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**DIVERSITY
ISN'T WHAT
DIVIDES US.
DIVISION
IS WHAT
DIVIDES US.**

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INTRODUCTION

There is a growing sense that the American project, and the Western liberal project more generally, is faltering. Our politics have become increasingly caustic, and norms of civility have eroded. There is less bipartisan compromise, and more attempts at winner-take-all brinksmanship. Partisanship is penetrating deeper into more spheres of life, to the point where marriages are increasingly well-sorted by political affiliation.¹

One potential source of this discord is the increase in diversity in Western countries. For example, according to the U.S. Census Bureau, the foreign-born population of the United States has increased from a bit under 5 percent in 1970 to a bit under 13 percent in 2010. Across the same time period, the United States has had a growing minority population, and it is projected to become majority-minority by 2044. One might reasonably suspect that significant demographic changes can lead to a strain on political institutions.

Indeed, ethnic, religious and linguistic diversity are often cited as a source of social division.² On these accounts, diverse populations are well-correlated with a number of social ills. In several papers, Harvard economist Alberto Alesina and his co-authors argue that diverse populations are less able to provide public goods, which has implications for quality of government more generally. In his influential 2006 Johan Skytte Prize Lecture, Robert Putnam argues that more diverse societies have lower levels of “social capital,” measured in terms of social trust – the belief in the honesty, integrity and reliability of others – and rates of community participation. For UCLA economist Dora L. Costa and USC economist Matthew Kahn, the finding that diversity reduces social capital is robust enough to count as an empirical regularity. This basic set of results has been associated with what’s called the “conflict theory” of intergroup interaction. This literature broadly suggests that diverse populations are either less interested in working together toward common social and political goals, or are less able to. Groups either perceive each other as threats, or they are in conflict over resources.

As Putnam says, “Diversity does not produce ‘bad race relations’ or ethnically-defined group hostility...rather, inhabitants of diverse communities tend to withdraw from public life, to distrust their neighbors, regardless of the colour of their skin, to withdraw even from close friends, to expect the

1 [“Partisanship and Political Animosity in 2016.”](#) June 22, 2016. Washington, D.C.: Pew Research Center.

2 Alesina, Alberto, et al., “Public Goods and Ethnic Divisions.” *Quarterly Journal of Economics* 114: 1234–84 (1999). Alesina and Eliana La Ferrara. 2000. [“Participation in Heterogeneous Communities.”](#) *Quarterly Journal of Economics* 115: 847-904. Costa, Dora L., and Matthew E. Kahn. 2003. “Civic Engagement and Community Heterogeneity: An Economist’s Perspective.” *Perspectives on Politics* 1 (1), 103-111. Alesina and La Ferrara. 2005. “Ethnic Diversity and Economic Performance.” *Journal of Economic Literature* 43(3): 762-800. Putnam, Robert D. 2007. “E Pluribus Unum: Diversity and Community in the Twenty-First Century: The 2006 Johan Skytte Price Lecture.” *Scandinavian Political Studies* 30: 137–74.



worst from their community and its leaders, to volunteer less, give less to charity and work on community projects less often, to register to vote less, to agitate for social reform more, but have less faith that they can actually make a difference, and to huddle unhappily in front of the television...diversity, at least in the short run, seems to bring out the turtle in all of us.”³

The view that diversity generates problems for liberal societies makes intuitive sense. After all, diversity implies difference — different wants, different needs, and different interests. The more diverse a society is, the more likely these differences will manifest themselves in ways that put people at odds with each other. There will be different diagnoses of society’s problems, different goals, and different methods for solving problems and achieving social goals. Since many of these goals will be in conflict with each other, we can’t simply try to achieve them all. We as a society have to make choices and determine our priorities. In that process, some people’s interests will come out on top, and some people will be upset that the country’s priorities were not their priorities.

Differences in policy preferences may stem from differences in values, but they may also stem from differences in knowledge, or even differences in how people assess and weigh evidence. So, even if we broadly agree on our values, we might still disagree about what policies to pursue. Many of our social challenges are complex and multifaceted, and we all may care about different aspects of those challenges and disagree on what we take reasonable solutions to be, even if we are all trying our best to understand each other. No matter what, diverse societies are just going to encounter more disagreements, because diverse societies are simply more likely to draw from different values, evidence, and methods of assessment than more homogeneous ones.

As I have argued in “Social Contract Theory for a Diverse World: Beyond Tolerance,” even when we all act in good faith, we may not be able to come to a consensus view in the short term.⁴ There are simply too many views that are reasonable to hold given our diverse commitments, knowledge, and interests. Furthermore, a more diverse population is just more likely to suffer from miscommunication and misunderstanding than a more homogeneous population in which people have a large set of shared beliefs and commitments. Not only will we disagree, but we may not even understand each other all the time. If we measure the danger to our institutions by the number of disagreements they must manage, then diversity is dangerous.

³ Putnam 2007, pp. 150-151

⁴ Muldoon, Ryan. 2016. “Social Contract Theory for a Diverse World: Beyond Tolerance.” New York: Routledge.



THE VALUE OF DIVERSITY AND DISAGREEMENT

However, disagreement can also protect us from danger. That's why diversity can also help in a liberal society. Diverse societies may disagree more often, but these disagreements may represent important liberal resources rather than problems. Because so many of our social challenges are complex, we benefit from having multiple ways of understanding them. The more we agree on how to think about a complex problem, the more likely it is that we're all wrong. It is extraordinarily difficult to capture all the relevant details in one model of a complex problem. The more we all focus on the same evidence, the more likely we are to be missing important evidence that is relevant to the problem. There is just too much that could be brought to bear on the question at hand. The more we agree on which values we prioritize, the more likely we are to miss out on protecting other values that we may not have noticed are implicated by our policy choices.

