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The Vicious Cycle of Mass Polarization and Fear: A Pilot Program Using Comedy and
Dialogue to Leverage Political Polarities

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Abstract

United States polarization has shifted from simple Congressional stalemate to a state of political warfare. While there is debate in the literature as to whether this attitude polarization is mirrored among the general public, the research is clear that American perceptions of their political opposition is marked by fear and animosity (Pew Research Center, 2016). The Impolitic program aims to intervene in this cycle using comedy to reduce anxiety and encourage participation, and dialogue to build understanding and shift relationships among politically divergent participants. This paper details the system of polarization in which Impolitic seeks to intervene, the guiding leadership philosophy that informs this work, and the results of the September 2016 pilot event. Impolitic events consist of an improvised comedy show based around political storytelling coupled with facilitated dialogue among audience participants. The goal of the program is to model a third-way for political conversations (beyond debate or discussion) and invite participants to bring this mode of engagement into conversations with individuals with whom they are close, but ‘don’t bother talking about politics’ due to disagreement.

Key words: *Mass polarization, comedy, applied improvisation, dialogue*

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Preface

Throughout this paper I will detail the design and pilot for Impolitic, an event that is part improvised political comedy and part facilitated dialogue. The program is designed to combat the mass polarization that results from the cycle of fear and avoidance of those with whom we disagree politically. The impetus for this program came out of my early work in Oregon state politics, my professional work as a dialogue facilitator, and my role as a comedy improviser. I got involved in politics because I believed that government was how American citizens came together across our differences to solve our shared problems. Only after eight years working on state campaigns and in the Oregon legislature, earning a BA in political science, and writing a thesis on US drug policy did I finally accept that what I had envisaged is not how government works in practice. Through this program I pay homage to my youthful vision by offering tools to bring it closer to reality.

According to a 2016 Pew Research study, roughly half of all Democrats fear Republicans, and roughly half of Republicans fear Democrats (Pew Research 2016). This depth of polarization goes far beyond the impassioned debate across ideologies envisioned by our founding fathers, to a point where those on the ‘other side’ are seen as idiots at best, and villains at worst. American democracy is predicated on the notion that good policy comes from quality debate among rivals, through the balancing of knowledge and varied perspectives, and through thoughtful citizen participation. This becomes impossible when one’s rivals are viewed as having nothing of value to bring to the table, and that even inviting them poses a threat.

This paper suggests comedy and dialogue as potential tools for an effective leadership intervention, and details a pilot program designed to leverage the social role and psychological impact of comedy to prime participants for genuine dialogue across political divides. Comedy is an effective tool because it reduces anxiety and because political comedy has historically been a tool for questioning political systems. While most political comedy today pokes fun at one party or another, they typically fail to take aim at the broader system that creates this polarization, and they lack opportunities for audiences to engage in the material. But US political polarization is not a Democratic problem or a Republican problem: it is an American problem. The system that requires dismantling is not the Democratic or Republican party; it is the political arms race whose currency is our votes (and our dollars), and which relies on our passive consumption of their narrative. Comedy invites us to question that narrative, and dialogue invites us to fill it in with something new: each other’s stories.

My Leadership Philosophy

Several leadership theories provide the foundation for my perspective on this work, and as such it is prudent to discuss my approach to leadership at the front-end. Leadership is not a

position, a person, or a superpower—though all of those things help. Leadership is the process by which groups intentionally change. While all human groups will change over the course of their existence, it is through leadership that groups can attempt to influence that process of change. The skillful practice of leadership by individuals (who we will refer to as ‘leaders’ for simplicity), then, is not about amassing power, prestige, or position, but rather about seeing the forest and the trees of dynamic human systems in order to identify effective points of leverage to enact positive change in groups. This leadership philosophy is informed primarily by the following influences (detailed in the section to follow): the Adaptive Leadership theory of Ronald Heifetz (Heifetz, 1994), Zachary Green and Rene Molenkamp’s BART theory (Green & Molenkamp, 2005) and Holistic Coaching Model (Green, Trias, Williams, & Peshon, 2013), Peter Senge’s systems theory (Senge, 2006), Barry Johnson’s polarity management theory (Johnson, 1992), the philosophy of improv, and the personal motto of my first leadership mentor, Jefferson Smith: “Be irreverent, but let ‘em know you care.”

Adaptive Leadership

Ronald Heifetz splits the great challenges of the world into two kinds: technical problems and adaptive challenges (Heifetz, 1994). Technical problems are those for which a known answer or protocol is necessary and sufficient. Technical problems might be incredibly difficult and complex, but draw completely on pre-existing knowledge for resolution. Brain surgery, for example, despite its complexity, is a technical problem requiring existing technical expertise and authority. Adaptive challenges, on the other hand, require new learning to address. Adaptive challenges tend to span many disciplines or sectors and require experimentation, learning, and piecing together disparate skills, techniques, and approaches.

Heifetz also distinguishes between two models of organizational behavior used in addressing these challenges: authority and leadership. Heifetz defines authority as an exchange of services (including protecting boundaries, and determining roles and tasks) for a specific kind of power. Authority can be either formal—stemming from a named and known position—or informal, stemming from the fulfillment of a group’s expectations over time. Authority is fundamentally about stability and maintaining order and structure. Leadership, as Heifetz defines it, is the process by which groups are mobilized to address adaptive challenges (Heifetz, 1994). The tasks of leadership include regulating the temperature—ensuring that the pace of change is urgent but tolerable—maintaining “disciplined attention” to ward off work avoidance, giving the work back to the group to avoid being loaded up as a savior, and to protect the voices from below, ensuring the wisdom siloed in all areas of an organization or group are accessible to work with.

According to Heifetz, addressing adaptive challenges requires leadership, while addressing technical problems calls for authority. This distinction is important because individuals often conflate leadership with authority to their peril, denying their own capacity for leadership and seeking stabilizing forces when a situation calls for learning, growth, and change. While authority, technical expertise, and positional power can be helpful tools for leadership, understanding this distinction helps individuals engaging in change processes effectively by calling on the best skills and practices for the task at hand.

BART and DAC

If Heifetz’s theory of adaptive leadership defines the separation of leadership and authority, Green and Molenkamp’s BART framework (Z. G. Green & Molenkamp, 2005) and

the DAC model of the Center for Creative Leadership (McCauley, 2014) offer guidance to leaders seeking to re-integrate the power of authority with the imperatives of leadership.

The BART framework is an acronym for four aspects of group process that a leader must attend to in order to successfully navigate and leverage change within human group systems: boundary, authority, role, and task. Together, these four aspects of group life provide the foundation a leader needs in order to understand and locate leverage points within a group. Green and Molenkamp define **boundary** as the container for group work, best exemplified by boundaries of time, task, and territory. How to manage these boundaries is a crucial question for those seeking to influence a group. Green and Molenkamp use Heifetz's definition of **authority**, adding that formal authority should be clearly identified, taken up accordingly (not too much or too little authority is taken), and accompanied by the tools to exercise it. **Roles** are the formal and informal expectation of individuals dynamically created within groups. Roles can be formal—job descriptions or designations of formal authority, for example—or informal—like the 'devil's advocate' or the nurturer who always makes the coffee. The **task** is the work of the group, including both the primary task and the survival and process tasks. The survival task is the subconscious work of maintaining the existence of the group. The process task is managing the survival task without succumbing to it; Green and Molenkamp argue that when the process task is neglected, the survival task often leads to work avoidance as members seek to prolong the existence of the group.

DAC, which stands for **direction, alignment, and commitment**, is how the Center for Creative Leadership, an international non-profit leadership research and education organization, defines the outcomes of leadership (McCauley, 2014). CCL contends that leadership is the process by which a group comes to direction, alignment, and commitment, and strives to develop

leaders and managers capable of steering the process. Direction refers to agreement on the group's goals; alignment is the coordination of the shared work toward that goal; and commitment is group trust, motivation, and responsibility.

Taken together, these frameworks suggest how leaders can use the tools of authority to accomplish the tasks of leadership. Although leaders seek to create change, in order for a group engaged in a change process to continue to exist and function through the turmoil of adaptive work, the work of authority is crucial.

