

## The Worsening Political Divide: Adult Education as Part of the Cure

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**Abstract:** The US is experiencing extreme social and political polarization not seen since the Civil War. This divisiveness is causing civil unrest and governmental dysfunction which threatens the stability of the nation. Four major causes of the current state are party realignment, the deregulation of news broadcasting, algorithmic personalization of electronic information, and an unknowing public. Adult education can and should be part of the remedy reducing or eliminating harmful polarization. Knowledge of authoritative systems is key to the solution. To promote such knowledge, adult educators can create practical and theoretical learning experiences about authoritative systems and incorporate such knowledge into existing courses and programs. Breadth of the field should produce myriad ways to do so particular to each educator's practice.

*Keywords:* social polarization, political polarization, adult education, civic Engagement, partisan divisiveness

The US is experiencing extremes in social and political divisiveness not seen in over 100 years (Aschwanden, 2020; Associated Press, 2016; Boxell et al., 2017; Campbell, 2016; Gallagher, 2020; Simas et al., 2020). Worsening polarization has given rise to various forms of social unrest that threaten democratic stability (Entman & Usher, 2018). Moreover, increasing political polarization has resulted in dysfunctional government (Entman & Usher, 2018; Hutchens et al., 2019). Reasons for this widening rift are the subject of numerous investigations. A review of relevant literature reveals some prominent causes of this polarization and prompts questions and suggestions of what adult educators can do to remedy the overall situation.

### Background and Literature

Polarization is “a sharp division, as of a population or group, into opposing factions” (Dictionary.com, 2020). Social polarization occurs when society endures a split in attitude or perspective and its members move toward opposite ends of the associated spectrum (Oxford Reference, 2020; Psychology Research and Reference, 2020). Political polarization occurs when “partisans become more ideologically distinct across groups while becoming more ideologically similar within groups” (McLaughlin, 2018, p. 41). Social and political polarization in the US has been worsening in recent decades (Boxell et al., 2017; Hutchens et al., 2019; Simas et al., 2020) to levels not seen since the Civil War (Aschwanden, 2020; Associated Press, 2016; Campbell, 2016). This divisiveness—which occurs on general and specific aspects of issues such as climate change, immigration, police action and reform, the handling of COVID-19, Supreme Court Justice and other governmental appointments, and the 2020 election—has led to civil rights violations, job discrimination, demonstrations, fights, riots, partisan gridlock, delayed government action, and even government shutdown with functionaries unable to agree on how to handle even the most pressing issues (Associated Press, 2016, Hutchens et al., 2019; Simas et al., 2020).

The literature shows a substantial amount of research undertaken to understand the causes and effects of current polarization. As studies parse out ideas and adjust and sharpen investigatory foci, general prominent factors leading to divisiveness become evident. Four of the more prevalent factors identified in the literature by this paper's authors are political party realignment, deregulation of news broadcasting, algorithmic personalization of electronic information and an unknowing public.

### **Party Realignment**

Party realignment, or substantial shifts in ideologies and power bases within and between political parties, has occurred about six times in the history of the Country. The most recent realignment took longer than those before it, occurring over more than three decades. Beginning in the early 1960s, this realignment was initiated by a party dealignment. By this time, the two major political parties had become indistinguishable from each other. Both contained members representing a broad range of ideologies, including liberals and conservatives. Lack of differentiation was noticeable enough to generate published commentary suggesting and predicting the discontinuation of the two-party system. As this dealignment continued, liberal democrats were elected into state and federal offices and began to take action in accord with various social (e.g., Civil Rights, Anti-War, Women's Rights) movements, which in turn attracted more liberal followers, and prompting liberal Republicans to switch to the Democratic party and pushing the Democratic party platform further and further to the left. These events motivated a Republican response known as the *Southern Strategy*, in which the party began to adjust its platform to recoup and maintain its balance of power by attracting disassociated White Southern conservative Democrats. It continued adjustments to attract other conservatives, which continued to push the Republican platform further to the right. This realignment along liberal and conservative ideological lines was apparent by the early 1990s, with the Democratic party identifying as liberal, and the Republican party identifying as conservative (Campbell, 2016). Party movement in opposite directions in this respect has both primed and fed the current polarization of people and their representation.

### **Deregulation of News Broadcasting**

Working in tandem with party realignment to foster the current situation has been the deregulation of news broadcasting, which occurred with the repeal of the Fairness Doctrine. Put into effect by the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) in 1949, this doctrine required broadcasters (those holding broadcasting licenses) devote a reasonable amount of time to presenting controversial issues of public importance in an honest, fair and balanced way, allowing reasonable opportunity for opposing views to be expressed (Clogston, 2016; Hentoff, 2015; Pickard, 2018). The doctrine was repealed in 1987, which enabled, initially, mainly conservative talk radio to flourish (Clogston, 2016; Pickard, 2018) followed by reactionary liberal programs to follow suit. Indeed, AM "informational radio formats, including talk and public affairs" rose from 7% of programming in 1987 to 28% in 1995 (Clogston, 2016, p. 376). Contrary to popular misconception, the repeal of the Fairness Doctrine most likely had nothing to do with the advent of the popular Fox News cable television station and subsequent liberal cable outlets like MSNBC, as the doctrine reached only broadcast, not cable, television; and the FCC likely would have not extended its reach. At any rate, from 1987 to present, the public is

receiving biased and partisan “news” from radio and (some) television broadcasters, which feeds and provokes the worsening social and political divide.