Complex social problems are often so complex in part because they touch on a wide variety of important values. A more diverse society can help bring out better arguments, better ideas and better policies, even if the process is contentious. If anything, a diverse society helps bring these better ideas and arguments and policies forth because the conversation is more contentious. It is through the process of disagreement that we can come to understand the nuances of these complex challenges that we face. The common-law adversarial court system has long recognized this. By allowing different sides to debate and bring forth their best evidence and arguments, we put judges and juries in a position to make judgments that are as responsive to the complexities of the situation as we can reasonably manage. Each side's self-interest is aligned with the court's interest in both discovering the facts of the case and finding a fair resolution to the disagreement.

Likewise, just as monocultures can be more easily invaded by a pest, and one-industry towns are more vulnerable to economic shocks, politically homogenous communities are more vulnerable to political failures. "Invasion" of bad ideas is harder when there are already lots of conflicting ideas vying for attention. The regular contest of ideas helps build up an immune system against more dangerous ones. Diverse environments are more robust environments, simply because they embed more possibilities for the future. Diverse environments are more adaptable because different aspects of them already have to adapt to each other. So, this line of thought goes, if you want to protect liberal institutions, a more diverse society is the best way of doing it. While society may change through time, it is less likely to fail.

So, while there is a plausible account of why diversity is a danger to liberal institutions, there's an equally plausible account of why diversity is the thing



that saves them. It may be helpful, then, to look not just at the data regarding whether or not the United States is becoming more diverse, but also at the data that examines people's attitudes and behaviors toward this growing diversity. If diversity is the problem, then we should expect people to say so.

RECENT TRENDS IN ATTITUDES TOWARD DIVERSITY

The empirical data on diversity in the United States is, by and large, positive and trending in the right direction. Interracial marriages have been steadily rising, from three percent of new marriages in 1967 to 17 percent of new marriages in 2015. Interfaith marriages have also increased, from 19 percent of marriages before 1960 to 39 percent of new marriages since 2010.⁵ Fifty-seven percent of Americans say that increasing national diversity makes the country a better place, compared to only eight percent who say it makes the country a worse place.⁶ Happily, this data suggests that Americans by and large support living in a diverse country, and increasingly, American household-formation demonstrates that significant life choices are consistent with espoused beliefs. Overall, Americans really do seem to value living in a diverse society.

However, while the general story is positive, we can find some fissures that are worth exploring. While interracial marriage is going up, it is far more likely in urban areas than in rural ones. Likewise, though 53 percent of Americans say that immigrants strengthen the country, 38 percent say they burden the country. Of those who say that immigrants burden the country, 34 percent say they are angry with the federal government.

Similarly, of the eight percent of Americans who say that increasing diversity makes the country a worse place, 42 percent are angry with the federal government. Attitudes against immigration and diversity are strongest among those with the least educational attainment, and lowest among those with the most educational attainment. Here, we find a fairly small minority that is against diversity generally, and a reasonably large minority that is

5 Geiger, Abigail, and Gretchen Livingston. 13 Feb. 2018. "8 Facts About Love and Marriage in America." FactTank: News in the Numbers. Washington, D.C.: Pew Research Center.

6 "Beyond Distrust: How Americans View Their Government." 23 Nov. 2015. Washington, D.C.: Pew Research Center.



against immigration. Most worrying, however, is that a large minority of both of those groups is both upset about these demographic issues and angry with the federal government. It is reasonable to assume that those who are both angry with the government and think some residents are a burden on society are going to be less interested in reasonable compromises with those residents that are mediated by our political institutions.

A related trend that is worth noting is that our two main political parties are increasingly representing, and to some extent catering, to distinct demographic groups. While Republicans maintain an advantage with whites (51 percent to 43 percent) compared to Democrats, Democrats have enormous advantages with African Americans (84 percent to 8 percent), Hispanics (63 percent to 28 percent) and Asian-Americans (65 percent to 27 percent). While Democrats have been making large gains with more-educated voters, Republicans have been making gains with those with no college experience. Likewise, Democrats have a large advantage with urban voters (62 percent to 31 percent), while Republicans have a large advantage with rural voters (54 percent to 38 percent). All of these divides have grown over time.⁷

While the composition of the Republican coalition has remained relatively stable, the Democratic coalition is increasingly composed of women and minorities. Republicans are slowly becoming older, whiter, more rural, more male, and more Christian relative to the rest of the electorate, even though their coalition hasn't changed much. The Democratic coalition has changed along with the electorate, but as the urban/rural divide in partisan identification suggests, those changes are only occurring in parts of the country.⁸

That different parties cater to different coalitions is, of course, unsurprising. That is broadly what political parties are for. However, we may wish to pay attention to the fact that nonwhites overwhelmingly favor one party, and that the parties are somewhat separated spatially, as Democrats tend to be more urban, and Republicans tend to be more rural. These cleavages by race and space help explain the growing sense of division and distrust.

As we shall see, the recent empirical literature suggests that diversity itself is not a problem. If anything, diversity provides a small boost to social trust. But diversity is, in a way, implicated in a likelier culprit of reduced social trust: segregation. Segregation is possible only when there is diversity, but there are very different outcomes in diverse environments that are integrated compared to diverse environments that are segregated, and these differences are visible at a variety of geographical scales. The insight that segregated populations are necessarily diverse populations brings into focus earlier findings to the effect that greater diversity is statistically associated with worse social and political outcomes. Those results were, by and large, about segregated environments.

7 "Wide Gender Gap, Growing Educational Divide in Voters' Party Identification." March 20, 2018. Washington, D.C.: Pew Research Center.

8 "Voters' Party Identification," Pew Research Center (see footnote 6).



Once we shift our thinking away from the idea that diversity causes problems to the idea that segregation causes problems, we can more accurately pinpoint the dangers to democracy. In particular, by thinking more carefully about segregation, we can better understand the mechanisms driving division and mutual distrust. The relationship between segregation and polarization is especially important.