Senge: Systems Theory and Mental Models

To Heifetz' definition of leadership as separate from authority, the re-integration of the two for practical purposes that we get from BART and DAC we now add Senge's concept of the Five Disciplines of a Learning Organization. If we accept Heifetz's definition of adaptive challenges as those which require new learning to solve, then through *The Fifth Discipline* Senge illuminates the path toward this learning. Senge explains the five disciplines as approaches to developing the three "core learning capabilities for teams" (Senge, 2006, p. xii):

- 1. Aspiration:** Comprised of the disciplines of Personal Mastery and Shared Vision, this learning capability is about clarifying and connecting with our personal vision, understanding its connection to the communal shared vision, and committing ourselves to the truth of where we are and where we are going (acknowledging the creative tension and structural conflict therein).
- 2. Reflective Conversations:** This capability is made up of the disciples of Mental Models, Team Learning, and Dialogue. Mental models are the pictures in our minds of "how things are" or "the way the world works." They are sets of basic assumptions that allow us to operate in the world. We all have many, but it can be maddeningly difficult to see

your own, and deeply problematic when invisible, inaccurate mental models crash into reality. Team Learning, “the process of aligning and developing the capacity of a team to create the results its members truly desire,” contains within it the approach of dialogue. Dialogue is a method by which members of a team move beyond their own individual perspective to access the a greater “pool of common meaning” (Senge, 2006, p. 223). Through this process individuals can begin to see and accurately assess their own and the group’s mental models.

- 3. Systems Thinking:** Systems thinking is a conceptual framework that supports understanding events and problems within the broader systems of which they are a part. Systems are networks of events across space and time which influence one another within the same pattern. However, these influences are often difficult to see, especially when events are distant in space and time. Systems thinking encourages leaders to identify the systems in which the events they seek to influence are a part, and to use these systems to identify and act on ideal points of leverage for systemic change.

Each of these core capabilities is utilized in developing Impolitic, though Reflective Conversations and Systems Thinking are most prominent. Systems thinking supports understanding phenomena such as the political warfare of the modern Congress, the increasing costs of political campaigns, and tribal fear-of-the-other expressed by ordinary citizens across the political spectrum. If we seek to change any of these events, we must understand the systemic pattern of which they are all a part. This method of systems thinking is used throughout this paper to contextualize and understand the pattern in which our current civic discourse resides.

How one understands this system can also be part of one’s mental model; for example, my mental model could say that Republican voters are stupid and refuse to accept enlightened

Liberal ideas about diversity and science, which accounts for the lack of genuine dialogue.

Another person's mental model could say that Democrats are trying to weaken the American spirit by hobbling our individual work ethic with government give-aways, and that liberals' need for 'safe spaces' accounts for the lack of genuine dialogue. What Senge suggests is that the best way to uncover and work with our mental models—and to use them to get a grip on the real systems at work—is through dialogue (Senge, 2006, p. 223).

In *The Fifth Discipline* Senge also introduces the idea of balancing inquiry with advocacy (2006, p. 186). In order to this, Senge offers the following guidelines when advocating for your point of view:

- Make explicit the data and reasoning that brought you to your perspective
- Encourage others to question your view, and to offer different data or conclusions
- Actively inquire to better understand differing viewpoints

When inquiring into the views of others:

- Make explicit the assumptions you have about their views, and the data on which those assumptions are based
- Ask only those questions for which you are genuinely interested in the other person's answer

And when you find that others are no longer interested in inquiring into their own views:

- Inquire about what sort of data could change their view
- Explore designing an experiment or other method of inquiry together that might generate new information.

These guidelines form the operating principle for the form of dialogue Impolitic advocates. Impolitic operates from the assumption that our political perspectives are based off of

our own set of data—made up of our experiences, values, role models, technical knowledge, and more. This data, while often invisible as discrete components, perform important functions by building our mental models, determining our policy positions, and telling us who we can and cannot trust. By encouraging participants to think critically about how their data—and that of others—forms their political perspective, my hope is that they will begin to develop the capacity to engage with diverse perspectives by delving into their collective data pool for shared problem solving.

Polarity Management

A major purpose of leadership is to usher groups through solving problems that require group change. While some problems we face can be solved in the traditional sense by choosing one option or path over alternatives, others, like those embedded in complex and volatile systems, require a different approach. Barry Johnson offers the notion of leveraging polarities as a method for understanding and working with complex challenges like this (1992). Polarities—referred to in other literature as paradoxes, ‘wicked problems,’ or chronic dilemmas—are “ongoing, chronic issues that are unavoidable and unsolvable” (Johnson, 1998, p. 3). To understand these issues Johnson suggests identifying the interdependent pair of alternative choices at play—that is, the pair of ‘solutions’ or circumstances that seem in conflict with one another. This interdependent pair comprise two situations that, over time, require one another. Unlike in a standard problem (what Heifetz might call a technical problem), where a choice is made between competing independent alternatives, polarity management requires managing two interdependently correct answers. You cannot choose one over the other and successfully manage the polarity. To illustrate this principle, I’ll use an example common in liberal-

conservative debates—free markets and government market regulation—as it is particularly apt to this study.

Effectively leveraging polarities begins with mapping the upsides and downsides of each pole and identifying the greater purpose (what happens if we leverage this polarity well?) and the deeper fear (what happens if we leverage this polarity poorly?). With our example of free markets and regulated markets, we might end up with a map like this:

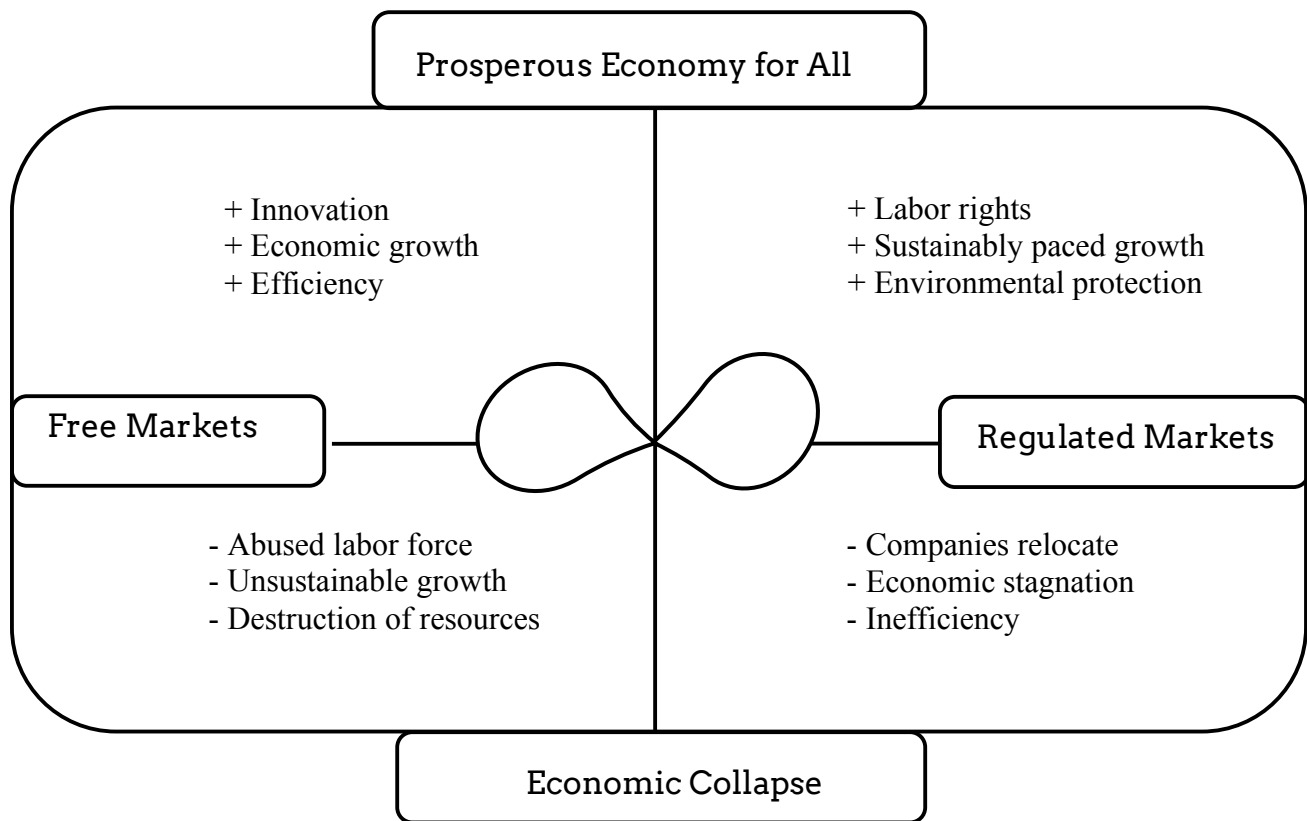


Figure 1. Polarity map for free markets and regulated markets. This figure shows the benefits (indicated by +) and downsides (indicated by -) for each pole.