### **Algorithmic Personalization of Electronic Information**

Beside broadcasting, the public has become even more affected by the internet and social media. As providers compete for the attention of users--the public--to increase revenue through more exposure to advertising, they have invented, and maximized use of, means proving to have adverse effects. The more direct of these is the unscrupulous posting of biased information, misinformation, or even disinformation, to attract users to particular sites, thereby increasing exposure to certain sites or products and boosting its advertising and revenue value. While the immediate goal is to make money for those who do the posting, the collateral effect is to bias, misinform, or disinform, the public, and unduly influence public perceptions. This tends to work in tandem with what has proven to be the more insidious means of holding and directing user attention, which is using algorithms to personalize individual consumption of whatever material is electronically published. Simply put, the algorithms track what links and sites each user “clicks on” and gives him or her more of the same. Very soon, users are exposed to only the kind of sites and material the algorithms determine they want (Bessi et al., 2016; Boxell, 2017; Entman & Usher, 2018; Kim, 2017; LaFrance & Carlson, 2017; Praiser, 2011; Sunstien, 2017). This creates information silos and “echo chambers,” or groups of like-minded people where views are continuously further polarized. (Bessi et al., 2016; LaFrance & Carlson, 2017; Praiser, 2011; Sunstien, 2017). Moreover, the continued absence of opposing views in the material they consume narrows perspective and increases the inability see or understand how anyone could hold a different view. The result of these means to increase advertising effectiveness, sales and revenue is a growing and ever increasingly polarized public.

### **An Unknowing Public**

Unfortunately, an unknowing public enables the factors discussed above, not only to effect polarization, but to do so with maximum effectiveness. Used here, the term *unknowing public* means a public that lacks knowledge about the authoritative systems running its society. Terms like an uneducated or uninformed public are purposely avoided because they may be loaded with undesirable and debatable assumptions giving rise to perceptions of the same ilk. *Authoritative systems* is a term developed by this paper’s authors to encompass a litany of less comprehensive but related system descriptors—government, civics, politics, policy, public affairs, public administration, and the like—without the undesirable, negative connotations conjured by a term such as law, which, in its broadest definition, would also suffice. Authoritative systems, then, are systems within a society, recognized as legitimate, or sovereign, or official, or otherwise understood to have the power, or authority, to manage—i.e., to maintain stability, or bring about change within—that society.

Simply put, as authoritative systems become ever more complex and pervasive in people’s lives, knowledge of them continues to decline (Annenberg Public Policy Center, 2016; Carcasson & Sprain, 2012; Cavanagh, 2017; Delander, 2014; Gastil, 2004; Goldstein, 2008; Hallenberg, 2016; Levinstein & Sisco, 2016; Malin et al., 2017; Rowell, 2019). Including exacerbating polarization, this decline in knowledge has resulted in declining civic engagement (Carcasson & Sprain, 2012;

Hayes & Lawless, 2015; Hayes & Lawless, 2017) and low participation in elections. Excluding the 202 cycle, eligible voter turnout in federal elections has ranged from 45% to 63% over the past 70 years (Ballotpedia 2018, Bureau of the Census, 1991; Statista, 2020).

### **Adult Education as Part of the Cure**

Adult Education can be part of the cure or remedy of the current debilitating social and political polarization. Indeed, adult educators ought to be concerned and motivated to do so. After all, the field has always espoused democratic ideals, civic engagement, and social justice, none of which can occur without an informed and functioning populous. Knowledge of authoritative systems and processes can prevent undue influence of bias, misinformation and disinformation, as it effects an understanding of how things actually work, and how to quickly and efficiently find out what is really going on, by vetting and using accurate, non-biased and responsible sources of information.

The field is much too broad for any group small of theorists or practitioners to attempt a thorough treatment of the topic on its own. Notwithstanding, the paper's authors offer some basic suggestions. First, adult educators at all levels should learn authoritative systems--with a focus on processes--well enough to instill them in all activities (program planning, instructional design, teaching, research, administration, support and public services, etc.). They then can build new course focused on various aspects of authoritative systems; or they can incorporate information into existing courses or lessons. As an example, an Adult Basic Education math teacher can use school or voter districting, legislative elections, and such as contexts for problems and equations. Another example would be to use combine historical contexts (e.g., the activity of Myles Horton and Paulo Freire) with current events, promoting discussion and learning about identifying issues and taking effective action--which overwhelmingly would benefit from the use of authoritative systems to solve them. In this latter vein, those so inclined could actually teach through experiential learning by allowing for or actually utilizing or navigating authoritative systems for social change at some level. An example would be to require some kind of civil engagement (e.g., volunteering as an election official or an environmental monitor) for credit in a course, or to undertake or immerse in a larger scale project (e.g., creating a bill and seeing it through the legislature, or pursuing administrative action concerning placement of public works facilities) as a whole course--action research. Such projects can be non-partisan, collaborative and inclusive. Finally, going along with getting involved in action, adult educators can set examples by acting with respect to their field. They could initiate and take part in adult education policy discussion and development and promote activity on the part of their professional organizations. One of those activities might be to advocate for a law or policy regarding the restrictions of internet and social media algorithms to reduce polarization. For example, algorithms might be used only to narrow the focus of topics but not perspective or bias in information consumed; and they could be prevented from affecting the intake of major news events. If one needs a more basic subject for involvement, how about the protection of personal information from being electronically collected, bought and sold (also done with the use of algorithms)?

## Conclusion

The message herein is simple, its implications important and its opportunities for implementation broad. Without action, polarization will only remain and increase, further crippling the ability of the nation to function. Authoritative systems knowledge is key to reducing or eliminating current polarization. Adult educators can and should act as an important part of the solution to reduce or eliminate harmful divisiveness and promote constructive discussion, debate, and activity. To do this, they must investigate, learn, and teach knowledge of authoritative systems. This paper is meant to stimulate ideas and action on the part of adult educators on reducing or eliminating the crippling divide with respect to their area of practice or theory.

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