However, before we delve into the risks to democracy posed by segregation, it will be helpful to remind ourselves of the basic vision of liberal democracy.

LIBERALISM AS A FRAMEWORK FOR MANAGING DISAGREEMENT

Liberal institutions emerged out of an effort to manage disagreement nonviolently. Locke's "A Letter Concerning Toleration" is emblematic of the centrality of disagreement to the liberal tradition. Deep, persistent disagreements, like those about religion, risk dangerous civil conflict in the absence of political mechanisms able to contain and defuse them. Prior to the advent of liberal institutions, these disagreements were typically settled by force. But Locke argued that neither politics nor force can change someone's mind about something so fundamental. Even if one sect is in the position to force others to conform to the edicts of its favored doctrine, doing so may suppress the disagreement, but it does not actually resolve it. After all, when one group does bring others in line through force, there's little reason to think the members of the compelled group will regard their new, mandated religion as legitimate. So, instead of sticking with a system that generates constant conflict, as groups vie to take a turn oppressing their rivals, Locke argued that we should simply accept that the state can't resolve these disagreements. In effect, we should agree to disagree. We can continue to try and convince each other in private life if we so wish, but the desire to get others to adopt our views about fundamental questions should not bear on our shared public commitments.

While Locke's account of toleration was built around religious disagreement, and the inability of reasonable people to resolve it through politics, later liberal theorists argued that disagreement wasn't just something we would have to live with; disagreement can also serve as a crucial tool for social



progress. A number of liberal thinkers, such as James Madison in “Federalist 10” and John Stuart Mill in “On Liberty,” maintained that robust disagreement and discussion is key to a well-functioning society. The first step in that line of thinking was to recognize that disagreement over values and goals isn’t illicit in a liberal society.

Madison discussed this in terms of factions, which organize themselves around a common set of interests in public debate. Others argued that factions ought never to form in an ideal democracy, but Madison maintained that they were, in fact, the natural result of freedom of conscience and liberty of thought. Because people’s interests and experiences differ, it is impossible for a liberal society to prevent the creation of factions that attempt to promote their distinctive interests. Madison argued that since factions can’t be eliminated, we need a country large enough to sustain a multitude of factions in competition with each other. Given that factions will come to exist, the solution is to make sure that they are forced to engage on terms that prevent any from coming to dominate the rest. A bigger society allows for more factions, and more factions make public debate more robust. As with the adversarial common-law tradition, the more factions compete, the more ideas are tested, and the more society has to gain. The prevalence and multiplicity of these disagreements prevent any single narrow interest from gaining power over others.

Mill refined and extended this line of thought, arguing that tolerance, free speech and robust disagreement were crucial for improving society and preventing social stagnation. Tolerance was necessary to allow for the emergence of other values and ways of life. Mill, unlike many classical liberals before him, recognized that the exercise of liberty must be protected from the coercion of one’s neighbors, and not only from the coercion of the state. Mill proposed “experiments in living” as a mechanism for individuals to explore different plans of life. So long as these experiments didn’t harm others, individuals should be allowed the freedom to pursue them. Mill paired this freedom to explore with an extremely robust account of the freedom of speech. Together, these freedoms provide societies with opportunities to innovate and find errors in existing beliefs. We may not coerce others to make them believe what we believe, but we must be free to critique their beliefs and to try to show them why they are mistaken. Within the marketplace of ideas, both participants and observers benefit from spirited exchange, as everyone is pushed to develop the best version of their argument so that they can respond effectively to the other side. Eventually, Mill argued, the best ideas will win, and everyone will benefit.

Madison and Mill (and later liberals, such as Dewey, Hayek and Popper) present liberalism as a structured contest of competing and potentially incompatible ideas. Liberal states provide mechanisms for experimentation, and a means for us to evaluate and debate the results, all within a structure of rules that assumes equal standing among participants. However, the liberal ideal of a contest of ideas and values requires actual engagement between their proponents. That is, the ideal of productive contestation relies on the notion of a public square in which all comers can and do engage with



others, challenging their ideas and being challenged in turn. It can't work if representatives of competing ideas don't show up.

To make matters worse, if we engage only with those who already largely agree with us, the same belief-updating processes that tend to push honest, adversarial dialogue in the direction of truth can instead drive deliberation to extremes, pushing rival intellectual and political factions further apart.

INTELLECTUAL MARKET FAILURE: HOMOGENEITY AND BELIEF POLARIZATION

There is no give and take of competing ideas and interests if the only arguments we hear are those we already agree with. If there is no public square, or if most of our conversations take place in what we might think of as gated communities, the give-and-take of ideas breaks down. When we retreat to the comfort of like-minded communities, we don't experience spirited engagement with different insights and values, and can find ourselves in echo chambers. Madison's model of factions fails if we rarely compete directly with each other, and instead simply divide up territory and hunker down with our clans. Mill's marketplace of ideas can't winnow out bad ideas if they are only reinforced and never challenged. Indeed, lack of diversity and contestation in deliberation can lead to "belief polarization" and acute failure of the liberal ideal.

Belief polarization occurs when interlocutors on some subject are already more or less in agreement. Deliberation among like-minded people tends to pull the members of the group further in the direction of their initial beliefs.⁹ (Sunstein, 1999) Rather than such deliberation resulting in individuals holding, say, the median view of the participants, it generates beliefs that are more radical than those any individual in the group started with. For instance, members of a group of like-minded gun control advocates might begin a discussion of gun control policy with individual positions that center

⁹ Sunstein, Cass R. 1999. "The Law of Group Polarization." Working Paper No. 91. Stanford Law School: John M. Olin Program in Law and Economics.



around beefing up background checks and closing loopholes, but then drift gradually over the course of deliberation toward agreement on more and more restrictive policies, until they arrive at beliefs that center on banning guns altogether, despite the fact that no member of the group started with such an extreme stance. Likewise, gun rights advocates might start deliberation with the idea that individuals have a right to keep guns in their home for protection, and end up with the view that we should arm teachers and librarians to protect children from violence.

