

Can We Save Our Toxic Political Atmosphere?

Lia C. Howard

The toxins in our atmosphere this spring make even more palpable what we already have been experiencing in our political culture, and make even more urgent our communal responsibility to address them as we approach the election season of fall 2020. Lia C. Howard, Ph.D., is a political scientist and the Student Advising and Wellness Director of the Stavros Niarchos Foundation Paideia Program at the University of Pennsylvania. This essay is adapted from her opening lecture to her Introduction to American Politics course as well as a public lecture delivered in September 2019.

Rachel Carson, in her 1962 book *Silent Spring* pointed out what the pesticide DDT was doing to the natural environment and helped turn the tide towards eliminating its widespread use. Carson highlighted the interconnectedness of the natural environment, explaining how human interference in one area badly altered other parts of the wider ecosystem. Her work led to the creation of the Environmental Protection Agency. Likewise, in 2016 after a ten-year lawsuit, the lawyer Rob Bilott was able to classify the toxin PFOA and make sure it was no longer dumped by DuPont into Parkersburg, West Virginian waterways.¹ Being translucent in water, it had not yet been identified by the EPA though its effects were evident: cows were dying, cancer levels escalated among the citizens of Parkersburg, and two out of seven births experienced birth defects. Once PFOA was identified, however, DuPont could be held accountable for dumping it and the town could work towards restoration and health.

Like Carson and Bilott, most Americans bear witness to the effects of political toxins in our atmosphere, mainly in the measurable increase in anger and anxiety. In April of 2019, Gallup released their Global Emotions poll showing that Americans have hit record levels of stress and anger.² U.S. citizens are 20% higher in our stress reporting and 6% higher in our worry reporting than the world averages. Folks under 30 are reporting the highest

levels of anger. Pew Research Center's March 2019 report has 8 in 10 Americans "worried about the way the government in Washington DC works" with 65% of Americans thinking that we will grow in our divisiveness over the next 30 years.³ Along with anger and stress, nearly three quarters of those under 30 no longer trust other people or key institutions especially when compared to older generations according to a Pew Research Center August 2019 report.⁴

It is clear that there are toxic elements in our political air and water. Identifying the causes behind why this moment feels so incredibly fraught is critical as it may have concrete consequences. Some might be led by their feelings to disengage from all of the heightened energy directed towards the election of 2020 especially if it continues to be framed in toxic and divisive ways. Some already have. Feelings of anxiety and anger invoke the fight or flight response. What if we studied the atmospheric conditions affecting all of us, take a moment to reflect on where we are, and look for ways to take deep breaths of clean air?

¹ Nathaniel Rich, "The Lawyer Who Became DuPont's Worst Nightmare." *The New York Times Magazine*, January 10, 2016: <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/01/10/magazine/the-lawyer-who-became-duponts-worst-nightmare.html>.

² "The State of Global Emotions." Gallup News, 2020: <https://news.gallup.com/poll/248876/state-global-emotions.aspx>. Accessed 15 May 2020.

³ Kim Parker, Rich Morin, and Juliana Menasce Horowitz, "Looking to the Future, Public Sees an America in Decline on Many Fronts." Pew Research Center: Social and Demographic Trends, March 21, 2019: <https://www.pewsocialtrends.org/2019/03/21/public-sees-an-america-in-decline-on-many-fronts/>.

⁴ John Gramlich, "Young Americans are less trusting of other people – and key institutions – than their elders." Pew Research Center, August 6, 2019: <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2019/08/06/young-americans-are-less-trusting-of-other-people-and-key-institutions-than-their-elders/>

Six Toxins Corroding Common Ground in the Electorate

(1) Our information and social networks reinforce our own views and caricatures of opposing views mostly because we do not have electronic shared, common space.

Harvard Law Professor, Cass Sunstein's book *#Republic: Divided Democracy in the Age of Social Media*, uses the term "homophily" or self-love to describe the product of the algorithms that keep our information feed and friends curated such that we do not encounter authentic difference in non-confrontational ways.⁵ Most poignantly, Sunstein quotes Jane Jacobs' description of the purpose of sidewalks in cities—spaces of "serendipity" where we encounter and observe differences in nonthreatening, shared space without having to respond—to underscore that we do not have such space online. Though much of this is happening at a subconscious level, on a sidewalk we meet people face to face and we are aware of people's humanity, which subtly reinforce certain norms and manners.

