

NISKANEN C E N T E R

IN SEARCH OF A NEW BALANCE

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Key Takeaways

- Hyperpolarization in American politics is not without precedent, but the toxic level of the current social-media-fueled partisanship is a relatively novel phenomenon that poses a great threat to our democracy. Moderation can be crucial to cooling the political temperature.
- While the word “moderation” has been contested, and “moderates” have been criticized for lacking courage, true moderation views the world without ideological blinders and rejects hyperpartisan rhetoric in favor of empirical evidence.
- Moderates are not centrists; they embrace an eclectic mix of bold policies that range from conservative to progressive, based on where the evidence leads.
- Moderates may be most effective in changing today’s hyperpolarized political landscape through formal institutions and local civic engagement. There is also hope for optimism that moderate factions will find a foothold in both parties.

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“We are entirely made up of bits and pieces, woven together so diversely and so shapelessly that each one of them pulls its own way at every moment. And there is as much difference between us and ourselves as there is between us and other people.”

~ Michel de Montaigne

The dramatic events of January 6, 2021, when the U.S. Capitol was stormed by a mob incited by the 45th president of the United States, have steered America into dangerous, uncharted waters. Donald Trump and his violent supporters put a bullet through the body of the republic, deliberately assaulting its foundations. As we are learning more details about what happened during that tragic day, we struggle to answer many important questions. How extensive is the damage inflicted by Trump’s conspiracy theories and his endless distortions of the truth to America’s democratic guardrails? Will the Biden administration and new Congress be able to effectively govern if many Trump voters question their legitimacy? How can our democratic institutions operate when public trust has fallen to alarmingly low levels?

These open-ended questions will loom large on our elites’ political agenda in the months ahead. Hyperpolarization in American politics is not without precedent, but the toxic level of the current social-media-fueled partisanship is a relatively novel phenomenon that poses a great threat to our democracy.¹ The crisis we are facing today goes beyond the political sphere; it is also economic,

1. Polarization comes in different forms. The distinction between affective and ideological polarization is discussed in Steven Webster and Alan Abramowitz, “The Ideological Foundations of Affective Polarization in the U.S. Electorate,” *American Politics Research* 45, no. 4 (2017): 643; and Jonathan Rauch, “Rethinking Polarization,” *National Affairs*, no. 45, Fall 2020 <https://www.nationalaffairs.com/publications/detail/rethinking-polarization?fbclid=IwAR2kwwCseWcpDI4Rkv_-Rzx9gMrUhh4SYuczmPn-h97PqjdTu-f45n80Jd8>.

social, and demographic.² Moreover, the protests following the death of George Floyd have triggered powerful controversies about the identity of the American republic.

Addressing all these challenges will require complex policies, significant resources, and innovative strategies. The magnitude of our problems invites pessimism. And yet, for all our existential uncertainties, we may also find reasons for cautious optimism with the few promising signs that are emerging.³ The elections featured record voting levels and civic participation. In some important respects, the elections marked a victory for political moderation, even if not necessarily for moderates.

Building upon the work of scholars affiliated with the Niskanen Center,⁴ we reflect on what might be done to recalibrate our politics using the principles of moderation, which have kept America on an even keel during previous crisis points in its history. This task, we argue, requires a bold balancing act and a novel form of political eclecticism as an alternative to the present ideological style of politics. The moderation and eclecticism we discuss in this essay do not preclude, when necessary, bold responses proportionate to the daunting challenges we face today.

“In some important respects, the elections marked a victory for political moderation, even if not necessarily for moderates.”

Who are the moderate voters?

It is worth noting that, as a descriptor, the term “moderate” has had variegated and contested connotations. “The silliest usage of ‘moderate,’” British political scientist Bernard Crick once remarked, “is simply to mean ‘what I approve of.’”⁵ Such a definition does not take us very far, for obvious reasons. Confusions often arise, Crick continued, “because ‘moderate’ can be applied either to means or to ends, to goals or to values.”⁶ It may be more helpful to think of moderation as expressing a strong commitment to pluralism, civility, and democratic institutions.

