

What can stop a diverse democracy from tearing itself apart?

Review by Lee Drutman

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[Book review of "The Great Experiment: Why Diverse Democracies Fall Apart and How They Can Endure" by Yascha Mounk - The Washington Post](#)

Democracy is a fragile pact. As elections approach, politicians blame and name-call. Sometimes they warn: The soul of the nation is at stake. Passions run hot. But after the votes are counted, the fragile pact makes strict demands. The losers must concede. In exchange, the winners promise grace and restraint.

But what happens when concession feels like surrender, and when grace and restraint feel like wielding a plastic fork against a torch mob? What happens if you believe, as Vice President Mike Pence [told the Republican National Convention](#) in 2020, that “the choice in this election is whether America remains America”? And what happens when your version of America loses?

“The history of diverse societies is grim,” warns Yascha Mounk in the opening pages of [“The Great Experiment: Why Diverse Democracies Fall Apart and How They Can Endure.”](#) We all know the reasons. Ethnic hatreds come easy. When scapegoating demagogues stoke them during hard times, they make the classic promise: Break the democracy pact, and people like you can be great again.

Yet Mounk counts himself as “unfashionably optimistic.” Democracies, especially Western democracies, are doing a better job these days of integrating immigrants than you might think. If this is news to you, he argues, it’s because both the political left and the political right are invested in a narrative of fatalistic defeatism. Thus the case for a new book on a familiar topic: a little hope amid the darkness.

Mounk made his reputation by warning about the rise of anti-democratic populism, ahead of the curve. He thus has appropriately harsh criticism for a political right trafficking in conspiratorial terrors of being “replaced,” a fear made all the worse by hateful stereotypes about their supposed future overlords. But he worries, too, about a left too hung up on past injustices and too attached to race-targeted policies to right these previous wrongs.

In the middle section of the book, he argues instead for an inclusive “cultural patriotism” that embraces a distinct mixing of national peculiarities that cut across racial categories but aggregate into a unifying culture. He asks us to abandon the tired slogans, the “melting pot” and the “salad bowl,” in favor of the “public park” metaphor: “A public park is open to everyone.” “A public park gives its visitors options.” “A public park creates a vibrant space for encounter.”

All of this seems reasonable enough. And who could argue with Mounk’s earnest ideals for an inclusive society: “secure prosperity,” “universal solidarity,” “effective and

inclusive institutions” and a “culture of mutual respect”? Of course, everyone should lead “a life of affluence and dignity.” Absolutely. But is this just a pipe dream? Mounk spies hope in cross-generational blurrings and stirrings of mixed marriages and economic ascension, in which today’s racial categories soften and intermingle.

This vision of progress juxtaposes oddly with the first part of the book, which describes how previous attempts at diverse democracy all apparently devolved into petty and violent wreckage. “Which actions and institutions are likely to prevent — or to exacerbate — conflict?” Mounk writes. “I would love to answer these questions by taking you on a tour of all the diverse democracies that have fully solved their problems and built admirably just societies. But such countries do not exist.” But this feels like an impossibly high standard. What country ever has “fully solved” its problems?

For the many social scientists who have been studying diversity and democracy for decades, the claim that we are undertaking a “disorienting transformation” that is “without precedent” may seem odd. Similarly, the claim that thriving multiethnic democracy is a contradiction in terms may come as news to citizens of places like Canada, New Zealand, Switzerland, Ghana and Botswana — often-cited examples of successful diverse democracies. Meanwhile, other countries that are much more ethnically homogenous, from China to Hungary to Haiti, are not exactly thriving democracies. The United States has long been one of the most diverse countries in the world. Until recently, few would have placed it at risk.

So what explains the variation in democratic stability among diverse societies? A top-line finding from considerable scholarship is that ethnic diversity is not destabilizing by itself. Rather, it challenges democracy when it hardens into a winner-take-all struggle for power between two sides. [In a classic study](#), Paul Collier and Anke Hoeffler concluded that “highly fractionalized societies are no more prone to war than highly homogeneous ones. **The danger of civil war arises when the society is polarized into two groups.**”

This warning seems particularly relevant to the United States. As American partisan politics has sorted by geography, culture, ethnicity, and race over the last several decades, the two parties have embraced clashing visions for American national identity, taking politics into a radically racialized new hyper-polarized stage, in which yesterday’s extremism can pass for today’s talking points. In such a widening gyre, Mounk’s calm mix of storytelling, political theory and social psychology exegesis, peppered with some charming insights, has a comforting seriousness.

Yet for a book that is supposedly about “diverse democracies,” the actual institutions of democracy — elections, political parties and above all, power — are surprisingly peripheral. Yes, Mounk devotes some discussion to “power-sharing” solutions that were trendy in an earlier era (when different ethnic groups got permanent positions in government). But he moves on quickly and ignores the more contemporary advice that aims for a middle ground between power-sharing (which can too often freeze racial categories and deprive elections of meaning) and the us-against-them divide that is so

threatening today in the United States. This middle ground recommends modest forms of proportional representation — enough to ensure that all groups can gain some power and share in coalitions, but not so much to lead to excessive fracture or many ethnic parties.

In his more noble theorizing, Mounk grasps the key point that our best hope involves getting past the simplistic majority-minority dichotomy that dominates so much of the discourse. We should embrace complexity and avoid essentialism.

But the big question remains: How? If the fragile pact of democracy is to continue in the United States, we must do more than simply chide the left and the right for being too race-obsessed and urge more mutual respect.

Instead, we might want to look squarely at the political institutions that make mutual respect feel like surrender — namely our winner-take-all binary party system. In such a system, compromise and concession really do feel like surrender, because letting the other side win on anything means potentially letting them win on everything. **And when every election is for everything, demagoguery and demonization are inevitable.**

But make politics less winner-take-all, and lower the stakes, and we all might be a little more open to hearing from people who are different from us — the foundational premise for a diverse democracy to succeed.

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