One dramatic result of this toxin is something that Ross Douthat in a recent article refers to as a scissor.⁶ A scissor "is a statement, an idea or a scenario that's somehow perfectly calibrated to tear people apart—not just by generating disagreement, but by generating total incredulity that somebody could possibly disagree with your interpretation of the controversy followed by escalating fury and paranoia and polarization until the debate seems like a completely existential win or perish fight." Several scenarios are listed, the NFL and the national anthem, the Kavanaugh Supreme Court hearing and the March for Life where the Covington High school student encountered a Native American activist. Scissors have many different elements of the culture wars often condensed into a single image. Because the image is designed to evoke high levels of passion, when you discover that someone has the opposing view of the scene, it can continue to calcify your

perception of the other person as an irredeemable antagonist.

This is compounded by the fact that political information is disseminated and consumed differently by persons based on their political party affiliation. Though it seems commonplace knowledge at this point, five years ago Pew Research Center found that "consistent conservatives" tend to cluster around one source, (*Fox News*) while "consistent liberals" tend to gather media from multiple, different sources (*New York Times*, *NPR*, *CNN*, and *MSNBC*).⁷ It is important to note that since Pew's study, other forms of conservative media have become more popular. Social media is likewise filled with fragmenting behaviors. "Consistent liberals" are more likely to unfriend someone on social media based on political opinions whereas "consistent conservatives" are more likely to hear opinions that mirror their own on social media sites. This means, people do not receive information from the same source—the frame is different, the content is often different and the ad hominem attacks are different.

Lacking both common spaces to encounter opposing views and even the same information can lead to "zero sum" narratives—the idea that for your policy idea to win, I have to lose. Since the way legislation is crafted in the U.S. is deeply dependent on compromise, the entire legislative process becomes stymied. This leads to the "might makes right" phenomenon where the only way to get something done is to grind the other party into submission with larger majorities in Congress and to make capture of the executive office an existential battle, instead of working with the other party towards acceptable compromise.

Moreover, it can feed fear and anger through "comparing our best against their worst" caricatures. It is reductive, often rife with logical fallacies, and because the other side is not portrayed fairly it becomes deeply emotive. This, when coupled with our next toxin, can become combustible.

Television media sources increasingly rely upon strategies that evoke high emotional responses among viewership—making it harder for viewers to

⁵ Cass Sunstein, *#Republic: Divided Democracy in the Age of Social Media* (Princeton University Press, 2017).

⁶ Ross Douthat, "The Covington Scissor." *The New York Times*, January 22, 2019: <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/01/22/opinion/covington-catholic-march-for-life.html>

⁷ Amy Mitchell, Jeffrey Gottfried, Jocelyn Kiley, and Katerina Eva Matsa, "Political Polarization & Media Habits." Pew Research Center, October 21, 2014: <https://www.journalism.org/2014/10/21/political-polarization-media-habits/>.

turn away, but leaving an association of anger and distaste towards political discourse.

University of Pennsylvania Political Scientist, Diana Mutz discusses the rise in emotional reactions that viewers experience as they are exposed to ever more uncivil media (close-ups of yelling pundits).⁸ Humans in general are averse to intense, in-your-face confrontations, so seeing these images at such high frequency influences the way Americans experience politics (net negative) as opposed to the information conveyed by, say, Walter Cronkite with a single, stationary camera. The visuals of angry pundits give flesh to the angry words read on media feeds.

Beyond sophistication of hightech videography, the market imperative of media has given license to selling ideas for maximum viewership as a higher prerogative than worrying about the consequences resulting from *how* ideas are sold. The sophistication of data allows marketers to micro-target their audience with such precision to know exactly which words, emotions and ideas will appeal to their very specific audience. They can frame information knowing with precision that their fuzziness around certain ideas will fit within the blanket world views of their audience. Information is not calibrated necessarily towards allowing their viewers to learn new things, instead it reinforces preexisting opinions.