As Sunstein, Ellman, and Schkade (2003) discuss, there are multiple mechanisms that can generate belief polarization.¹⁰ Most basically, when you hear arguments that defend a position you already agree with, you're likely to find those arguments persuasive. This is a version of motivated reasoning — we are more inclined to like arguments that get to conclusions that we want to endorse. Because we like these conclusions, we aren't very critical of the mechanics of the argument itself, but instead simply take it on board, and view the argument as yet more evidence for our position. We think of deliberation as providing us with new evidence and as an opportunity to test our arguments. However, when everyone is like-minded, our arguments only get tested from one direction. If we keep getting challenged from the left, we are more likely to adjust leftward. As we update our beliefs to the left, our interlocutors are also doing the same. So new discussion will continue this pushing in the same direction. This mechanism is just a degenerate version of the kind of responsive updating that minimizes error in robust debate. In intellectually homogenous groups, people deploy their rational faculties, but only get feedback from one direction, which leads to revision in one direction.

A related mechanism that Sunstein, Ellman and Schkade discuss is “corroboration.”¹¹ People whose ideas are challenged tend to become less confident in their original view and more moderate in their beliefs. But in a homogenous environment, one's beliefs are only confirmed and reinforced. Even as would-be moderates move closer to the corners, people who were already committed to extreme views but felt uncomfortable expressing them will become more likely to speak up, pulling debate even further their way.

A final and more worrying mechanism that Sunstein, Ellman and Schkade outline is “social comparison.”¹² Individuals under the influence of social comparison take on the beliefs they think will raise their reputation with others in their group. We all want to be liked, and if we think everyone else in our group holds some view, that gives us a reason for taking the view on as well. As we mutually adjust our opinions to stay in the good graces of our group, the entire group can drift toward more extreme views and develop a stronger in-group/out-group distinction.

10 Sunstein, Cass R., Lisa Michelle Ellman, and David Schkade. 2003. “Ideological Voting on Federal Courts of Appeals: A Preliminary Investigation.” Working Paper No. 198. Stanford Law School: John M. Olin Program in Law and Economics.

11 “Ideological Voting,” Sunstein et al. (see footnote 9).

12 “Ideological Voting,” Sunstein et al. (see footnote 9).



Belief polarization is so troubling because it is generated by the normal mechanisms of Millian debate or Madisonian factionalism, but without diverse inputs. The individuals involved are using generally reliable methods for updating their beliefs and attitudes, but those methods only steer deliberation toward truth when there is a range of different views.

This is a pervasive problem that afflicts even highly skilled reasoners, like judges. Sunstein, Ellman and Schkade show that three-judge panels in the federal circuit-court system exhibit polarization effects when all three judges were appointed by a president of the same political party.¹³ Decisions from mixed-party panels are narrower and more moderate. Boyd, Epstein, and Martin found a similar result for gender composition. Male judges are significantly more likely to rule in favor of a litigant claiming discrimination when a female judge is also on the panel.¹⁴ Kastellec finds a similar effect for racial composition. The presence of a black judge on a three-judge panel “nearly ensures” that the panel will vote in favor of an affirmative-action program.¹⁵ Cox and Miles find that a black judge on a three-judge panel increases the likelihood that other judges on the panel will find violations of the Voting Rights Act.¹⁶

These findings demonstrate that belief polarization can occur even among highly skilled reasoners with reputations for impartiality. As a result, we have good reason to worry about polarization in the general population. Perhaps most notably, early work on the subject suggests that ethnically homogenous groups can polarize toward increased racial animus. Myers and Bishop find that in a group discussion among white people who demonstrated some pre-existing racial animus, these views significantly increased as a result of the discussion.¹⁷ A more recent paper by Del Vicario et al. examines this phenomenon on Facebook, with a more fine-grained exploration. They find that individuals within polarized groups become increasingly angry toward out-group members and out-group ideas the more they are involved in discussion.¹⁸ This is again worrisome, as the Millian model supposes that more active discussion will help to drum out bad ideas. Instead we find that more active discussion makes it easier to hold bad ideas in place in a polarized environment.

Once we fail to have a diverse set of inputs, the contested deliberation of Madison and Mill and a variety of other liberal thinkers simply breaks. While an imagined public square or marketplace of ideas does not have to include

¹³ “Ideological Voting,” Sunstein et al. (see footnote 9).

¹⁴ Boyd, Christina L., Lee Epstein, and Andrew D. Martin. 2010. “Untangling the Causal Effects of Sex on Judging.” *American Journal of Political Science* 54: 389-411.

¹⁵ Kastellec, Jonathan P. 2013. “Racial Diversity and Judicial Influence on Appellate Courts.” *American Journal of Political Science* 57: 167-183.

¹⁶ Cox, Adam B. and Thomas J. Miles. 2008. “Judging the Voting Rights Act.” *Columbia Law Review* 108 (1).

¹⁷ Myers, David G., and George D. Bishop. 1970. “Discussion Effects on Racial Attitudes.” *Science* 169: 778-779.

¹⁸ Del Vicario, Michela, et al. 2016. “Echo Chambers: Emotional Contagion and Group Polarization on Facebook.” *Scientific Reports* 6.



everyone in society, it must include sufficiently varied ideas and values to produce substantive, robust disagreements. The experience of intellectual pushback and dialectical engagement serves to make participants more modest in their beliefs and more cognizant of the merits of rival beliefs, and helps them to winnow out ideas that can't survive scrutiny. But if we avoid the diverse public square and mingle only in semi-private squares of like-minded individuals, the same deliberative mechanisms give us the opposite results. People become more certain, more willing to condemn their opposition, and more extreme in their beliefs.