Nonetheless, some iterations of the term evoke dark moments in American history. For example, in his “Letter from a Birmingham Jail” (1963), Martin Luther King Jr. called out the “white moderate” who sympathized with the Civil rights Movement but whose excessive attachment to order impeded political progress and perpetuated various forms of injustice. In King’s view, the greatest obstacle to African-Americans’ struggle for freedom was the lukewarm and cowardly moderation adopted by white voters who were unwilling to challenge the status quo.⁷ Interestingly, King’s

2. See Michael Lind, “The Five Crises of the American Regime,” *Tablet*, January 7, 2020, <https://www.tabletmag.com/sections/news/articles/american-crises-capitol-assault?fbclid=IwAR2BrmQzmdilJ2v_sUC0fpsBYCVVvNioQJzh9nlaWZq3YJDKyy2eQK1eDoQ>

3. See Harry Enten, “Joe Biden won a race another Democrat may have lost,” CNN, November 8, 2020 <<https://www.cnn.com/2020/11/08/politics/democrats-biden-election/index.html>>.

4. On Niskanen Center’s vision of moderation as a political strategy, see <<https://www.niskanencenter.org/moderation-as-a-political-strategy-a-niskanen-center-series/>>. The ideas presented in our essay respond to — and partly overlap with — the arguments of Steven Teles and Robert Saldin’s article “The Future is Faction,” *National Affairs*, no. 46 (Winter 2021) <<https://www.nationalaffairs.com/publications/detail/the-future-is-faction>>.

5. Bernard Crick, “The Character of a Moderate (Socialist),” *The Political Quarterly* 47, no. 1 (1976): 5-28.

6. *Ibid.*, 6.

7. Martin Luther King Jr., “Letter from a Birmingham Jail,” April 16, 1963, *The Martin Luther King Jr. Research and Education Institute*, Stanford University, <<https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/king-papers/documents/letter-birmingham-jail>>.

critique of the “white moderate” mirrors the criticism moderates face today from both the left and right for their alleged political reticence. The left excoriates moderates for their reluctance to disrupt order in the face of economic inequality and racial injustice. The right condemns moderates’ cowardliness, accusing them of not doing enough to save America’s allegedly endangered soul. However, these assessments misappropriate King’s usage by constructing a false equivalency.

According to a study conducted by the Washington think tank Third Way in 2014, moderates may not be visible on the national scene, but they nonetheless represent a significant part of the electorate. Between 37 and 39 percent of registered voters hold mixed ideological positions and an eclectic assortment of views and preferences on various social, political, and economic issues. They constitute a racially and ethnically diverse group. Moderates are simultaneously hopeful and skeptical about government; they tend to be politically active but are concerned about the intransigent “my way or the highway” approach that dominates our politics today. Moderates are committed to justice and freedom, valuing safety and privacy on the one hand, individual responsibility and government protection on the other. “Moderates are not wishy-washy, disengaged, or ill-informed,” the Third Way study concludes. “They are viewing politics without the benefit of ideological blinders and struggling with values that pull them crosswise.”⁸ However, their moderation remains powerless as long as it is not effectively channeled through formal institutions.

Moderates have endured their fair share of criticism this past election cycle. During the 2020 Democratic primaries, they faced condemnation for their pusillanimity, lack of vision, and their skepticism toward calls for radical change. Yet in the end voters chose moderation over radicalism in both the primaries and the general election, despite these pressures. Biden decisively won the Electoral College, notwithstanding the narrow margins of victory in key states. In some cases, swing voters played an essential role that might have gone unnoticed.

The so-called “Kasich voters,” for instance – people who preferred moderate Republican presidential candidate John Kasich to Trump – voted for Biden but supported GOP candidates in the down-ballot races.⁹ In Pennsylvania, for example, where Biden won by over 112,000 votes, approximately 66,000 votes came from suburban “Kasich voters.” They were also critical in other swing states such as Wisconsin, which had approximately 50,000 “Kasich voters” statewide, and Georgia, with approximately 28,000 “Kasich voters.”

We should not ignore, of course, other factors that prevented Trump from becoming a two-term president. Yet we believe that the so-called “Kasich voters” merit particular attention, because their support demonstrates Biden’s partial success at transcending partisan divides. Moreover, “Kasich voters” point to a larger ignored constituency in American politics, whose empowerment may increase bipartisan cooperation.

Biden’s effective, no-frills campaign strategy corroborates another important study contending

8. Michelle Diggles and Lanae Erickson Hatalsky, “The State of the Center,” Third Way, May 15, 2014 <<http://thirdway.imgix.net/pdfs/the-state-of-the-center.pdf>>; also see Rauch, “Rethinking Polarization.”