This polarity map shows our two interdependent alternatives (free markets and regulated markets), the higher purpose of having markets (a prosperous economy for all), and the deeper fear of failing to leverage this polarity effectively (economic collapse). On the free market side,

the top left quadrant shows the upsides of this pole and the bottom left shows the downsides of focusing too heavily on this pole. The same is seen on the right for regulated markets. What emerges is a clear need for elements of both alternatives that allows us to get the most benefits while avoiding dipping too far into the downsides of over-focusing on either pole.

Groups and organizations who find themselves experiencing deeply the downsides of one pole tend to look for salvation in the upsides of the other pole, ignoring the new pole's downsides. Unfortunately, when the group jumps ship for the new pole, they find its downsides run just as deeply. Polarity management allows for groups to understand where each pole needs a 'foothold,' and how to maintain supportive elements of both sides.

Polarity management is useful in solving many complex challenges, but is especially important for me when I think about sustainable political change. An understanding of the upsides and downsides of both poles of political thoughts does not discourage debate, disagreement, or passionate emotion, but reminds us of why we need our political opposition. It is unlikely that a purely conservative Ayn Rand America would be as utopian as proponents believe; it is likewise likely that deep downsides would emerge from a liberal Bernietopia. Our path forward must leverage the benefits of both political poles, lest we find ourselves deep in the downsides of either one.

Holistic Coaching Framework, Essential Partners Dialogue, and the Value of Questions

My leadership style is heavily influenced by the Holistic Coaching Framework (Green et al., 2013) and the dialogue facilitation trainings of Essential Partners. The practices of coaching and dialogue facilitation are closely related because both rely on powerful questions, deep personal presence, and careful attachment. Strong questions are a powerful tool for development, especially when it comes to shifting mental models or integrating new knowledge as is required

for addressing adaptive challenges. Good questions put the work where it belongs and are a useful tool for leaders striving to avoid the ‘savior’ role. Leadership, coaching, and dialogue facilitation require a deep personal presence cultivated through mindfulness and reflection; this presence allows a leader to humbly set aside one’s personal turmoil in service of the team and the work. Careful attachment is crucial in both coaching and facilitation because it is easy to become wrapped up in an individual or group’s patterns and dynamics, worsening the situation. Some level of attachment is needed in order to develop effective relationships and alliance with clients or participants, but a degree of separation is needed to avoid ethical or personal trouble. The same principle holds for leaders with those they seek to lead and the adaptive challenges they address; maintaining separation between the self and the role or work is crucial to maintaining the stamina and capital to lead.

Improvisation

Although Impolitic uses improv primarily as entertainment, the principles of improvisation are core to my leadership philosophy. The following core teachings of improv inform my leadership practice and the development of this program:

Yes, and... The founding principle of improv is to agree to the reality put forth by your scene partner, and to contribute something to it. To say “Yes, and....” We do this because when we step out on stage we have absolutely no idea what the scene is going to be about. We have no characters, no set or setting, no props, no time period or planet, and no jokes. By being able to quickly explore the greatest number of possibilities we can get to the good stuff faster, and make the good stuff even better than if we had pre-planned it. As leaders seeking to ‘lead from the future as it emerges’ (Scharmer, 2016), we cannot bulldoze people into our vision; we must build it with them, lest we be autocrats rather than leaders. Yes, and... reminds us to engage

collaboratively with one another as we co-create a new reality. This approach is also useful in dialogue, where we seek to similarly co-create an understanding of the whole based on the discrete parts we each bring.

Bring a brick, not a cathedral. Improvisers don't pre-plan scenes, and they don't come on stage with a scene to execute. Instead, they bring only one piece, one brick. Improvisers trade bricks to build a scene and create their imaginary reality together like this:

I declare that we are on the Moon. *Brick.*

You tell me my name is Bleep Bloop. *Brick.*

I declare that we are staging a revolution to overthrow the King. *Brick.*

You tell me you will be a much better King. *Brick.*

Together performers create a much more interesting, rich scene than either of them could have on their own. This principle is valuable both for how leaders engage with groups, but also for keeping the emergent nature of change in focus. Complex change does not occur—unfortunately—through the development of a beautiful strategic plan and its flawless execution. Though a plan is a helpful tool, the ability to build and shift with groups, environments, and situations as they develop is a crucial leadership skill.

Stay in the moment and embrace uncertainty. As leaders concerned with understanding systems, history, and articulating a clear vision, the value of the present moment is easy to overlook. Improvisers know that everything they need to create theater is available in the present moment between them and their fellow performers. For leaders as well, staying present allows one to better sense what is needed and to assess the present reality, instead of relying only on our mental models. Similarly, staying in the moment supports embracing uncertainty. An improv scene can go anywhere, so performers must find comfort in the uncertainty of not

knowing what will happen. Staying in the present and moving one piece at a time makes this uncertainty manageable. Uncertainty in leadership operates similarly to an improv scene: it is both scary to manage and a prime opportunity for creating something new.

Leadership Role Models

While theory provides scaffolding and language to build up my approach to leadership, it is important to note that the foundation is built on my experience of tremendous leaders throughout my life who have inspired and guided me. My first work in politics was with the Oregon Bus Project, where I met and worked closely with then-Executive Director Jefferson Smith. Jefferson frequently summed up his approach to leadership by saying “be irreverent, but let ‘em know you care.” This balance of not taking things too seriously while providing deep caring and affection for those you work with continues to inform my approach. In both the design of formal leadership interventions and in the day-to-day work of leadership, I strive to bring this philosophy to life by balancing lightness and laughter with a commitment to service.

Defining the Adaptive Challenge: US Mass Polarization

Since 1973 Congress has become increasingly polarized. More and more, we see Democrats voting exclusively with Democrats and Republicans voting exclusively with Republicans (Theriault, 2006; Hill & Tausanovitch, 2015). Prior to this point, it was common for members of Congress to cross party lines as they sought to balance the desires of their constituents and the desires of their party. Today, Democrats and Republicans are more ideologically consistent and distinct than ever before; even the most conservative Democrat and most liberal Republican will have very little overlap in voting records.

Although partisan gridlock is sometimes cited as a reason that this increasing polarization is a problem, it is unlikely that reducing polarization would substantially increase Congressional

productivity. The gridlock we see is more likely an intentional symptom of the Constitutional design of American government, which was built to be slow moving and insulated from the whims of the public. Instead, the problem with polarization is the partisan warfare that develops and the breakdown in democratic functioning, governmental stability, and constituent trust. Based on cases of elite political polarization from around the world, literature shows that extreme polarization has three potential outcomes: complete gridlock between parties unable to broker policy negotiations, extreme swings in policy as parties trade power at each election, or leaders begin to change rules (like election laws) to benefit their party and retain power, sowing the seeds for authoritarian regimes (McEvers, 2017).

In order to begin to address this adaptive challenge, we must understand the system of causal loops that make it up. By developing an accurate understanding of this system we are able to select leverage points and design an effective intervention. It is important to note that the system(s) that produce political polarization both among elites and the general public are vast and extraordinarily complex. Political polarization is the result of political history, a changing regulatory and legal landscape with regard to elections and governance, changes in news and information media, changes in how citizens and elected officials interact, and much more. In order to focus the scope of this challenge, I hone in on the primary driving factors described in the political science literature and identify the related causal loop that drives polarization and partisan warfare in the political conversations of non-elite individuals. Figure 2 shows the causal loop driving elite polarization and the secondary loop that both drives mass polarization and adds

fuel to the elite system. The section that follows outlines the way this system functions and identifies a key point of leverage in the mass polarization loop.

