cleverly interpret it so that your side is always right. Thus high-information voters are more intense partisans than low-information voters, and the old quip that "X is so foolish, only an intellectual could believe it" has empirical support — in a study Klein cites, for instance, that found smart people talking themselves into the wrong answers on brainteasers where the right answers had ideological implications they disliked.

The focus on the psychological, though, makes Klein's book a bit less compelling as a historical account of how we ended up polarized in this particular way. Generally the story he tells makes today's partisan polarization seem somewhat inevitable, and its relative

absence before the 1970s simply an artifact of the distorting effects of Southern segregation on American politics.

Once Jim Crow was dismantled, in this telling, some kind of partisan and ideological sort became inevitable. And to the extent that Klein offers a specific explanation for why this sorting has become so much starker and nastier lately, it's an extension of that story. If excluding black voters from politics entirely once made it easier for white Americans to cooperate across party lines, now growing racial diversity makes conservative whites feel under "demographic threat," which encourages the bunker mentality to which all human beings are prone.

Because Klein is a liberal and I'm a conservative, it may just be the press secretary in *my* mind (or my bunker) that makes me doubt the completeness of this analysis. But let's consider a rival account offered from the right, in Christopher Caldwell's "Age of Entitlement: America Since the Sixties," which depicts the polarization that Klein analyzes in terms of identity and psychology as more of a war of genuinely irreconcilable ideas.

Like Klein, Caldwell (a Times contributing Opinion writer) considers the civil rights era a watershed, but in his narrative the crucial polarization isn't racial but constitutional: In order to rectify racial injustice, '60s reformers created, through the Civil Rights Act, a structure of judicial and bureaucratic supervision and redress that gradually expanded into a rival constitutional system.

This "Second Constitution" is organized around the advancement of groups claiming equality, not the protection of citizens enjoying liberties. And so the claims these groups make must be privileged over and against both the normal legislative process and the freedoms of speech and religion and association that the original Constitution protects.

Every subsequent culture-war battle, in Caldwell's account — the debates over feminism and gay marriage, transgender rights and immigration — follows the lines of this constitutional division. The new constitutionalists are constantly discovering new rights and empowering courts and bureaucracies to enforce them; the old constitutionalists object, win a few elections on the objection and then find themselves defeated nonetheless. And this pattern of defeat is responsible, he implies, for the Trumpian turn: After so many failures to defend the old Constitution, Trump-era conservatives are embracing the logic of the new one, choosing white-identity politics because in "the new constitutional dispensation that began in 1964," group identities are the only ones that count.

Caldwell's book is noteworthy for being a conservative account that effectively reinforces a liberal ideological narrative. It is usually liberals who argue that on every new culture-war battlefield their side is just extending Martin Luther King Jr.'s vision, while conservatives

respond that the civil rights acts were supposed to correct a specific historical injustice and their application to debates over gender or marriage or abortion or the rights of illegal immigrants warps that purpose. Caldwell shrugs off this idea as a pleasant illusion; in his account the original critics of civil rights legislation were probably correct to warn against its revolutionary implications, which include the steady subsequent advance of cultural progressivism, an enormous expansion of deficit spending and the economic abandonment and cultural vilification of the white male working class.

And this is where Caldwell's account becomes unpersuasive in its turn. He depicts federal economic policymaking after the civil rights era as a hugely expensive attempt at "integrating Americans by race and sex," a project paid for after Ronald Reagan by deficits rather than transfers. But as Wesley Yang points out in a review of "The Age of Entitlement" for The Washington Examiner, there's little evidence that American public policy actually transfers lots of money from whites to minorities; the spending that Reagan's deficits funded was for the military and old-age entitlements, both of which flowed far more into white pocketbooks than black ones. Nor were the economic policies that have arguably harmed working class whites the most somehow a necessary extension of civil rights legislation: China's entry into the World Trade Organization, to choose one signal example, was not somehow foreordained when L.B.J. set pen to paper.

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So if Caldwell's book supplements and corrects Klein's, by giving a clearer sense of the ideological stakes involved in post-1960s polarization, his account needs to be corrected and supplemented in its turn. And a third new book, Michael Lind's "The New Class War: Saving Democracy From the Managerial Elite," does an important part of that work, by explaining an aspect of our present polarization that can't be traced to specifically American racial fears or constitutional debates: Namely, the way that our populist-era divisions increasingly mirror Europe's, with the same exodus of downscale voters from left-of-center parties, the same polarization by education and class.

In Lind's account, Caldwell's story about the advance of social liberalism through bureaucratic and judicial power is just a subsidiary of the more important story, the post-1970s consolidation of *economic* power by a "managerial" upper class. The liberalism of Bill Clinton and Barack Obama isn't an ideology of white disempowerment, in his account, so much as a solvent that weakens *any* institution — from churches and families to union shops and local industries — that might grant real power to groups outside the gilded city, the Silicon Valley bubble, the Ivy League gate. And together with its center-right partner in crime, Reagan-Thatcher libertarianism, this liberalism's policy choices — economic and

social permissiveness, effectively conjoined — created a new class divide, between thriving meritocratic hubs and a declining and demoralized heartland, that explains both the frequency of populist irruptions and their consistent futility.

But even as he acknowledges the faults of populism, Lind treats the class-war aspect of polarization as a potentially positive development, because he hopes that it will create a real political coalition for the losers of neoliberal era — a socially conservative, economically left-leaning constituency that's numerous but often homeless. Making such a coalition constructive rather than just disruptive may be impossible, but it's the only way he sees to escape neoliberal oligarchy and bring our class war to an end with a negotiated peace.

Lind is somewhat too polemical in his treatment of neoliberalism, too dismissive of the reasons for Reagan-to-Obama economic choices and the constraints that post-1970s policymakers faced, just as Caldwell is too polemical in his treatment of racial liberalism and Klein is too polemical in his treatment of conservatism. But the beauty of reading several too-polemical accounts together is that you end up with a capacious-feeling portrait of the whole. From Klein you can take the truth that politics tends naturally to polarize and that racial divisions and racism make that polarization worse; from Caldwell the truth that our polarization follows ideological fault lines, not just tribal ones; from Lind the reality that culture war looks indistinguishable from class war the deeper our polarization gets.

Still, there is one book missing to complete the picture: All of these writers treat the dramatic religious trends since the 1960s, both secularization and institutional-Christian decline, as subsidiary to their major themes, and in fact the religious polarization of America is at least as important to the story as the polarizations they describe.

But a description of how religious polarization interacts with all the other forms, like the question of how one might transcend any of them, will have to await another column, and a different set of reading recommendations. For now, read these three books together, and you will be closer to enlightenment — though maybe also a little more despairing — about our widening divisions than you are right now.

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