For example, when I encounter some people who hear that I am a political scientist in a university, I frequently hear how there is no free speech any more in universities and they are appalled at how young people are not exposed to a variety of ideas. While it is true based on some data that education leads to growth in liberal ideas, it is largely a myth (one punctuated by a few high-profile exceptions to give it temporary validity) that universities block speakers. It gets traction on networks with viewers that have less daily contact with universities, their ideas are fuzzy about the place, so hearing caricatured information that young people are in trouble can be believed more easily.

(2) The rise of negative partisanship. The majority of the American electorate is voting to oppose the other party rather than to affirm their own

⁸ Diana Mutz, *In-Your-Face Politics: The Consequences of Uncivil Media* (Princeton University Press, 2015).

beliefs. Emory University Political Scientist Alan Abramowitz's study and recent book discuss the rise of "negative partisanship," the idea that people are voting to oppose other party's beliefs rather than to support a set of beliefs held by their own party.⁹ The elections of 2012 and 2016 marked the highest incidence of "party loyalty and straight ticket voting since the National Election Studies began tracking American voting patterns in 1952." This is dangerous in a democracy on many levels.

If you are preoccupied by painting a negative portrait of the other, you will be less concerned with outlining what it is you actually (precisely) believe. Again, fuzzy concrete policy ideas do not matter if all political rhetoric is designed primarily to malign the other side. This particular strategy facilitates the proliferation of logical fallacies in political campaigning because it is more concerned with getting the electorate to feel disgust, anger and fear than it is to get them to think rationally. Our Founders, schooled in both the Enlightenment and in classical thought, categorized rhetoric that appealed chiefly to passions as the very lowest form of political discourse. An appeal to reason was most important in an argument; and then, if necessary, one might appeal to people's interests. Only as a last resort should there be an appeal to emotions because such appeals are rife with logical problems and are the primary tool of demagogues.¹⁰ Passions work as a marketing imperative. They do not cultivate thoughtful, engaged citizens.

Another feature of negative partisanship is that it breeds both destructive thinking and self-righteousness, which erode the construction of a set of policies that represent a coherent political perspective. It is easy to be a wrecking ball but much harder to present an alternative vision. Further negative partisanship erodes trust from those who might not agree with your perspective but who want

⁹ Alan I. Abramowitz and Steven Webster, "The Only Thing We Have to Fear is the Other Party." *Sabato's Crystal Ball*, UVA Center for Politics, June 4, 2015: <http://centerforpolitics.org/crystalball/articles/the-only-thing-we-have-to-fear-is-the-other-party/>. Accessed May 15, 2020. See also Alan Abramowitz, *The Great Alignment: Race, Party Transformation, and the Rise of Donald Trump* (Yale University Press, 2018).

¹⁰ Alexander Hamilton, James Madison and John Jay. *The Federalist Papers* (Bantam Press, 2003), especially Federalist 51.

to nonetheless create public policies. This trust is critical to develop what Penn's president Amy Gutmann and Harvard professor Dennis Thompson call the "spirit of compromise" as opposed to a spirit of campaigning.¹¹ Negativity is highly contagious, deeply destructive and takes on a life of its own, one that can divorce itself from reason.

(3) The nuance of the local is becoming homogenized into two gigantic political parties. In his article "The Rise of McPolitics," Harvard Political Scientist Yascha Mounk underscores the highly problematic substitution of big box store party politics for the idiosyncratic nuances of local party politics.¹² Democrats in New Hampshire were qualitatively different from Democrats in Georgia but with the rise of the other toxins mentioned above as well as decisions made by the two dominant US political parties, we have the snuffing out of local, geographically based political nuance. This could well be connected to the loss of local newspapers (on which, see Harvard professor Jill Lepore's work).¹³