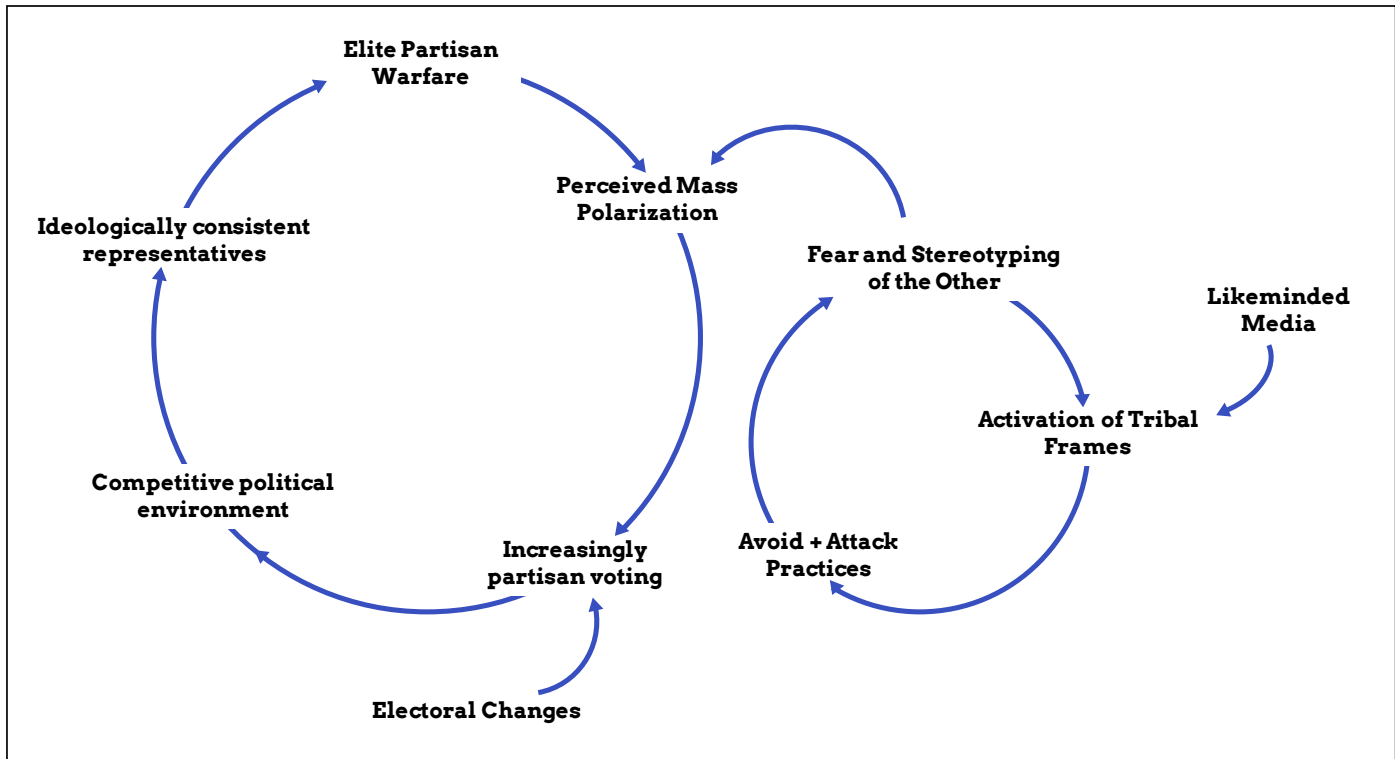


Figure 2. System of elite and mass polarization. This system diagram shows the snowball interaction between the causal loop of mass polarization and elite polarization.

Increasingly partisan voting behavior and electoral changes

We’ll begin our path around this system with the most obvious connection between popular polarization and elite polarization: the increasingly partisan votes cast by precincts around the country. There is scholarly consensus that Americans increasingly live in effectively politically homogenous voting districts (Oppenheimer, 2005; Abramowitz, Alexander, & Gunning, 2006; Fleisher & Bond, 2004). To put this in perspective, when Jimmy Carter beat Gerald Ford by about 2 percentage points in the 1976 election, 26.8% of Americans lived in districts where more than 60% of the votes were cast for one candidate (Bishop, 2004). Compare

this to the 2004 election in which George W. Bush beat John Kerry by 2.5%: 28 years later 48.3% of Americans lived in a district that voted predominantly (more than 60%) for one candidate. What we see then is that 80% more Americans live in ‘safe’ Democratic or Republican districts, compared to those in which there is rigorous cross-party competition (Theriault, 2008).

The driving force behind this shift is the political and geographic sorting of the electorate, and, to a lesser extent, partisan redistricting. Although the effect is modest, redistricting over the last 30 years has resulted in more polarized Representatives than each earlier iteration (Carson, Crespin, Finocchiaro, & Rohde, 2007); though this theory is not without its detractors (McCarty, Poole, & Rosenthal, 2009). Constituent mobility and ideological party sorting have each contributed to partisan voting districts as well. Constituent mobility refers to the tendency of ideological partisans to choose similar neighborhoods (e.g., Democrats prefer to live in the walkable urban core and Republicans tend to prefer more rural areas) (Bishop & Cushing, 2009). Ideological sorting refers to the increasing consistency of political attitudes among members of each major party; voters have increasingly aligned their political beliefs with their party of choice, sorting themselves into two ideologically distinct categories (Abramowitz et al., 2006; Fiorina, Abrams, & Pope, 2011).

Competitive political environment

These electoral changes have been mirrored by a corollary shift in ideology of the members who represent these districts through two primary forces, both shaped by party primaries: member replacement and member adaptation. Sean Theriault (2006) finds that member replacement accounts for about two third of increased polarization and member adaptation accounts for about one third. Both effects are in part the result of increasingly

homogenous voting districts and the resultantly increased importance of partisan primaries. In politically homogenous districts, it is party primaries that decide representation, and competition from the ends of the political spectrum that pose the greatest threat. This competitive environment also discourages political moderates from running (Thomsen, 2014). Taken together, we see that close political competition disincentivizes negotiation and cooperation between political elites (Lee, 2009; Lee, 2014).

Ideologically consistent and distinct representatives

These forces converge to result in representatives that are ideologically consistent within their parties and parties that are entirely distinct from one another. When scholars refer to political polarization, this trend is almost always the starting point because it is obvious and clear cut. Over the last thirty years, the House of Representatives and, to a somewhat lesser extent, the Senate have become highly polarized institutions (Aldrich, 1995; Coleman 1997; Collie & Mason, 2000; Fiorina, 1999; Fleisher & Bond, 2000; Fleisher et. al, 2004; Jacobson, 2000; Roberts and Smith, 2003; Rohde, 1991; Sinclair, 2000; Stonecash et al, 2003). Researchers have continuously found that Democrats and Republicans in Congress increasingly vote as unified and discrete blocks, operating through procedural maneuvers rather than cross-party negotiation to pass legislation.

Elite partisan warfare

With increased ideological consistency comes increased power for party leaders, and the result is strategic use of Congressional procedure for partisan ends and political rhetoric heated to a boiling point (Theriatult, 2006; Theriatult 2008; Sinclair 2000b). Although scholarly study of Congressional change—and public outcry—has focused on polarization, it is the resultant political warfare that comes from concentrated party leader power, party loyalty and obedience,

and constant fear of primary challenges that better describes the problems most Americans have with the state of Congress (Therriault, 2014). Partisan warfare refers to maneuvers like the Republican blocking of a hearing for President Obama's Supreme Court nominee Judge Merrick Garland or attempted Democratic obstruction of President Trump's nominee, Judge Neil Gorsuch. Partisan warfare is easy to spot when one's political opponents are engaging in it, but can be harder when one agrees with the cause. This difficulty in seeing the downsides of our personal un-favored pole is one way to tell you're working with a polarity, as opposed to a technical problem.

Perceived mass polarization

Reading the news every day and witnessing the ideological bar brawls in Congress, it is no surprise that Americans perceive themselves to be polarized as well. The literature on mass polarization, however, presents us with a paradox: we both experience homogeneity in our political networks, while existing within observably heterogeneous networks. In short, we both experience and do not experience mass polarization. This is important because our perception of polarization adds fuel to the fire of the vicious cycle of elite polarization, while illuminating a potential leverage point for intervention. We focus on the perception of polarization because there is substantial disagreement among scholars as to whether or not mass attitude polarization mirrors the much more easily-measured elite polarization (Abramowitz & Saunders, 2008; Abramowitz, 2010; Fiorina, Abrams, & Pope, 2006). However, regardless of attitudes, the perception of polarization fuels the secondary cycle of the breakdown in heterogeneous, respectful political discourse (Pew Research Center, 2016).

Fear and stereotyping of the other

The perception of polarization among the general public fuels the belief that Democrats and Republicans not only disagree politically, but also that the opposition is a threat to one's way of life. Recent Pew research finds that roughly half of all Republicans and half of all Democrats (49% and 55% respectively) feel afraid of their political opposition (Pew Research Center, 2016). These numbers are even higher among those who are highly politically engaged (activists, donors, primary voters, etc.) Iyengar and Westwood find that the hostility and discrimination between partisans is as automatic and more intense than that based on racial difference (Iyengar & Westwood, 2015). We see from this research that regardless of actual ideological differences, the cultural divide that began with the red state/blue state rhetoric in 2004 has only grown.