Thus far we have cast belief polarization as merely a bug that afflicts the liberal model under conditions of segregation, but Glaeser (2005) argues that for ambitious politicians, it can be a feature. He suggests a formal model of political economy that aims to describe how between-group animosity can take hold in segregated environments, but not in more-integrated environments. His model focuses on attempts to initiate or exploit animosity, which can be prevented by better between-group contact. The core idea is that hate-generating stories about an out-group can be useful to motivate a politician's base. Such agitation is both cheap and effective when the politician's base has little to no exposure to the out-group, but when different groups are mixed together, people are less willing to simply accept those hate-generating stories. Instead, they have reason to look into the narrative themselves. This raises the cost for politicians attempting to use animosity and division as political weapons. If the costs are too high, politicians abandon the politics of division, and instead try to argue for their policies on the merits.¹⁹ This account presents animosity as the default option for politicians calculating costs and benefits, and integrated environments as a way of breaking the mechanism. By assuming the presence of fundamentally illiberal actors interested in exploiting liberal institutions, this model suggests that efforts to persuade citizens of the need to strengthen those institutions through reforms will meet with concerted opposition. It thus paints an even more pessimistic picture than the studies described above, in which it is possible to assume that polarized parties remain fundamentally committed to liberal values and thus amenable to reform.

We can find empirical evidence at a large scale that demonstrates the harms of polarization. Rapp finds that social capital, and social trust in particular, is lower in countries that exhibit higher levels of belief polarization on questions of morality.²⁰ This was based on a hierarchical analysis of the fifth wave of the World Values Survey, using a sample of 39 countries, relying on views of homosexuality, abortion, and euthanasia as proxies for moral beliefs. In particular, the stronger the bimodality of response to these moral questions, the more social trust declines. Within the sampled population, ethnic diversity has a statistically insignificant positive effect on social trust. Moral issue-polarization, however, has a stronger negative effect on social trust

¹⁹ Glaeser, Edward L. 2005. "The Political Economy of Hatred." *The Quarterly Journal of Economics* 120 (1): 45-86.

²⁰ Rapp, Carolin. 2016. "Moral Opinion Polarization and the Erosion of Trust." *Social Science Research* 58: 34-45.



than income inequality as measured by the Gini index. The more our beliefs diverge from each other, the harder it becomes to reconcile those beliefs or even see the other side as participating in the discussion in good faith.

SEGREGATION, NOT DIVERSITY, IS THE PROBLEM

Given these rather stark empirical results, and the obvious conflict between broad liberal ideals and a society composed of polarized minisocieties that rarely interact but seek to have political authority over each other, we have good reason to want to reduce the potential for polarization. However, segregation serves to make polarization easier. Segregation shapes who our conversational partners initially are. Polarization can make it more likely that we'll want to remain segregated.

Clarifying the connection between polarization and segregation is critical to the debate over the causes of failure in civic institutions. Taking greater care to distinguish diversity from segregation is particularly important. Conflating diversity and segregation, and their effects, has led to the idea that diversity is a potentially serious problem. But the idea that diversity is a problem suggests segregation as a solution, which threatens to make the corrosive polarizing tendencies of segregation even worse.

The “diversity is a problem” story suggests that there is simply an upper bound on how different people in a society can be. More worrisome forms of this argument implicitly argue that the presence of minorities is fundamentally caustic to a society. As such, their presence is a burden on society, and there is only so much burden society can bear. Whether the alleged burden of diversity is thought to be due to disagreement, conflicting norms, or basic tribal animus, this account hinges on the idea that the majority needs to manage the diversity it is exposed to, as a matter of prudence. But there is not much one can do about diversity, as such, other than attempt to reduce it. Indeed, a potentially reasonable local response to the imagined problem of diversity would be to move toward people like oneself and away from those who are different. Even if one’s city or country is diverse, it might seem sensible for people to shape their neighborhoods to be more homogenous.

Since this “diversity is a problem” model has a great deal of intuitive pull, it is important to evaluate the evidence around segregation and its civic impact.



Simply put, the evidence is overwhelming in finding that social ills arise from segregation, not diversity by itself. What is most striking, however, is that this appears to be true at any policy-relevant level of analysis that we might choose.

THE TOXICITY OF SEGREGATION

Alesina and Zhuravskaya (2011) find that ethnic and linguistic segregation is negatively associated with quality of government in a cross-section of countries.²¹ Alesina and La Ferrara (2005) and Alesina et al. (1999) had done earlier work that demonstrated that higher levels of diversity are associated with lower-quality governance, and less redistribution.²² However, in this later work, Alesina and Zhuravskaya find that if one controls for diversity and the level of development at the country level, higher ethnic or linguistic segregation is associated with significantly lower quality of government. Interestingly for our purposes, this relationship is strongest in democracies. Alesina and Zhuravskaya are able to examine the causal relationship between lowered social trust and segregation by examining the composition of groups in neighboring countries to allow for a comparison of “predicted” segregation compared to actual segregation. They then find that the causal effect of segregation remained significantly negative on trust and the quality of government. So, rather than low trust between groups causing more segregation, more segregation caused lower trust between groups, which then lowered the quality of governance.

Alesina’s earlier work had provided important evidence in favor of the view that diversity was a source of division. However, as better datasets have become available, such that the spatial features of a population can be more carefully measured, segregation has emerged as the true culprit of reduced trust and institutional quality — at least at the national level.

Robinson has produced a similar finding in the African context. Examining public-opinion data from 16 African nations using the 2005 Afrobarometer survey, she finds that as national-level ethnic diversity goes up, there is more coethnic trust than interethnic trust. However, this effect is mediated by diversity at the local level. And, consistent with Alesina and Zhuravskaya’s

²¹ Alesina, Alberto, and Ekaterina Zhuravskaya. 2011. “Segregation and the Quality of Government in a Cross Section of Countries.” *American Economic Review* 101 (5): 1872-1911.