9. “2020 Presidential Election Results,” Bloomberg, December 12, 2020 <<https://www.bloomberg.com/graphics/2020-us-election-results>>. See also Parker Abt, “‘Karens’ and ‘Dream Hoarders’ Swung the Election to Biden,” *The Bulwark*, November 13, 2020 <<https://thebulwark.com/karens-and-dream-hoarders-swung-the-election-to-biden/>>.

that moderates constitute the most underrepresented demographic in American political life.¹⁰ A critical number of them fall within the upper middle class, so accordingly they have the means for civic engagement; yet most have been generally passive, with neither party appealing strongly to them. Nonetheless, Biden’s modest gain with “Kasich voters” proves that exciting the base does not necessarily mean that candidates must throw red meat at the party’s radicals to be elected. Many voters split their tickets in Michigan, Wisconsin, Pennsylvania, and Georgia because Biden had the political acumen to realize that campaigning on bumper-sticker slogans such as “defund the police,” or supporting single-payer health care, does not reflect the preferences of a good part of the electorate, let alone Democratic Party voters.

“Political moderation is not a morally neutral disposition. It is a temperament, a certain political style...that carries important policy implications.”

Would it be accurate, however, to describe all “Kasich voters” as moderates? And do moderates really exist, or are they a statistical myth? Ezra Klein sounded a cautionary note in this regard. Challenging the common image of moderate voters as committed to middle-of-the-road policies, he claimed that voters who are often categorized as moderate may, in fact, be quite radical.¹¹ In reality, he averred, some of the policy positions advocated by moderates may be surprisingly “extreme.” For instance, it is not uncommon to find “moderates” who, on the one hand, support the deportation of undocumented immigrants without due process of law or policies that discriminate against the LGBTQ+ community, but on the other favor single-payer health care. Klein warned that our efforts to empower “moderates” thus may lead, paradoxically, to the election of more radical representatives.¹²

Skepticism toward moderation is nothing new. Some have gone so far as to argue that moderates are more hostile to democracy than extremists.¹³

But such views confound the deeper meaning of “political moderation,” a structural pillar of American constitutional democracy, with its pejorative usage, erringly evoking our darkest moments in 20th century history. In reality, political moderation is not a morally neutral disposition. It is a temperament, a certain political style that varies across political systems and cultures and carries important institutional and policy implications. The key point is that moderates refuse to confine their political outlook within an ideological straitjacket. If they sometimes endorse bold policy positions, that is a mark of their strength rather than a sign of opportunism or confusion. Their eclecticism and openness to heterodoxy allows for a wide range of policy options that overlap with positions held by different groups and parties.

If moderates may sometimes be wary about the tedious work of organizing at the grassroots level, they tend to privilege political practicality and are skeptical toward one-size-fits-all policies. In

10. See “The Hidden Tribes of America,” a year-long project of More in Common launched in October 2018 <<https://hiddentribes.us/>>.

11. David Brockman, “The real extremists are American voters, not politicians,” Washington Post, January 22, 2014 <<https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2014/01/22/the-real-extremists-are-american-voters-not-politicians/>>.

12. Ezra Klein, “No one’s less moderate than moderates,” Vox, February 26, 2015, <<https://www.vox.com/2014/7/8/5878293/lets-stop-using-the-word-moderate>>.

13. David Adler, “Centrists are the Most Hostile to Democracy, not Extremists,” New York Times, May 23, 2018, <<https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2018/05/23/opinion/international-world/centrists-democracy.html?mtrref=www.google.com&assetType=PAYWALL&fbclid=IwAR0m3HvKhZ4h02QwNo65XtBcehKHxxdy9PCNw6mNrY5JbPRdWA5Sr0Wst9Y>>.

their view, neither party has a monopoly over morality or the “truth”;¹⁴ politics are more about addition than subtraction. This explains their openness to building coalitions that transcend partisan lines while maintaining reserve toward self-righteous actors who claim to have moral clarity on seemingly intractable issues.

At the same time, moderates are not unreflectively centrist, nor do they triangulate without a compass between oppositional policy orientations.¹⁵ In sum, they tend to have an eclectic cast of mind reflected by their willingness to adopt bold changes or defend conservative policies according to circumstances. They oppose radicals’ uncompromising pursuit of moral purity and abhor the all-or-nothing politics of relentless warfare.