Activation of Tribal Frames and the impact of likeminded media

As groups that were previously implicit or ill-defined are named and given specific parameters, prejudice increases as frames of tribal identity are activated (Schwalbe et al., 2000). Seyle and Newman (2006) propose that this psychological phenomenon limits individuals' ability to form complex and multi-faceted identities for themselves or to recognize them in others, forcing and exacerbating this misperception of ideological and identity purity in the general public. They also suggest that "it is difficult for people whose social identities include political groups such as Democrat and Republican to interact with one another in contexts that make these groups salient without the activation of processes that support intergroup conflict" (Seyle & Newman, 2006, p. 573).

Likeminded media consumption patterns—consuming news and other media that reflects one's existing worldview—exacerbates this problem by removing opportunities to test assumptions against divergent information. This becomes especially problematic as Americans

increasingly get their news from social sources, which are not only filtered to present likeminded articles, but which also tend to trend articles that are editorial in nature as opposed to news (Bakshy, Messing, & Adamic, 2015; Lee, Choi, Kim, & Kim, 2014). Likeminded media outlets also tend to support the demonization of members of the opposing partisan groups, re-creating partisan warfare among the general population.

Avoid and attack practices

This vicious cycle finally brings us to the initial observation that prompted this work. Increasingly Americans fear their political opposition and, seeing no value in constructive dialogue, find as their only options avoidance of partisan opponents or attacking them, lest they be attacked first. You may have experienced this dynamic yourself at Thanksgiving dinner or a family reunion if you have a politically diverse family. If you're like most Americans, you either avoid talking politics or get into frustrating debate. This pattern is made worse by the toxic state of online discourse in particular, exposure to which has been shown to cause individuals to assume real-life discourse looks the same, and to behave accordingly (Hwang, Kim, & Huh, 2014; Weber Shandwick, Powell Tate, & KRC Research, 2010).

The Leverage Point Emerges

What emerges is a clear picture of the mechanism by which popular polarization drives elite polarization, exacerbated by deteriorating public discourse and increasing fear and tribal political attitudes. Although certainly there are several points within this system at which a leadership intervention could be applied, the sub-system that activates tribal political frames emerges as a particularly salient point because, as a citizen, it is where I hold the most power. Additionally, an intervention at this leverage point within the cycle of mass polarization and communication deterioration has the potential to cause substantial slowing of the cycle of elite

polarization, and certainly results in a citizenry better equipped to manage the challenges this system presents.

With the system in view and a leverage point determined, we can begin to look in the toolkit and examine *how* to intervene. Based on the tools at my disposal, I'll pull out two buckets for continued analysis: dialogue and comedy. Dialogue is a mode of group process in which participants draw on one another to better understand complex issues, often tapping into one another's knowledge while observing new emergent analysis (Bohm & Nichol, 1996). Dialogue as a process is often used in groups with deep divides to build relationships and elucidate new understanding. We'll draw also on the social function and neurological process of comedic performance. Throughout history, comedy has held a special place as a 'speaker of truth'. Comedy has long been a medium for the masses to manage their discontent with elites, and a safe place to question existing power structures. Additionally, laughter triggers neurological processes useful for controlling the temperature in a leadership intervention, and for increasing participants' openness to new methods, ideas, and perspectives. Throughout the next section I will examine each of these tools in turn, the organizations representing the 'best practices' for the use of each of these tools with regard to political polarization, and how Impolitic emerges out of the strengths of these tools and the gap in what currently exists.

Dialogue

Dialogue is a mode of group engagement in which participants seek to develop new understanding through sharing perspectives, knowledge, and ideas. Individuals offer up their data (emotions, stories, facts, etc.) to the group for processing, and the group collectively sorts through what is presented before them to attempt to make unified sense of it all (Bohm & Nichol, 1996; Stains Jr, 2014). Dialogue is distinct from debate or discussion in that participants do not

seek to convince or persuade one another and typically there is not an outcome goal (a decision, action, or intended change of heart). Dialogue is a useful tool for managing political polarization because our current situation is predicated on the very different realities that liberals and conservatives have constructed around themselves. By engaging in dialogue across partisan divides we create a space in which a more accurate narrative of political reality can be developed. Additionally, dialogue within a heterogeneous network has a moderating effect on the impact of likeminded media consumption, supporting stronger critical thinking, political analysis, and political understanding (Kim, 2015) (Katz & Lazarsfeld, 1955; Lazarsfeld et al., 1944; McLeod, Scheufele, & Moy, 1999)

Best Practitioners in this Space

Several organizations around the country are using dialogue to intervene in the vicious cycle of mass polarization. In this section I provide an overview of the pre-eminent organizations currently working in this space. Because most dialogue organizations are small and locally-oriented, this review focuses on best-practices national organizations and on the approach that is popular in San Diego, where the pilot Impolitic event took place.

Essential Partners. Essential Partners (formerly Public Conversations Project) is a pioneer in the field of dialogue, using elements of family therapy, mediation, and neuroscience to design and deliver structured conversations on issues that matter. Essential Partners' approach to dialogue—a method they call Reflective Structured Dialogue—uses “preparation, structure, questions, facilitation, and reflection to enable people to harness their capacity to have the conversations they need to have” (“Essential Partners 'About Us'”, 2016).

Reflective Structured Dialogue is a highly structured approach to dialogue that works especially well for groups in conflict. Typically, the goal is not to find common ground or

determine any action; instead, the purpose is to build relationships and understanding across deep differences.

Part of what sets RSD apart from other methods of dialogue is the focus on facilitator preparation. Essential Partners facilitators typically design a meeting in substantial detail, outlining exact questions, timing for responses, and experiential activities for participants to engage. During the meeting itself, facilitators deliver the structure and typically use a light touch in terms of intervention. RSD is also distinct from other forms of dialogue because of the focus on personal reflection. This focus serves to both encourage participants to critically consider their own experiences, stories, and values, but also offers listeners a rare opportunity to understand others on a deep level.

To the field of dialogue, Essential Partners also contributes the concept of multipartiality. Conflict meeting facilitators typically hold themselves to a code of neutrality—in fact the shorthand term is often simply ‘Neutrals’—in an effort to provide unbiased service to all parties. Essential Partners facilitators instead consider themselves ‘multi-partial,’ meaning they care deeply about all stakeholders (Parsa, 2016). This philosophical distinction may be hard to spot in real time—in practice, multi-partiality and neutrality often look similar—but the approach gives facilitators license to use themselves as instruments and to use their emotional pulls in support of the dialogue.

Essential Partners dialogues are highly targeted to specific groups experiencing conflict. Meeting design involves interviews with stakeholders and participants, and participant pre-interviews and selection are crucial components. Processes are typically sustained over a period of time (anywhere from a few weeks to many years) with consistent participants, and generally speaking they are confidential and private.

Impolitic borrows heavily from Reflective Structured Dialogue in its approach, but differs markedly in terms of audience. While Essential Partners has had success providing professionally facilitated dialogue processes and dialogue training for civic leaders, they do not offer publicly accessible dialogue events, forums, or trainings. Although they offer professional development training for practitioners, their trainings are not intended for a lay-audience for personal use.

Living Room Conversations. Living Room Conversations develops and provides open-source facilitation guides for use in civic conversations across political divides. The model invites citizen-organizers to join with a friend, neighbor, or willing stranger of a different political perspective to organize in-home dialogue events. Each organizer invites two additional guests, for a total of six participants. This model is strong because the group size invites deeper sharing—as each participant will have more airtime—and varied perspectives through deliberate outreach.

A potential challenge of this model is that most individuals have politically homogenous social networks, making identifying a co-organizer of a different perspective challenging. One way they help organizers get around this is through a collaboration with “Hi From The Other Side,” a program that matches “friendly” strangers for conversations across political divides. However, this program was designed for one-on-one conversations, and by the nature of being strangers and not necessarily sharing geographic proximity, its usefulness for organizing Living Room Conversations is limited.

