

Harris Responses to The Great Experiment

In the selections for this seminar, Mounck seemed to be putting a contemporary gloss on some very old philosophical/political/sociological issues of balancing: ascriptive diversity v. societal cohesion; common good v. individual liberty; and group identity v. individual rights. It can be helpful to keep such seminal questions top-of-mind as we navigate our current polarization. To the extent Mounck accomplishes that there is definitely value in his perspective. I also I think his methodological cautions about *presentism* and *provincialism* are very helpful.

From the interview and the excerpts that we read I couldn't tell if he linked his analysis to the literature on game theory and public goods, but his metaphors of a public park and a neighborhood evoke the same "[collective action problem](#)" as the *tragedy of the commons* metaphor and the game of *prisoner's dilemma*. In the real world, public goods like Mounck's parks and safe neighborhoods depend on political power. And, just as a park requires taxes and regulations and neighborhood safety requires zoning laws and fire codes, a healthy democracy requires laws and that promote the values of relative equality and justice across diverse identities. It would have been good to see how Mounck thinks these issues are best addressed in a diverse democracy. In this vein, it's important to bear in mind that the "oppressive powers of the state" are essential to sustaining a diverse democracy. The challenge is how can these necessary powers be exercised through a Lockean liberal democracy in which the restrictive norms of groups are accommodated by the principle of tolerance rather than through a Hobbesian centralized Leviathan in which the restrictive norms of groups are suppressed?

Some specific observations:

1. Mounck approvingly quoted Jennifer McCoy, "Unlike many other polarized democracies, we are not a tribal country based on ethnicity...the key identity is party, not race or religion." It's curious that she ignores class, culture, and education, all critical variables, for which I'd suggest party is a proxy. Indeed, there is a lot of research that links our current polarization to these variables...and this provides a plausible explanation for Mounck's observations on Trump's "appeal" to Black, Latino and Asian voters. Ruy Teixeira, one of the architects of the "coalition of the ascendant" strategy has persuasive [a three part analysis](#) that unpacks a lot of what this partisan polarization/identitarian explanation misses. Teixeira's point is that addressing questions of class, culture, and education while embracing "liberal patriotism" (the winning formula for Clinton & Obama) might overcome partisan toxicity. This would be one way "to keep humanity's instinct toward groupishness in check."
2. Mounck, like many of us, seems fixated on the national state. His analysis (at least the selections we read) never addresses the fact that ours is a federal system. I wonder, for example: Does polarization vary across states and localities? Do states mirror national trends? Does polarization vary between federal v. non-federal systems? More

importantly, I think I could make a strong case that a lot of our current polarization can be explained by the nationalization of issues and institutions. The more policy and authority migrate from the state level to Washington, DC, the less political divisions can be diffused and defused. This problem gets exacerbated when national policy is made through judicial decisions, administrative regulation, or executive orders rather than through Congress...and even when Congress passes laws nowadays, it is through opaque processes of budget reconciliation and omnibus or cromnibus "legislation."

3. It is interesting that the founders, saw a large, diverse republic as a desirable thing, because it would guarantee rights. As Madison famously argued in the *Federalist #10*:

Extend the sphere [of the republic] and you take in a greater variety of parties and interests; you make it less probable that a majority of the whole will have a common motive to invade the rights of other citizens; or if such a common motive exists, it will be more difficult for those who feel it to discover their own strength, and to act in unison...

Of course, he was most concerned with diverse economic interest, "the various and unequal distribution of property," rather than rather than ascriptive diversity leading to the "mischief of factions" and "spirit pf party." Still, it's worth considering that Madison's truly revolutionary contribution was his thesis that a smaller republic, though closer to the people, would be more likely to foster tyrannical majorities and threaten individual rights while a large, diverse one would better protect those rights by making majorities harder to form and sustain. In a way, our current frustrations with gridlock are a feature rather than a bug in the system. Parties, in fact, formed, to overcome the anti-majoritarian bias of the Constitution.