The politics of warfare

Building consensus in the present hyperpolarized context seems to be a daunting task. In 2017, the authors of a study comparing levels of political polarization in developed nations concluded that partisan hatred was strongest in the United States.¹⁶ The findings were ominous but evident to those who observed the scorched-earth politics to which our elites have long since become accustomed.

The politics of warfare has increasingly shaped American civic life over the past three decades. The language used by the practitioners of this type of politics is apocalyptic, employing a bellicose, threatening, and uncivil tone and calling for purity and rigorous litmus tests to weed out so-called moderates. Those who embrace this aggressive form of politics are politically and morally intransigent; they are ruthlessly sectarian in the pursuit of what they take to be the truth, and regard themselves as part of a larger fight for redemption. They perceive compromise as weakness and aspire to total victory over those whom they regard as “evildoers.” Anything seems justified in the pursuit of their worthy goals, even scorched-earth tactics such as disseminating fake news to sow civic distrust and paranoia among partisan supporters.

The paranoid politics of warfare embraced by the hard right poses a threat to America’s constitutional principles.¹⁷ A key inflection point in the routinization of such a style of politics was Newt Gingrich’s elevation to speaker of the House following the 1994 midterm elections. The politics of warfare has since become a staple in our national political discourse and mass media.

Consider, for example, Michael Anton’s widely read “Flight 93” essay supporting Trump’s presidential candidacy in 2016. The article, originally published in the conservative *Claremont Review of Books*, provided a full instantiation of the politics of warfare and was praised by conservative media for its highly combative tone. It drew stark Manichean contrasts, exacerbating a sense of

14. See Linda J. Skitka and Daniel C. Wisneski, “Moral Conviction and Emotion,” *Emotion Review* 3, no. 3 (2011): 328-330.

15. With respect to America’s two-party system, moderates should not dream of creating a third party — an unrealistic goal, given the history, culture, and size of the country as well as the nature of the political system. Instead, they should seek to defend and impose their views within the major existing parties.

16. Eli J. Finkel et al. “Political Sectarianism in America,” *Science* 370, no. 6516 (October 30, 2020), 533.

17. Timothy Snyder, “The American Abyss,” *New York Times*, January 9, 2020, <<https://www.nytimes.com/2021/01/09/magazine/trump-coup.html?referringSource=articleShare>>.

danger among the political right. “You charge the cockpit or you die,” Anton wrote. “You may die ... there are no guarantees. Except one: if you don’t try, death is certain.”¹⁸ Anton and others who subscribe to this style of politics see themselves as warriors in an all-out holy war, accepting the possibility of martyrdom for a “just” cause. Time is running out, the choices we face are crystal clear: We must fully commit ourselves to save the soul of our country. If we do nothing, we are traitors for acquiescing in the republic’s demise.

Anton’s apocalyptic rhetoric, meant to arouse passion and militancy, has become sacrosanct among radical conservatives, defining the Trump era with the violent episodes it provoked.¹⁹ Shortly following Biden’s victory in November, the editors of the same Claremont Review of Books penned a chilling open letter in *The American Mind* that read like another apocalyptic battle cry, urging followers to challenge the election results.²⁰ Its message was unambiguous, evoking Anton’s “Flight 93” exhortations: There is no time to wait, since America is headed off a cliff. Everything is at stake in this war, and it is now or never.

Such overheated and apocalyptic language peddles dangerous fantasies of salvation and conspiratorial theories that illustrate what historian Richard Hofstadter once called “the paranoid style” in American political life.²¹ Its fanatic embrace of a politics of faith and a holy war at all costs flies in the face of reality. The letter in *The American Mind* deliberately distorted facts and flouted the rule of law, declaring one side — the Democrats who allegedly tried to steal the election — entirely corrupt and anti-American. The editors concluded with an excoriation of the “weak sisters on the right,” calling for the character assassination of moderate Republicans who had failed to corroborate Trump’s wild and fantastical claims about election fraud.

We find this aggressive, apocalyptic-style politics among some influential conservative radio hosts as well. A glaring example is Eric Metaxas, a prominent New York-based supporter of Trump whose nationally syndicated radio program, *The Eric Metaxas Show*, commands a large audience. He claimed that every true American patriot must join the “Stop the Steal” resistance movement; those conservatives who refuse to do so were traitors who deserve the fate reserved for Nazi collaborators. Responding to Trump’s baseless legal challenges against Biden’s victory, Metaxas called upon his listeners to stick to their blind faith at all costs: “So, who cares what I can prove in the courts? This is right. This happened, and I am going to do anything I can to uncover this horror, this evil.”²² According to this view, evidence and real facts may be ignored if they fail to accommodate the ideological battle. The rule of law is just a mere convention that people may defy when it goes against their interests and the stakes are so high.