²² Alesina et al., “Public Goods and Ethnic Divisions.” Alesina and La Ferrara, “Ethnic Diversity and Economic Performance” (see footnote 2).



2011 study, interethnic trust goes down the most where ethnic segregation is highest. Robinson argues that this is due to the fact that national-level politics are easier to racialize if ethnic groups are separate. When there are more ethnic groups at the local level, local civic experience points away from endorsing racialized policies.²³

Robinson's account very neatly maps onto the view that segregation and polarization are tightly connected. Conflict between groups is easier and more likely if those groups are separated spatially, which makes their views more likely to polarize. As views polarize, aversion to engaging at all with the out-group strengthens. However, if groups are spatially intermixed and interact regularly, the vicious circle of polarization does not get started.

This work suggests that national-level segregation is problematic. Robinson offers some evidence that suggests that local-level integration helps improve national-level politics. But what about the effects at the local level? Putnam suggested that diverse localities had lower levels of social capital, had lower levels of volunteering, and exhibited a "hunkering down" effect.²⁴ Costa and Kahn find that diversity virtually always reduces social trust.²⁵ How have these claims held up? What's the evidence on the effects of local diversity?

Marschall and Stolle suggest a mixed picture, looking at data from the 1976 Detroit Area Survey. Overall, they find that individuals in racially mixed neighborhoods are inclined to exhibit higher levels of trust than those in homogenous ones. They find that whites' generalized trust levels are most strongly associated with education level. African-Americans' level of trust goes up with racial heterogeneity as well as with informal social interaction.²⁶ This suggests that segregation negatively affects minorities rather strongly but may be most encouraged by less educated whites. This is consistent with Pew data suggesting that antagonism towards both immigrants and diversity is associated with lower educational levels.²⁷ While low-education whites may help push for more segregation, and while minorities face more burdens from it, as Chetty and colleagues show, segregated environments reduce upward mobility for everyone.²⁸

Rothwell, relying on data from the 2000 General Social Survey, finds that local racial segregation is strongly associated with lowered levels of trust. Diversity

23 Amanda Lea Robinson. 2017. "[Ethnic Diversity, Segregation, and Ethnocentric Trust in Africa.](#)" *British Journal of Political Science* 1-23.

24 Putnam, "E Pluribus Unum" (see footnote 2).

25 Costa and Kahn, "Civic Engagement and Community Heterogeneity" (see footnote 2).

26 Marschall, Melissa J., and Dietlind Stolle. 2004. "Race and the City: Neighborhood Context and the Development of Generalized Trust." *Political Behavior* 26 (2): 125-153.

27 Neal, Samantha. 4 August 2017. "[Most Americans View Openness to Foreigners as 'Essential to Who We Are As a Nation.'](#)" FactTank: News in the Numbers. Washington, D.C.: Pew Research Center.

28 Chetty, Raj, Hendren, Nathaniel, Kline, Patrick, and Saez, Emmanuel. "Where is the Land of Opportunity? The Geography of Intergenerational Mobility in the United States." *The Quarterly Journal of Economics* 129(4): 1553-1623. 2014.



itself has no effect. Generalized trust is also found to be higher in those areas with larger populations. Rothwell, consistent with Jha (2013), Muldoon et al (2012), and Muldoon (2016), suggests that this is due to economic advantages to specialization making cross-group relationships more valuable.²⁹ Larger populations support more division of labor, so those advantages will be more pronounced. Relying on data from the Current Population Survey, Rothwell examines whether these reported levels of trust translate into concrete civic behaviors, like volunteer work. As before, segregation, but not diversity itself, is associated with lower levels of volunteering.

Uslaner, using data from the Social Capital Community Benchmark Survey in the United States and the Citizenship Survey in the United Kingdom, finds that residential segregation, rather than diversity, drives down trust in both countries.³⁰ He argues that this is driven by interaction and relationships across groups. In particular, if we look at a more fine-grained level, experiencing cross-ethnic friendships while also living in an integrated community boosts trust by about 27 percent in the United States. There is an additional gain of trust if one participates in a group of some kind with diverse membership. This pushes against the conflict model of group interaction. Indeed, it provides some evidence for the contact hypothesis – the idea that inter-group relations improve when there is greater between-group contact, especially when that interaction is on equal terms. Like the literature on the contact hypothesis³¹, it does suggest that the structure of interaction is immensely important.

Laurence examines neighborhood-level trust in Great Britain and finds that once segregation is controlled for, there is no trust loss among neighbors in diverse communities. Segregation, however, has a significant negative impact on trust. As before, it is not diversity that is a problem, but segregation. This result held not only across cities in the U.K., but between areas of London.³²

The recent literature is remarkably consistent. Diversity itself poses little problem for trust or quality of government. Diversity might even help. The evidence on the relationship between diversity, trust, and institutional quality ranges from no effect to a small benefit. And the evidence is clear that the main driver of reduced trust — and the lower-quality governance and reduced civic participation that results — is segregation. This is true cross-nationally as well as at the city and neighborhood level.

29 Rothwell, Jonathan T. 2012. "The Effects of Racial Segregation on Trust and Volunteering in US Cities." *Urban Studies* 49 (10): 2109-2136. Jha, Saumitra. 2013. "Trade, Institutions and Ethnic Tolerance: Evidence from South Asia." *American Political Science Review* 107 (4). Muldoon, Ryan, Michael Borgida, and Michael Cuffaro. 2012. "The Conditions of Tolerance." *Politics, Philosophy & Economics* 11 (3). Muldoon, Social Contract Theory (see footnote 3).

30 Uslaner, Eric M. 2011. "Trust, Diversity and Segregation in the United States and the United Kingdom." *Comparative Sociology* 10: 221-247.