4. Mounck recapitulates the argument about our unprecedented polarization and layers in the [Carnegie study](#) which purports to "illustrate how polarization can contribute to democratic downgrading in multiple ways." Without minimizing the pernicious effects of polarization, some significant theoretical/methodological questions arise:

- a. The Carnegie Study is a correlational analysis, not a causal one. Yet the authors advance a simple, bi-variate causal argument, in which polarization is treated as the independent variable and democratic downgrading is the dependent variable. One could make just the opposite argument, democratic downgrading causes polarization. The most important element of any causal explanation is temporal sequence...independent variables must precede dependent variables. Since the mid-1960s numerous studies have argued that the democratic character of American politics is seriously suspect. See for example Theodore Lowi – *The End of Liberalism: Ideology, Policy, and the Crisis of Public Authority* (1969) or Sheldon Wolin – *Democracy, Inc: Managed Democracy and the Specter of Inverted Totalitarianism* (2017). If democratic downgrading is causing polarization rather than vice versa, our problems get cast in a completely different light. Side note – I find it fascinating that the Carnegie Study, like almost all other leftist critiques, rails against the Senate because Wyoming has an equal

voice with California, but is apparently unconcerned with Rhode Island having a voice equal to Texas. I'm just sayin'...

- b. Mounck and the Carnegie Study compare Republicans and Democrats without considering independents, thereby oversampling the most polarized segments of the citizenry. Just as importantly there are degrees of polarization within Ds & Rs. See for example the [Hidden Tribes Study](#) from More in Common.
 - c. The Carnegie Study compares the U.S. to, for example, Bangladesh, Hungary, Indonesia, Kosovo, Lebanon. If a student made a comparative argument like that in a term paper, I'd have extensive comments, to say the least. Indeed, Carnegie Study included a section on "American Exceptionalism," an unfortunate choice of terms, but a necessary acknowledgement that comparing American democracy to others with qualitatively different systems, histories, and cultures is problematic. Mounck too makes a point of the shaky methodological foundation of the study, which invites the question of why he makes it a centerpiece of this essay? A straw man?
5. The various calls for institutional reform (Ranked Choice Voting, multi-member districts, proportional representation, etc.) beg a very important question: Why was there no pernicious polarization in the 1940s, 50, 60s, and 70s when we had the same single member districts, plurality-winner-take all elections, and equal representation in the Senate? Some corollary questions would be: Why did we suffer with a comparable pernicious polarization problem in the late 19th to early 20th centuries? (See Jon Grinspin's *Age of Acrimony: How American's Fought to Fix their Democracy 1865 - 1915.*); What made the post-WW II era less acrimonious? Are there factors we have in common with that so-called Age of Acrimony? How did Americans "fix" their Democracy back then?
6. Since I'm neither an optimist nor a pessimist, I'll take a crack at addressing one challenge and identifying one blind spot that warrants further attention.
- a. Challenge – Our nationalized, non-transparent, and only weakly accountable policymaking processes advantages donors and activists who have little interest in accommodation. Perception of a rigged system fosters "democratic downgrading" and creates fertile ground for "pernicious polarization." If I were a conspiracy theorist, I'd observe that while the public discourse is perniciously polarized, there seems to be remarkable elite solidarity supporting Big Tech, Financial Services, the MIC, regardless of which party controls Congress or the White House. Bailing out banks and funding massive Defense budgets are bipartisan policies, even as parties promote fear and loathing every election cycle. It's almost as if ascriptive identity issues distract from finding common ground on class issues...much like the southern Bourbons deployed white supremacy in the late 19th century to destroy the emerging black-white populist unity.
 - b. Blind Spot – There is remarkable consensus in the electorate, even on hot-button issues like abortion and gun control. A [2019 study](#) in *Public Opinion Quarterly* found that "when answering questions about the other party, individuals think about elites more than voters". When the elites of the party were separated out 'respondents are more negative toward the elites of the other party than they are toward voters.'" Bonus blind spot: the rise in inter-racial families will scramble our current identity politics.