The problem here is people largely feel disconnected from concrete issues like those felt at the local level. This disconnect makes politics not about getting tangible things done, like fixing the bridge I can see from my house, but instead about more abstract issues that do not directly influence my commute to work or my day-to-day expenses. The abstraction works very well with culture war issues. It allows you to ignore all other important reasons to compromise, as you would in order to get that bridge fixed, to fight for something abstract. All energy is caught in zero-sum fights over single culture war issues with license to sacrifice all other day-to-day policies as long as we get our team in (even if "our team" is actually hurting our local area with their policies, be they environmental policies causing widespread flooding, tariffs hurting agriculture etc). As with the other toxins, this nationalization of

politics erodes the search for common ground and solutions where both sides can have tangible wins (and the community can have one big win—the bridge). With abstract issues, it is hard to see what a "win" looks like besides getting the Supreme Court to bulldoze the opposition with yet another 5-4 decision. If a community gets to fight for a concrete win, in an area that citizens cannot do for themselves as individuals, like a building/fixing that bridge, the feeling of cooperative accomplishment and political efficacy is tangible and priceless.

(4) The influence of money on politics narrative that has held sway over the American psyche is this notion that we are all middle class. We have long ignored class distinctions and been appalled at the thought of a US aristocracy because we could always point our fingers towards Europe saying we do not have that here (however much we were trying hard to ignore our hypocrisy). In the 1960s, political scientist Louis Hartz looked with envy towards Europe saying we would never get socialism here because we never had the class consciousness that comes from having a feudal history. The narrative of all Americans being middle class was significantly threatened by the 2010 Supreme Court ruling *Citizens United v the Federal Elections Commission*. The Court ruled that corporations are persons and as such are entitled to free speech under the First Amendment to the Constitution. They are thus allowed to spend what they like to support political candidates in elections. The 2012 election unleashed a spending frenzy by wealthy individuals on both sides of the aisle, even though Americans are largely united around reducing the influence of money in politics. Four in five Americans think there is too much money in politics, with 84 percent calling for a complete restructuring of campaign finance (from exit poll respondents in both parties).¹⁴

Alongside the *Citizens United* decision has been the very real economic realities of Americans. We are moving ever backwards toward the sharp

¹¹ Amy Gutmann and Dennis Thompson. *The Spirit of Compromise: Why Governing Demands It and Campaigning Undermines It* (Princeton University Press, 2014).

¹² Yascha Mounk, "The Rise of McPolitics." *The New Yorker*, June 25, 2018: <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2018/07/02/the-rise-of-mcpolitics>.

¹³ Jill Lepore, "Does Journalism Have a Future?" *The New Yorker*, January 21, 2019: <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2019/01/28/does-journalism-have-a-future>.

¹⁴ See

<https://www.law.cornell.edu/supct/html/08-205.ZS.html> Accessed May 20, 2020; <http://thehill.com/blogs/ballot-box/presidential-races/230318-the-5-billion-campaign>: Accessed May 20, 2020; Times/ CBS news poll June 2015 http://www.nytimes.com/2015/06/03/us/politics/poll-shows-americans-favor-overhaul-of-campaign-financing.html?_r=0: Accessed May 20, 2020.

inequalities of the Gilded Age elite few and the poor majority. The documentary “Inequality for All” by Robert Reich compares inequality in America to a suspension bridge.¹⁵ The peaks in 1928 and 2007 were followed by sharp economic dips. Interestingly, political polarization in America mirrors the economic “suspension bridge” almost perfectly. In periods of high economic inequality, there is high political polarization. The inverse is also true. Economic equality breeds political compromise.

(5-6) Isolation and Workism

Another very real social phenomenon polluting all efforts towards building the commons is isolation among the American populace. Arthur Brooks at the American Enterprise institute has shown that loneliness makes people more apt to accept ideas on the ideological fringe, especially if they are angry.¹⁶ Spending more time alone and with screens has led to a dramatic loss in empathy among young people, according to MIT scholar, Sherry Turkle.¹⁷ Finally, there is rapid isolation between generations even as intergenerational cooperation, such as between retirees and college students, according to a recent Wall Street Journal article, could be deeply helpful to both.¹⁸

Going hand in hand with isolation is the tendency of Americans to be engaged in what Derek Thompson of *The Atlantic* calls “workism.”¹⁹ Calling

¹⁵ Robert Reich, *Inequality for All* (2014): <http://inequalityforall.com> Accessed May 20, 2020.