Beyond the model itself, the greatest strength of Living Room Conversations is the facilitation guides themselves, which are available online for a wide variety of topics ranging

from war and peace to the American Dream, media and entertainment, and beyond. The guides, on which the facilitation guide for Impolitic is modeled, are structured in five rounds:

- 1. Why are we here?** Participants have the opportunity to share in their own words why they chose to take part in this process and/or topic. This stage allows participants to begin framing for themselves the purpose of their conversation, to likely find early common ground in shared purpose, and to begin to understand one another's perspectives.
- 2. Your core values.** Before diving into the content of the issue at hand, participants are asked to clarify their values. This is useful both for the speaker and the listeners to clarify values, priorities, and worldview before getting into policy.
- 3. Your thoughts and concerns.** Participants are invited to speak personally about how they are impacted by, or worry they may be impacted by, the issue at hand. This round varies with the topic, but questions are designed to invite participants to share how they came to their opinions, and to support their curiosity about others.
- 4. Reflection.** This round encourages participants to take note of their experience, including how their perception of themselves and others may have shifted, any new understanding or perspective on the topic, and parts of the conversation they found valuable.
- 5. Accomplishments and moving forward.** In the final round, participants share what they feel was accomplished through their conversation and share any commitment to action or next steps they would like to take as a result.

This structure is effective because of its exploratory and reflective nature, which creates a conversation quite different from the debate-model most people have experienced. Participants then have a model for how conversations across difference can look, as well as beginning development in how to create these conversations in their own lives. This structure is so well designed that the facilitation guide on money in politics was used as the foundation for the facilitation guide for the Impolitic pilot.

A challenge shared by Essential Partners and Living Room Conversations—as well as others attempting bridge-building work—is convincing stakeholders to participate. The truth is that for many people polarization, bullying, and debate are incredibly effective tools for gaining power and obtaining certain kinds of advocacy outcomes. When individuals reach a point on their own that they see the limits of inflammatory rhetoric and debate, these organizations provide the structure and guidance to explore other options. But what about those who have yet to make this determination? This creates a gap in service for this audience. Individuals who have not been exposed to dialogue, or who are unconvinced of its usefulness for them, will need another motivator to participate.

Civility Activism. There is a growing loosely organized group advocating for increased civility in political discourse. This group is important to mention because they have a strong foothold in San Diego through the annual Restoring Respect Conference on Restoring Civility to Civic Dialogue, as well as partnerships with the National Conflict Resolution Center (San Diego-based) and the National Institute for Civil Discourse (Arizona-based conference partner). The frame of civility is valuable for political elites and those responsible for framing campaign ads and news segments, but for the general population it falls short of the need. The call for civility runs the risk of veering into tone policing and removing emotional data from consideration,

neither of which are conducive to successful dialogue, and which deters marginalized populations from participating. This is especially true among younger individuals and those with strong emotional ties to political issues.

Comedy

Political comedy has its Western roots in the Greek plays of Aristophanes, and hasn't taken a break since. At times political satire has been covert, used as a means to disguise activism and rebellion. At other times comedy has been used to openly mock the ruling elites in a manner that would otherwise be punishable. Comedy is also understood as a genre and a frame that points out and plays with human foibles. Rhetorical theorist Kenneth Burke describes the comic frame as operating under the assumption that human beings are fundamentally good, but flawed (Burke, 1984). Through this frame we can jovially call into question our failings and bring them into the light. Humane enlightenment, says Burke in *Attitudes Toward History*, "can go no further than in picturing people not as vicious, but as mistaken. When you add that people are necessarily mistaken, that all people are exposed to situations in which they must act as fools, that every insight contains its own special kind of blindness, you complete the comic circle" (Burke, 1984, p. 41) The comic frame stands in opposition to the melodramatic frame, which pits our good side against the evildoers, whose followers are all bad to the core, and in which all evil is with one group of people and all good with another. Burke argues that comedy converts villains into fools and necessitates a response of engagement and understanding, rather than fight or flight (Burke, 1984).

Comedy also plays an important psychological role that renders it valuable as a leadership tool. According to psychologist Avner Ziv, humor and laughter support consolidation of group membership. When individuals laugh together, they cement their shared membership in

a group. Group laughter serves as a recognition that members share a common world view and recognize the same things as absurd (Ziv, 1984). Comedy is also valuable for lowering anxiety; when we laugh at the things that scare us they become less frightening. Laughter is an innate human sign of safety, as Carl Marci, MD, director of the social neuroscience at Massachusetts General Hospital says, “Laughter was a safe, early social signal to form human bonds. Before we could speak, laughter told early humans that ‘Everything’s okay, you can come over to my side’” (“Humor, Laughter, and Those Aha Moments,” 2010). Given the importance of controlling the temperature and ensuring a manageable pace of change, using comedy to reduce anxiety is incredibly valuable.

Best Practitioners in this Space

This section outlines the contribution of important current political comedy productions, with a focus on their orientation towards and role in the realm of political polarization. I examine the prevailing forms of popular political comedy, suggest one model of ‘transpartisan’ political comedy, and highlight an organization performing non-partisan, educational political comedy.

Late night comedy. In any discussion of political comedy, we must recognize the modern significance of late night shows like *The Daily Show* with Trevor Noah, *Full Frontal* with Samantha Bee, *The Tonight Show* with Stephen Colbert, *Last Week Tonight* with John Oliver, and *Saturday Night Live*. Each of these shows has a different format (primarily sketch, standup, and desk segments) and a different spin on political humor (research intensive, mocking impersonations, and ‘truth telling,’ to name a few). However, they have a shared foundation as liberal political satire. This is unsurprising given that all except for SNL come from John Stewart’s family tree (Noah inherited Stewart’s show and Bee, Colbert, and Oliver are former *Daily Show* correspondents).

Scholars and critics have theorized ad nauseum about why no equivalent conservative comedy has emerged to challenge this hegemony. Alison Dagnes suggests this is because “Conservatism supports institutions and satire aims to knock these institutions down a peg” (Dagnes, 2012). Others argue that this liberal tendency is inherent to satire as an art form. Satire highlights and heightens real world absurdity through parody and hyperbole, and there is certainly plenty of absurdity from both Democrats and Republicans. However, a cardinal rule in satire is to ‘punch up,’ meaning to poke fun at and ridicule people and structures in power, not those socioeconomically below you. The debate about whether Democrats or Republicans better represent the needs of working people is beyond the scope of this paper, but conservative ideals speak to the need for stability and retaining the status quo, while liberals ideals speak to a need for change. Whatever the reason, this tendency in popular political comedy points to a challenge Impolitic faces in creating comedy that appeals to participants across the political spectrum, what we might call Transpartisan Comedy, after a term coined by Mark Gerzon (Gerzon, 2016).

South Park. As we begin to explore how to create transpartisan comedy, the best model comes from a surprising place: South Park. Trey Parker and Matt Stone’s cartoon has followed the lives of the children and adults in the small, mountain town of South Park, Colorado. Although the show is best known for its foul language, defecation-related humor, and gratuitous violence, its unique political voice provides a trove of examples for using comedy to address the mental models of political competition without demonizing individuals on opposing sides.

The best example of this is the Season 7 (2003) episode “I’m a Little Bit Country,” in which a conflict breaks out between Iraq war protesters and war supporters. Throughout the episode we see a familiarly ingrained conflict between the two sides who are unable to understand one another and refuse to collaborate. At the same time, one of the schoolchildren,

Cartman, travels back in time to meet the founding fathers and returns with an important lesson for his town (primer: Randy, Gerald, and Stuart are protesting the war, Skeeter and Mr. Mackey support the war):

I learned somethin' today. This country was founded by some of the smartest thinkers the world has ever seen. And they knew one thing: that a truely great country can go to war, and at the same time, act like it doesn't want to. *[a shot of the crowd]* You people who are for the war, you need the protesters. Because they make the country look like it's made of sane, caring individuals. And you people who are anti-war, you need these flag-wavers, because, if our whole country was made up of nothing but soft pussy protesters, we'd get taken down in a second. That's why the founding fathers decided we should have both. It's called "having your cake and eating it too."

Randy: He's right. The strength of this country is the ability to do one thing and say another.

Skeeter: Yeah, but... if it weren't for all you guys protesting, why everyone around the world would

hate the American people instead of just the President.

And if it weren't for you people flexing your

Gerald: arms, America could easily get taken over by terrorists or... or China.

Mr. Mackey: I guess we... owe you an apology.

Stuart: Eh-ah, I guess we owe you one.

Townsfolk: Awww.