31 Pettigrew, T. F.; Tropp, L. R. (2006). "A meta-analytic test of intergroup contact theory". *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*. 90 (5): 751-783

32 Laurence, James. "Wider-community Segregation and the Effect of Neighbourhood Ethnic Diversity on Social Capital: An Investigation into Intra-Neighbourhood Trust in Great Britain and London." *Sociology* 51 (5): 1011-1033.



In light of this evidence, “conflict theory,” which suggests that the presence of minorities burdens social trust, is difficult to maintain. Belief in conflict theory, or support for policies designed to mitigate the perceived negative effects of diversity, may be more likely to create civic problems than solve them. After all, if intergroup contact predicts conflict and lower levels of social trust, separating the groups will look like a plausible policy approach. Residential segregation does just that. In this way, conflict theory brings about the problems it seeks to solve.

Even though there is considerable evidence that points to segregation, rather than diversity, as the cause of a number of social ills, this would all be moot if diverse communities just tended to end up segregating naturally. Nobel laureate Thomas Schelling famously presented a mathematical model to this effect in 1971. This argument relies on the idea that diversity is simply burdensome. Schelling’s model imagines that there is no individual benefit to being in a diverse environment, but there is a cost to being in a too-diverse neighborhood. Indeed, any theoretical exploration of this question crucially rests on the assumptions of benefits and costs, and the nature of the interactions people have with their neighbors. When we look at empirical findings, we see that individual benefits and costs indeed influence the microlevel decisions that drive segregation. Conflictual interactions tend to result in segregation, whereas positive-sum interactions (like trade) support integration. But these benefits and costs are not just a product of nature. Across the United States and across the world, there is much variation in how segregated communities are. While some of these differences can be explained by, for instance, historical migration patterns, much of it can be explained by policy choices. In the United States, segregation was part of national housing policy until the passage of the Fair Housing Act in 1968. Lending practices by a number of banks have continued to display racial biases. Residential segregation has been spurred on by policy, which drove the aggregation of individual choices.

As we have seen, once groups are segregated, trust goes down, and the quality of governance goes down. Robinson (2017) suggested that this would encourage more racialized voting — a hypothesis that Alesina and Zhuravskaya didn’t have positive evidence for, but were unable to reject.³³ Because the ethnic makeup of the two major American political parties is notably skewed, this is a significant worry in the United States, especially if we have broader problems with ample political representation. As Sances and You (2017) show in an examination of 9,000 US cities, the use of municipal fines as a source of revenue rises as a function of the African-American share of the population, though the effect is reduced by greater African-American city council representation. This demonstrates the risk of exploitative policies arising in a polarized political environment.³⁴

33 Alesina and Zhuravskaya, “[Segregation and the Quality of Government.](#)”

34 Sances, Michael W., and Hye Young You. 2017. “Who Pays for Government? Descriptive Representation and Exploitative Revenue Sources.” *The Journal of Politics* 79 (3): 1090-1094.



WHAT CAN BE DONE TO REDUCE SEGREGATION?

The evidence suggests that segregation harms our civic institutions, broadly because it contributes to lower levels of social trust. The question, then, is what we might be able to do about it. Residential segregation is difficult to change. People do not move very often. Also, while people may be willing to move into well-mixed neighborhoods, many will not wish to move into neighborhoods in which they would be a distinct minority. As Schelling (1969) demonstrated, if people generally prefer at least a few co-ethnics in their neighborhood, individual residential choices over time can end up generating stark segregation, even without any real racial animus.³⁵

The most direct route to reducing segregation is by intervening directly in housing policy. The Obama administration mandated that any housing projects funded by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development had to improve ethnic and economic integration. This policy has since been dropped, but could be restored or even broadened. One option would be to use the Home Mortgage Interest Deduction in the tax code to encourage integration. For instance, the size of the deduction for new home mortgages could be calculated on a sliding scale that relates to neighborhood diversity at the moment of the sale. Alternatively, a diversity “value-added” score could be determined from whether the entering family adds to the diversity of the neighborhood. These policies roughly parallel, and invert, the redlining policies that exacerbated residential segregation in the United States and would plausibly generate a reasonable financial incentive to encourage people to live in more integrated neighborhoods. Of course, this is extraordinarily unlikely to be implemented.

Similarly aggressive policies could be targeted at schools. The most obvious would be to end the use of local property taxes to fund public school systems. This practice distorts the housing market and increases economic and ethnic segregation.³⁶ Another related policy would be to expand the size of school districts so that they cross boundaries of residential segregation and implement an integration policy within the district’s schools. This would both reduce the incentive to segregate to begin with and spur the creation of civic groups (like the Parent-Teacher Association) with integrated membership,

35 Schelling, Thomas/1971. “Dynamic Models of Segregation.” *Journal of Mathematical Sociology* 1: 143-186.

36 Owens, Ann, Sean F. Reardon, and Christopher Jencks. 2016. “[Income Segregation Between Schools and School Districts](#).” *American Educational Research Journal* 53 (4):1159-1197.

Owens, Ann. 2017. “[Racial Residential Segregation of School-Age Children and Adults and the Role of Schooling as a Segregating Force](#).” *Russell Sage Foundation Journal of the Social Sciences* 3 (2): 63-80.
Hannah-Jones, Nikole. “[The Problem We All Live With – Part One](#).” 2015. *This American Life*.



which as Uslaner (2011) showed, boost generalized trust.³⁷ Past school-busing programs meant to integrate public schools made a large number of whites extremely upset. Nevertheless, busing worked from an educational standpoint. Every group gained educationally at least a little, and minorities made substantial strides. The racial achievement gap was lowest at the height of school integration. Additionally, there is substantial evidence that attending racially diverse schools has a variety of ancillary benefits.³⁸

In both residential and educational decisions, we face a conundrum: the evidence weighs heavily in favor of policies that encourage integration. There are individual benefits to these policies, but also a clear benefit to our civic institutions. However, these are also the policies that are least likely to gain broad-based political support. Moving away from a segregated condition is remarkably difficult: People in segregated communities trust others less and have more extreme positions, making governance more difficult. But to pass legislation that would ameliorate those problems, we need some of that trust and improved governance.