¹⁶ Arthur Brooks, “How Loneliness is Tearing America Apart.” *The New York Times*, November 23, 2018: <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/11/23/opinion/loneliness-political-polarization.html> Accessed May 20, 2020

¹⁷ Sherry Turkle, *Reclaiming Conversation: The Power of Talk in a Digital Age* (Penguin Books, 2016).

¹⁸ Marc Freedman, “Building Bridges Across the Generational Divide.” *Wall Street Journal*, November 1, 2018: <https://www.wsj.com/articles/building-bridges-across-the-generational-divide-1541086302>. Accessed May 20, 2020.

¹⁹ Derek Thompson, “Workism is Making Americans Miserable.” *The Atlantic*, February 24, 2019: <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2019/02/re-ligion-workism-making-americans-miserable/583441/>. Accessed May 20, 2020.

it a new religion (or one of the new atheisms) Thompson defines workism as “the belief that work is not only necessary to economic production, but also the centerpiece of one’s identity and life’s purpose; and the belief that any policy to promote human welfare must *always* encourage more work.” He goes on to give data showing that the richest men since 2005 have traded work for leisure and clock the longest work hours of any other group.

Isolation mixed with workism means a host of things. It means we are running on fumes when we turn to building civil society and our political life. It means that we can hide in our work and feel justified not contributing to the common good. Further, isolation and workism can reinforce each other. They and the other toxins mentioned above are making us more prone to believe things that are not rational but deeply emotive.

Concluding Thoughts

Reading through the toxins above, it is clear that regardless of the outcome of the 2016 election, all of the toxins would have been present in the atmosphere of the U.S. The striking thing about the election of our current president, however, is his tendency to exacerbate the pollution, rolling back not just the laws of the actual EPA, but actively promoting each of the toxins through behavior that leads to division. This administration has reminded us that the American presidency until now has followed unwritten norms of behavior initiated from the very start by George Washington. These norms are not written into the Second Article of the Constitution, they are simply a mantle that each president up to this point has taken on, silently following the words of Washington’s Farewell Address to unify the country lest our differences rip us apart. For temporary, personal gain, our current president has stoked divisiveness at every level, calling fellow Americans, even US Congresswomen, “other” and using careless and offensive speech to describe fellow citizens of the United States.

Without leadership coming from the top, it is ever more imperative for citizens to mount a grassroots clean-up of toxins. In the same way that people recover the ecology after a massive crude oil spill, I envision people cleaning up after the devastation that these toxins have ravaged on our shared political life.

To that end, I offer three simple charges to my fellow citizens:

First, form associational attachments with a preference towards face to face encounters that emphasize concrete policy goals. Alexis de Tocqueville's idea of American associations as an alternate source of moral authority has significant potential in this moment. Join book clubs and civic societies, clean up trash and feel the power of engagement.

Second, go local. Focus on ways to serve the public in your local community. Find out what is going on in your local community and engage your networks to find ways to be involved in doing concrete tasks that better life for all.

Finally, find ways to reconstruct the idea of "the commons" and look for leaders that consistently foster the common good and common ground as opposed to those who consciously build their

messaging around division. We do not need to be ideological purists. These are complicated times that call for nuanced views. It is important to have concrete policy ideas, as opposed to those built on fuzzy ideological concepts that artificially connect people based on their fears or anger.

In 1968, Garrett Hardin wrote the "Tragedy of the Commons" in *Science* magazine regarding the effect that increased population was having on earth's resources. Quoting a 19th century mathematician, Hardin said that "freedom in the commons brings ruin to all," articulating the idea that rationally pursuing our own self-interest destroys the commons. Rejecting that idea, Hardin turned instead to Hegel to say, "freedom is the recognition of necessity." While not making a statement about population, I agree with this idea. We desperately need to recognize the "necessity" of caring for our intellectual, dialogical, and political commons. We need to name the toxins, work for their removal, and build space for the common good to flourish again.