This scene can be considered transpartisan comedy for two main reasons:

1. **It highlights the absurdity of the system:** Rather than poking fun at how absurd either the protesters or war supporters are being (though, to be fair, it certainly does both as well), Parker and Stone set their sights squarely on the system that creates their dynamic and skewers in mercilessly.
2. **It is deeply affectionate for its characters:** South Park takes place in a self described “hick town” in Colorado, based loosely off of Trey Parker’s hometown. Although Parker clearly has some colorful commentary about his town, it is also clear that there is deep caring for the characters, and this is transmitted to the audience. Although we laugh at their foibles, the characters are generally portrayed as good-hearted and relatable.

In order to effectively fulfill the purpose of comedy for both conservative and liberal audience participants, capturing the spirit of transpartisan comedy is crucial. If the show presented is too far akin to the liberal-leaning late-night comedy described previously it will

activate familiar frames and alienate conservatives. This example is used in the development of the Impolitic show format.

The Theater of Public Policy. Although political sketch comedy is common (with the pack lead by the Second City Theater), political improvised comedy is uncommon. This is likely because performing political comedy on the fly is incredibly challenging and, because of the limits of the medium, will never have the sharpness of scripted satire. However, The Theater of Public Policy in Minnesota emerges as a clear exception to this rule. T2P2, as they refer to themselves, performs a monthly show in which they interview local political figures and thought leaders and improvise a show based on that interview. Their focus is helping the audience learn about and understand complex political issues with the aid of lighthearted comedy. A benefit to the educational frame is that it earns T2P2 a diverse audience and funding from organizations that one would not ordinarily associate with political comedy like the Bush Foundation. However, there is a substantial missed opportunity in the absence of structured audience engagement. Although individuals may learn from the show, there is not a formal opportunity for them to learn from one another, or to process their learning as a group.

Impolitic Emerges

Amidst the organizations attempting to impact popular political engagement through dialogue and/or comedy, a clear gap emerges. Among political comedy productions, there are no examples that include an opportunity for participants to engage with one another about their experience. Among dialogue practitioners, there are currently no examples using comedy performance to prime participants (or for any other purpose). Furthermore, there is a need for publicly accessible opportunities to be exposed to dialogue. A dialogue program intended to give participants a taste of this mode of engagement would need to encourage participants to attend

for another reason (because they will not yet be familiar with dialogue). As a result, a natural partnership between comedic performance and dialogue emerges.

The theory of change on which Impolitic is based argues that both avoidance of civic dialogue across political divides, coupled with the aggressive debate-style rhetoric common when these conversations do take place, causes—in part—the fear and animosity we see between general public partisans (Pew Research Center, 2016). This fear and animosity leads to the election of more ideologically distinct and consistent elected officials—and the ‘political warfare’ that comes with it—resulting in further evidence to support isolation from and animosity towards political opponents. Therefore, reducing mass polarization through the fostering of dialogic conversations (as opposed to debates or casual, friendly, ‘agree-to-disagree’ discussions), has the potential to result in a reduction in elite polarization as well. Because this is a snowballing loop, even a small resultant reduction in elite polarization would further fuel reductions in mass polarization, resulting in a new virtuous circle of de-escalation.

Therefore, the goal of the Impolitic program is to inspire participants with a hands-on experience of a new model for civic conversations, and to give them the tools to bring this model into conversations across their network. This section will describe the design, development, and pilot event of this program, and the shifts in program design that have resulted from this test run and the resulting feedback.

Program components

Team development. Because the cornerstone of Impolitic is an improvised comedy show, development of performers and of the team as a whole is of the utmost importance. Performers were selected not for their existing political savvy or knowledge, but for their performance skills and philosophical alignment. Similarly, the coach, Jewell Karinen, is not a political expert, but is one of the strongest improvisers in San Diego with an expert theater background and a strong belief in the project. She is also an experienced performer and coach for the Armando form, on which Impolitic is based.

Importantly, although the team is comprised of some of the most talented (and my personal favorite) performers, I determined that in order to effectively hold the role of facilitator, I could not perform with the team. In analyzing the roles that emerge, a key distinction forms between the role of comedian and the role of facilitator that makes a dual role unwise. The role of comedy performers in Impolitic is to meet expectations to generate laughter, while subverting social norms and poking fun at systemic absurdity. The role of facilitator is to evoke reflection, invite discomfort, and enforce boundaries. In essence, the comedians primarily lower the tension and the facilitator primarily increases the tension. This creates an environment where participants can be safely challenged, but requires that the facilitator to not hold a dual role as a performer. However, no such conflict emerges for performers to also act as participants. We found in the pilot that both audience members and performers valued engaging with one another, and that no issues in power dynamics were noted by those offering feedback.

Partnership building. Bringing this pilot to life required developing new partnerships with individuals and organizations, including with the Moniker Group, who donated their beautiful Moniker Warehouse venue for the event. This partnership came about as a result of a

formal letter proposing the collaboration, followed by a meeting with Moniker's Events Director. The Moniker Group generously donated the space and provided at-cost chairs and on-site event support.

These costs were supported by generous donations from individual contributors familiar with my work as a leadership consultant, comedian, and facilitator, as well as by ticket sales for the event. Additional in-kind support was provided by the improvisers who have volunteered their time to support this effort, and by Ashley Adams, Marcia Chin, and Faith Walmer who volunteered as facilitators for the event. Similarly to the financial contributors, these consultants volunteered their time because they are personally familiar with my work. This indicates that although my social capital is effective in enrolling close supporters, developing additional resources will require a strategy to strengthen ties further beyond my individual network.

Participant/attendee outreach and advertising. Effective advertising, branding, and participant recruitment is incredibly important because this process ensures that the people in the room are diverse enough to fulfill the purpose of the program, and that they know what to expect and are primed to participate effectively. When looking at political and civic issues, priming and framing are crucial to creating a different conversation than participants have experienced before. Left alone, participants are likely to re-create their past ineffective conversations because the model is familiar and expected.

The Impolitic title is an important component of this branding. The name is both a portmanteau of "improv" and "politics," as well as a word meaning imprudent or politically unwise. It also sounds like the word "impolite," which contrasts with the "civility" approach of other civic dialogue efforts. The tagline, "Let's get impolite," supports this frame, suggesting that participants will not be asked to stifle their anger, fear, or sadness, but rather to be real with

one another. The brand is also useful in assuring conservative participants in particular that this is not an environment for tone policing in any direction, and that participants are encouraged to set aside their favorite terminology for the night and listen to understand, rather than correct or respond.

Participants for the pilot were recruited primarily through personal outreach through networks at USD, the local improv community, and throughout San Diego. The show was advertised online through a website with online ticket sales, a Facebook event page and Facebook group, and through local event listings and city newspapers. Although I reached out to media outlets for news coverage and to local political organizations including University of San Diego Republicans, San Diego State University Republicans, San Diego Young Republicans, USD Democrats, SDSU Democrats, and San Diego Young Democrats, none of these organizations garnered a response. This highlights a challenge for this program: if polarization is an effective tool for mobilization, what's the benefit of reducing it for partisan elites? Although the argument for democratic stability and durable policymaking can be made for the long term, it is true that polarization and political warfare can be effective tools for political action in the short term. In order to engage more partisan participants, this question will require further research.

The show. Positioning comedy alongside dialogue is an example of controlling the temperature, or controlling the tension in a situation. Attendees and participants need not be firm believers in dialogue or even familiar with the practice, they need only be curious and ready for a laugh. The use of a comedy show Therefore encourages participation by those who would be unlikely to come out to a traditional dialogue or town hall event. The comedy show also lowers the temperature because it gives participants a familiar structure; they have a sense that they know what to expect. This is important because participants are being asked to let go of what

they expect in terms of a political conversation. Although advertising is designed to set appropriate expectations, it is likely that participants will still come having imagined a debate or discussion rather than dialogue, and will experience some degree of frustration with the structure. Therefore, it is especially important not to frustrate their expectations with regard to the comedy show. Individuals and groups can handle only so much frustration at a time (Heifetz & Linsky, 2002). This frustration can be a useful tool for encouraging learning, but too much and the pace of change will become intolerable.

Initial show format concepts were developed in collaboration with Anderson Grubb—San Diego improviser and Impolitic performer—and Los Angeles improviser Adrian Ruvalcaba. Grubb, Ruvalcaba, and I developed the Impolitic form with a dual purpose to inform and entertain. We had all found in our conversations with peers that many people avoided political discussions or cited ‘hating’ political discussions because they felt that they or others were uninformed. Therefore, it was important to include a component of the show designed to offer a baseline of shared knowledge for the audience participants.

