

Redmond Response to The Great Experiment

Several articles and books have been published over the past few years warning that democracy is under stress, from within and without, and not just around the world but in the United States as well, and that we cannot take for granted that our democratic institutions will endure. Each has a somewhat different explanation for what has gone wrong, and each offers its own prescriptions of just what must be done. These books and articles though usually suffer the “chapter 10” problem, that is, they are long on telling us what we already know but fairly short on substantive answers to the attacks on democratic institutions. But perhaps this is an unfair criticism. There are no simple answers, and perhaps no complicated answers, either. These are difficult times, and one sometimes has to look hard to find reasons to be hopeful.

In *The Great Experiment*, Yasca Mounk makes three main points. First, he reminds us -- *because he thinks that we need reminding* -- that “the history of diverse societies is grim.” If we think there is some inevitability to the success of democratic, diverse societies, we are mistaken, he says. Second, he argues that at the core of democracy’s problems is ethnic diversity, for ethnic hatred and scapegoating demagogues come all too easily. And third, he offers some glimmers of hope: the Right’s fears of replacement are overwrought, and Western democracies are doing a better job than authoritarian countries in integrating immigrants. (The assumption here seems to be that global mass migrations of people are likely to continue, making assimilation a challenge for authoritarian as well as democratic countries.) He then offers as a way forward some sort of “cultural patriotism” and offers the metaphor of a “public park” as a way of revitalizing civic life and calming ethnic passions.

Is Mounk right, though, in his diagnosis and prognosis about what is to be done, and, if so, should we share his optimism, faint though it is?

Diversity can be, and often is, a stressor. It is obviously easier to make common cause with your fellow citizens when they are similar to you in background, values, expectations, and life prospects. But Mounk narrows the diversity that he thinks is at the root of our problems today to essentially ethnic diversity, and then offers a solution of sorts based upon this narrow conception of diversity. We may well wonder about the other kinds of diversity, e.g., race, class, educational, sexual, gender, political, religious, and economic, and ask whether these may not be more problematic than simply ethnic diversity. And if Mounk is not quite right about the cause of the problem, then we wonder about his proposed solutions. It is not that the “public park” isn’t

in itself attractive, but Mounk provides little insight into how we move from where we are now to where we want to be. And so his goal seems to be more aspirational than anything else. If we want to move forward to shore up the foundations of a pluralistic democracy, we must look elsewhere.

It is frequently said that tribalism is not only a natural fact about groups, but a threat to pluralistic, ethnically and otherwise diverse societies. This is said so often that it has become almost a truism in progressive circles. I'm inclined to think, however, that this point is overplayed. Tribalism can lead to what Mounk calls "pernicious" polarization, but it needn't do so. In America, much of society is organized around various types of groups, and the First Amendment protects the right of association as much as it does the right to freedom of speech. It is not "groupishness," per se that is the problem. The danger comes when we allow tribalism to polarize us into only two powerful and well-financed groups with a winner-take all mentality in a no-holds barred fight. That is what is destabilizing.

Accordingly, then, for pluralistic, democratic societies there is, broadly, only one way forward, and that is to ensure that different viewpoints have an appropriate measure of political power. Only then can we begin to feel confident that we are respecting the equal dignity of persons promised by the American system. Only then can we hope to realize Mounk's aspirational promise of a "public park." Doing so will require a mix of personal and institutional long and short-range strategies. Identifying all of these, much less discussing them, go beyond these short remarks, but here are two governing ideas. First, we must rethink how we use and regulate media, especially social media. We no longer, and to our detriment, look to media as public goods which have responsibilities for the common welfare by ensuring accurate reporting of news and fair-minded analysis of conflicting points of view. Some version of the [fairness doctrine in broadcast news](#) that was eliminated during the Regan administration needs to be put back into place. And those who warned that social media was more likely to produce divisive echo chambers than fostering healthy communication have been proven right. The result is that for all our communication avenues fewer viewpoints are effectively heard today than before, for the voices that are heard drown out the rest. [In short, social media has been weaponized against us and has undermined the preconditions of a healthy, democratic society.](#) Section 230 of 1996 Internet Decency Act, which essentially removed any liability for social media providers for content needs to be reformed. While the specifics of the reforms are tricky ([here](#) is a good place to start), efforts to reform them are already happening in Red states that have objected to

the censoring of hate speech and the incitement to political violence. Even if one thinks there are good arguments for allowing social media platforms to escape liability for the content of postings, it is hard to understand why they should escape liability for their algorithms that promote certain content. Finally, free speech absolutists need to remember that in our system of government free speech is meant to serve the truth. When this connection is severed, free speech becomes a cudgel rather than a beacon for a free people. Mounk's own commitments as a free speech absolutist or something close to it blinds him to this need.

