

# Of Pockets, Legs, and Polarization

“For the people who actually study the origins of civil wars, not just in the US, but as a class of events,” says Dr. Timothy Snyder, who does just that as the Richard C. Levin Professor of History at Yale University, “America doesn’t look good right now, with its high degree of polarization, with its alternative reality, with the celebration of violence.”

While Snyder’s remarks are specific in context — they concern a prospective attempt to steal the 2024 presidential election on behalf of Donald Trump — he does seem to have a point.

America is certainly “polarized,” or at least most Americans seem to think so. And since polarization is about what people think, it amounts to the same thing.

Alternative realities and celebrations of violence are both symptoms and causes of such polarization, but the polarization itself seems to be the big problem.

What can we do about polarization, though?

So long as there are issues, people will hold different opinions on those issues and “polarize” on — that is, flock to opposite and mutually exclusive sides of — those issues.

As the number of contentious issues grows and larger groups coalesce around bundles of those positions, a more general polarization springs up and scales up in intensity from single-issue polarizations.

You and I may disagree on whether Paul McCartney died in 1965 and was replaced by a body double, yet still get along quite well. We might also disagree on whether Val Kilmer should have received an Oscar for his portrayal of Doc Holliday in “Tombstone,” and be able to have a beer together without it devolving into a brawl. But sooner or later you’ll cross some final red line, probably by suggesting that pineapple is a legitimate pizza topping, and then, well, we’re just done with each other, aren’t we?

When it comes to political issues, Thomas Jefferson offered a useful standard: “The legitimate powers of government extend to such acts only as are injurious to others. But it does me no injury for my neighbour to say there are twenty gods, or no god. It neither picks my pocket nor breaks my leg.”

The way to reduce political polarization is to reduce the number and kind of issues subject to politics. Jefferson marked out a useful starting point, but Henry David Thoreau went him one better:

“I heartily accept the motto, ‘That government is best which governs least;’ and I should like to see it acted up to more rapidly and systematically. Carried out, it finally amounts to this, which also I believe — ‘That government is best which governs not at all;’ and when men are prepared for it, that will be the kind of government which they will have.”

As a wordsmith, I’m nowhere near Jefferson or Thoreau in skill, but let me offer my own unworthy summary of the dual lesson:

The way to reduce political polarization is to give up politics as an instrument through which each of us claims an entitlement to run the lives of others.