The form that emerged was an Armando inspired by an interview with a policy expert. The Armando is a longform improv show form in which a guest monologist tells personal stories that inspire the improvised scenes that follow. Scenes are based on ‘pulls,’ bits of information, details, or personal mannerisms present in the monologues, but can vary widely in how this information is used. For Impolitic, we modified this form by replacing the monologues of personal stories with an interview with a policy expert.

For the pilot event we chose the topic of money in politics as the focus. This topic was selected because the issue has broad areas of agreement between those on the left and the right, and because it has a tendency to make ‘strange bedfellows’ out of unlikely coalitions of support

(e.g. big donors on opposing ends of the political spectrum). Additionally, it is a clear issue through which to identify participants' personal values conflicts. Many people will experience a conflict between valuing free speech and political participation to some extent, as well as valuing some degree of equity. Finally, a campaign issue was salient as the pilot took place in September, 2016, the height of the historic campaign that elected President Donald Trump.

Jeanne Brown—of the League of Women Voters of San Diego—and Chad Peace—of the Independent Voter Project—joined us for the pilot as guest experts to share about the state of campaign finance and money in politics locally and nationally. Brown and Peace were selected not only for their expertise—both work for non-partisan election education and reform—but also for their willingness to engage enthusiastically in an experimental process. Dozens of potential speakers were contacted throughout the process, and while there was some interest, there was much skepticism about pairing comedy with serious dialogue, and at least one harsh rebuke. Brown and Peace emerged as ideal partners who offered differing perspectives on the campaign finance system—Brown focuses on ‘dark money’ and campaign contributions, while Peace’s interest is in state-funded partisan primaries. The two were prepared through an initial phone meeting outlining the process, expectations, and hopes for the interview and show, through advance documentation regarding show structure, and through participation in development of interview questions.

A key learning that came out of the pilot of Impolitic is the importance of attending to the activation of frames or mental models in the format of the show itself. All participants at the first show engaged in a thoughtful dialogue about the impact of money in politics, but some participants and facilitators suggested that they shared familiar stories and opinions and heard much of what they expected to hear. My hypothesis is that the subject of money in politics

activates a familiar set of frames within participants' minds. The activated frame impacts how participants will view the show, what they'll listen for, and how they decide what to share in the dialogue. In order to address this challenge I worked with the Impolitic performers to brainstorm a revised show format that would fit their interests as performers and meet our goals of encouraging participants to think differently, to set aside preconceived notions of who their political opposition is, and to share themselves openly.

The team and I decided to modify the Armando format for future shows to include two rounds of interview storytelling by two individuals from the community who hold strong political opinions. Guest monologists for this form need not hold authoritative positions or credentials, but they should be in one way or another well-informed individuals who have considered their own beliefs and are prepared to speak on that reflection. The goal is for these individuals to share how it is that they came to their political beliefs, with a particular focus on the values and experiences that inform those beliefs. In order to prepare for their participation, guests will be invited to participate in a coaching session around their political beliefs and the values, experiences, and information that inform them. Ideal guests will be demographically similar to the target audience: young, politically interested individuals frustrated with the hostility and/or homogeneity of their political conversations. In this way, guests will model for audience participants the kind of self-reflection, vulnerability, and curiosity we invite from them.

This format also helps us avoid a challenge pointed out by Baldassari and Bearman (Baldassarri & Bearman, 2007): individuals tend to focus political interactions on issues most salient to them, thereby either heightening perceived polarization or missing potential network heterogeneity. By removing the issue-focus, participants are invited to explore their political

attitudes outside of the context of their most salient issues. This opens the possibility for new learning and for increased critical reflection.

The facilitation model. The facilitation model used in this pilot was designed with a dual purpose: to support an engaging, generative dialogue, and to model tools participants can use to create shifts in their own political conversations. To this end, we used a self-facilitation guide modeled after Essential Partners' Reflective Structured Dialogue and Living Room Conversations' facilitation guide on Money in Politics, coupled with light-touch process support and a combination of large and small-group dialogue (see Appendix A for complete facilitation guide).

The flow of the evening began with a brief introduction to dialogue and to this project before kicking off the first 25-minute improv set, followed by small group dialogues, then another interview and improv set. The plan was to break participants back into their small groups for a second round of dialogue to close the evening, but based on the facilitation team's judgment of the energy in the room, it was decided to instead bring the whole group together in a single large circle for the second round of dialogue.

Segment time was kept by the facilitation team and groups were asked to designate a timekeeper to support observing internal time boundaries during the first-round conversation. In the first round, participants began with questions aimed at building trust and camaraderie among the group (e.g. What brought you here?), before moving into reflection on what they noticed about the show, the complexity of values and experiences informing their perspective, and what they are curious about. Participants were asked to allow each person to respond to each question (in under 1 minute) in order to ensure early equity of voice, and were encouraged to listen closely and take note of questions that arise. In the remaining time, participants follow up on

what they heard, including asking those questions about which they are still curious. In the second round of dialogue participants got more specific about their primary concerns, reflected on their experience that evening, and shared what they wanted to do or bring with them based on their experience.

A key component of the framing at the outset of the event—and in the communication agreements—is the notion of asking only those questions about which one is genuinely curious. This is in contrast to—for instance—questions used to make a point (e.g., But what about the children?!) or questions used to attack (e.g., Don't you care about people?). These kinds of questions are common in political discourse, and are a frequent source of frustration.

Although participants reported finding the conversation valuable, I believe a more engaged facilitator role would improve participant outcomes in terms of understanding dialogue and being able to apply principles of dialogue to their own conversations. For future events, there are two ways I will adjust the facilitation design. The first is to include a more structured facilitation exercise to explicitly name dynamics including polarities. The second is to utilize live facilitation rather than self-facilitation. Although the goal with self-facilitation was to develop dialogic skills in participants, I believe this goal would be better met through a stronger initial encounter with dialogue through the more hands-on service of professional facilitators.

Opportunities for expansion

Based on this pilot program, I see several opportunities for expansion in addition to the revised show format described above. One challenge to expanding the program outside of San Diego and other politically diverse regions is that most people live in communities with low ideological diversity. The opportunity arises then to develop a digital version of this framework using videos of sketch and/or desk segment comedy and utilizing one of the many emerging

tools for online dialogue and group process. This option feels particularly valuable given that increasingly individuals are getting their news and engaging about politics online. Therefore online engagement has the opportunity to meet people where they are, providing a well-timed intervention.

Final Reflection

When I was a kid I thought that government was the way Americans came together across our differences to solve our shared problems. Through the process of designing and delivering the pilot of this program I've found that although that notion may be naïve, we as citizens have the power to create these spaces for one another. Whether it is as fun as a comedy show or as painful as genuinely trying to understand where your isolationist uncle or hippie neighbor are coming from, engaging across political divides is more crucial than ever. We are facing immense pressure to see our neighbors as enemies and to treat one another the way Members of Congress do, but this would be a mistake. Only by leveraging our varied perspectives can we effectively self-govern a nation as large and diverse as ours, and only by laughing together can we make the effort worth it.

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IMPOLITIC

SELF-FACILITATION GUIDE

COMMUNICATION AGREEMENTS:

- Share airtime and respect time boundaries
- Allow people to finish their speaking
- Hold back from side conversations
- Confidentiality upon request

COMMUNICATION REQUESTS:

- Speak what is most important to you
- Listen for what is most important to others
- Ask questions you are genuinely curious about
- Seek to understand (rather than simply agree or disagree)

ROUND ONE

Please assign one person in your group to keep time. For each question, each participant has 1 minute to answer. You do not have to use the entire minute, and at any time you may choose to pass or “pass for now” on a question. Remaining time can be used to follow up on what your fellow participants have shared, about which you may have remaining questions.

- What interested or drew you to this conversation?
- What did you hear or see that really stood out to you?
- Which of your values come into play when you think about money in politics? Are any of them in conflict with one another?
- Do you see money in politics influencing elected officials or policy makers? What specific stories can you share?
- What else do you not yet understand, or want to know?

ROUND TWO

You may use the same timing structure as you did in round one, or you may choose to loosen this structure and practice sharing your perspective and seeking to understand one another as you would “in the wild.”

- When it comes to money in politics, what is your primary concern right now?
- Where does the issue of money in politics fall on your top ten list?
- What learning, new understanding, or common ground was found on this topic tonight?
- What will you take from this dialogue experience into your future political conversations?
- Is there a next step you would like to take based on the conversation you had?