Second, we must work to create a middle ground between the two hardened extremes of polarization. This is not the same as the misguided call for moderate policies, for the debate is no longer about policies but about competing and conflicting ways of life, nor is it a call to reject tribalism. Rather, it is a call to reform the political system to ensure that more viewpoints are effectively represented in government.

There are several approaches, some of which are already being tested in various states, all of which attempt to move us away from a winner-take all approach to elections and political power. These include [preferential voting systems](#), proportional representation, [gerrymandering reform](#), and [primary reform](#). Each has defects, but [arguably every system of voting has defects](#). I'm sure there are other possibilities, but the promise though of these or similar systems is that they lower the stakes in elections by ensuring that political power is proportionally and effectively distributed over people with multiple points of view and thus of different groups.

But it may seem that this sort of governmental reform is impossible in today's political environment. I suggest, though, that there is something right and quite wrong about this observation. What is *right* is that reform requires that political power not only must be gained *but it must be effectively exercised*. It is not enough to have the arguments on one's side. One must also have the power to put them into place. Because of its value commitments to autonomy, liberalism has always had an ambivalent relationship with political power, but since the times of Machiavelli and Thomas Hobbes, John Locke, notwithstanding, it has been clear that effective governance requires that political power be exercised. There are better and worse ways to do so in a democratic society, but it must be done. Second, those who plead that this sort of change can't be done might take a moment to notice that in fact it *is* being done, though principally in Red states. And further judicial power is being wielded aggressively by a Supreme Court that seems intent on rolling back the sphere of civil and individual rights that the majority

of Americans have come to enjoy and expect over the past 70 years or so. Or, to put the point, crudely, one only has to look at Donald Trump and the Republican Party to realize that in today's world power can still be wielded to accomplish one's aims. The question is what price are you willing to pay for winning. That is, in part, a moral question.

Of course, liberals will rightly insist that political power must be gained and exercised in ways that are consistent with our deepest constitutional values of dignity and respect for persons. It should be done through elections. But that's becoming an increasingly tall order given the Right's largely successful attacks on voting rights, enabled by the Supreme Court, and the nonpartisan administration of elections that has taken place in most Red states. In my reading of things, I suspect that the time has passed, though, for any meaningful protection of the integrity of elections in the near to intermediate future. The tidal wave of election deniers well-funded by the Right makes it likely our current system and its safeguards will soon be overrun. At the moment, [many local election offices have mostly ceased to function effectively because of the torrent of attacks](#). Many of these attacks have used harassment and intimidation to force nonpartisan election workers either into retirement or removed their will to do their jobs effectively. In many other instances, election deniers have used something like an IT "denial of service" attack to flood offices with so many open record requests that normal operations are brought to a halt.

However, it may not be too late to turn back the tide of political violence and its normalization against one's opponents [that has now become a staple of the Right](#). Political violence is not part of legitimate political discourse as the Right claims today, for it is incompatible with democracy. For now, it is likely that his effort will have to be fought on a state rather than a federal level. For instance, although, remarkably, the federal government does not have anti-militia laws, most states do in one form or another. We must call upon state governments to enforce these anti-militia laws to ensure among other things the possibility of peaceful protest, the right to vote without the presence of armed militia, and the ability of state government officials to meet and conduct official business without surveillance by armed militia members who are not answerable to civil authority. Further, state governments have the power to weed out the presence of extremists in law enforcement and in their national guards. We must press them to do so. And we must be willing to call out our family, friends, and neighbors who are indifferent to political violence or its normalization, and that will require personal courage, but such are the times in which we live. If we can turn back the growing tide of political violence, in time, we can be

hopeful of restoring confidence and trust in our democratic institutions and the promise of a healthy, pluralistic civic sphere can be realized.

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November 5, 2022