DEPOLARIZING OURSELVES

Another approach is looking for other mechanisms to help depolarize ourselves, which may help create the conditions under which we can work on improving integration. Campante and Hojman found that the introduction of broadcast TV and the expansion of radio both reduced political polarization. They argue that shared broadcast media reduced politicians' incentives to polarize, and shifted the ideological composition of the electorate by motivating more people to participate.³⁹ However, this is broadly predicated on a shared media environment. A 2014 Pew research study on political polarization and media habits found that consistent liberals and consistent conservatives rely on entirely different media sources. There were also important asymmetries: Conservatives were tightly clustered around watching Fox News and broadly distrusting other media sources, whereas liberals consumed a greater variety of media and trusted more sources. Conservatives were more likely to only see similar opinions to their

³⁷ Uslaner, "Trust, Diversity and Segregation," (see footnote 26).

³⁸ Mickelson, Roslyn Arlin. 2016. "Brief No. 5: School Integration and K-12 Outcomes: An Updated Quick Synthesis of the Social Science Evidence." Washington, D.C.: National Coalition on School Diversity.

³⁹ Campante, Filipe R., and Daniel A. Hojman. 2013. "Media and Polarization: Evidence from the Introduction of Broadcast TV in the US." *Journal of Public Economics* 100: 79-92.



own on social media, but liberals were more likely to defriend someone on social media because of politics.⁴⁰ Contemporary America has much more polarized patterns of media consumption than it used to, and much more polarized media outlets.

We are no longer in a political environment that is buttressed by a common media environment. Rather than a small handful of national radio or television broadcasters, supplemented by local newspapers, we have a very large national (and international) media market. In the previous era, the small number of media players encouraged norms of even-handedness and neutrality of presentation. Picking a side meant losing a substantial portion of one's potential audience. However, thanks to the internet's making it possible to expand one's reach while making media cheaper to distribute, there are now many players competing for attention. This has encouraged the proliferation of media companies that serve a particular demographic niche. Media consumers have also come to prefer hearing stories that support their worldview. We have undoubtedly lost something of value in this shift to a much messier media environment. There isn't a common conversation made possible by everyone watching one or two news stations. However, this common conversation had its downsides as well. It meant that our shared conversation was shaped by very few people, and the issues discussed were necessarily restricted, even if only for time or space constraints. Our media environment now allows for a much more robust set of issues and perspectives to get attention, which both Madison and Mill would see as improvements to our discourse. The challenge we face is making sure that these broader discussions don't merely take place in gated communities, but actually allow for new ideas to spread across the populace. This problem is made more acute by the ease with which we can now cut ourselves off from opposing points of view. Facebook, Google, and other platforms that connect people to information tend to provide their users with more of the same. This can be yet another mechanism for polarization. Instead, however, these platforms could provide their users with counterpoints or more context as they click on different stories. Likewise, companies like Facebook are well-positioned to show their users what people who are differently situated than them see and are responding to. Steps like these could invigorate our debates and help us find cross-cutting connections, rather than further polarize.

The advantage of a bigger media market with more players ought to be the same as the advantage of a large country with many factions. It facilitates discovery of social problems that need to be addressed, and allows the country to engage in a healthy debate about how to address those problems. But this only works if we've made sure that those different views come into contact with each other. So far, we've used technology to further shield us from views that we disagree with. We could instead choose to use technology to expose us to the best arguments on the other side. This would both encourage citizens to have more nuanced views, and encourage journalists to further increase the quality of their journalism.

⁴⁰ Mitchell, Amy, et al. 21 Oct. 2014. "Political Polarization and Media Habits." Trust, Facts and Democracy. Washington, D.C.: Pew Research Center.



As Madison noted, factions are natural, and competition between them is institutionally beneficial. Mill thought robust disagreement is part of a healthy liberal order. Neither of them countenanced a liberal society where like-minded people kept to themselves, and didn't engage each other on the substance of their disputes. Our residential patterns, combined with our media consumption habits, have combined to undermine the depolarizing effects of engaging with each other. We live in increasingly divergent worlds: we are increasingly well sorted spatially along ideological lines, and the environments we occupy face different problems and opportunities.

This harms our democracy. As we have seen, the basic machinery of the Millian marketplace of ideas breaks down if there is not a diversity of views being considered. The more we hunker down in homogenous, polarized bubbles, the harder it is for us to reconcile our differences. Bad actors can maintain political power by relying on out-group animosities to keep people distracted. Governance, even by well-intentioned politicians, can become increasingly difficult if their various political bases are unwilling to compromise with each other. The more polarized we become, the more we try and imagine politics as an effort to vanquish our rivals and impose our political preferences on them. Liberalism and democracy are fundamentally about managing disagreements. But this task becomes increasingly difficult if we neither understand nor trust the other side.

While we do not all need to participate in a single national conversation, we do need to find mechanisms for more cross-cutting connections between groups. These connections do not have to take the form of agreements, or even shared identities. They simply have to be spaces where different factions can engage with each other seriously — where the marketplace of ideas is allowed to operate. By serving as a check on each other, we will be far less prone to polarization, and the mechanisms that allow liberal democracies to thrive can work as intended.

However, as we have seen, all of our civic problems are made worse by segregation. Segregation fundamentally rips the social fabric and exacerbates our worst tendencies. While we may be able to take steps to mitigate the damage caused by segregation, at some point we have deal with segregation itself. Segregation is a problem that disguises itself as a solution. We can be led to think that diversity is the source of our ills, and that we need to find ways to mitigate its effects. Instead, it is segregation that breaks the engine of our democracy. Diversity and disagreement are healthy parts of a dynamic free society. Segregation divides us and encourages our stagnation.



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