18. Daniel McCarthy, “Fasten Your Seatbelts,” *Claremont Review of Books*, Spring 2019 <https://www.claremont.org/crb/article/fasten-your-seatbelts/?fbclid=IwAR3g1Rfv4Dy0Yd5xnGluQE0j8hu220GWPZrIN6y0DQGAMsgEQTDM4JaH_gA>.

19. See Jonathan Chait, “How Michael Anton’s ‘Flight 93’ Essay Defined the Trump Era,” *New York — Intelligencer*, December 11, 2020 <<https://nymag.com/intelligencer/article/michael-antons-flight-93-election-trump-coup.html?fbclid=IwAR0m0h1JSUNmLJqTZsaAZ4dQh0ECqDXlpD1WnkUY0PyrmuDFTvaLXnlm0kg>>.

20. Ryan P. Williams, Arthur Milikh et. al. “The Fight is Now,” *The American Mind*, November 5, 2020 <<https://americanmind.org/salvo/the-fight-is-now/>>.

21. See Richard Hofstadter, *Anti-Intellectualism in American Life. The Paranoid Style in American Politics. Uncollected Essays, 1956-1965*, ed. Sean Wilentz (New York: The Library of America, 2020), 501-765.

22. As quoted in Rod Dreher, “Eric Metaxas’s American Apocalypse,” *The American Conservative*, December 10, 2020. <https://www.theamericanconservative.com/dreher/eric-metaxas-trump-bloodshed-american-apocalypse-live-not-by-lies/?fbclid=IwAR3Ks0l_62HrUGgWqoOkOEToMTOAPLhwm_NOdFoitO7vgGn9aaZgaSjDECY>.

One will find a less incendiary but perhaps equally insidious exercise of “politics as warfare” among social conservatives, some of whom reconciled themselves to Trumpism or other forms of populism. They too perceive themselves as engaged in an all-out crusade against the dictatorship of moral relativism that liberals and secularists promote. “This is not decay,” former Attorney General William Barr stated in a widely publicized speech at the University of Notre Dame in 2019. “It is organized destruction ... an unremitting assault on religion and traditional values.”²³

Radical social conservatives see themselves as heroically manning the barricades of civilization against the new barbarian invasions and the dictatorship of relativism. Others hubristically view themselves as the intellectual backbone of a newly formed coalition between social conservatives and America’s working class, despite the fact that their party has done little for this class apart from feeding them a boatload of identity politics and hefty doses of paranoia. What they share in common with their “storm the cockpit” mentality counterparts is an understanding of politics as a gigantic Manichean battle between the forces of good and evil, leaving no room for moderate political compromise.²⁴

Litmus tests and purity politics

Political litmus tests are not a specialty of the extreme right. The politics of purity can also be found among far-left progressives, frustrated with the slow and patient exercise of politics that our formal institutions require. Take, for example, a letter penned by the leadership of the Democratic Socialists of America in May 2020, which justified its decision not to endorse Biden in the November presidential election. The letter unambiguously stated that Bernie Sanders was the only acceptable presidential candidate, reminding DSA members that endorsing anyone else would be a rotten compromise, corrupting the purity of their organization’s cause and ideals. “We believe that the only way to beat the radical right once and for all,” the signatories wrote, “is through a socialist movement that draws millions of disillusioned working-class people, here and abroad, into the political arena.”²⁵ Worth noting here is the maximalist goal of scoring a decisive victory “once and for all,” and enlisting the support of “millions of disillusioned working-class people” in the pursuit of a radiant future.

The recent strategy of “the Squad” – the informal name for a group of progressive House Democrats – to engage in open contestation with former President Barack Obama typifies the moral purity tactics employed by some Democratic members of the House of Representatives. In recent public remarks concerning the George Floyd protests last summer, Obama criticized the left’s ineffective use of bumper-sticker slogans such as “defund the police,” which prevents them from

23. Former Attorney General William Barr, “Remarks to the Law School and the de Nicola Center for Ethics and Culture at the University of Notre Dame” The United States Department of Justice, October 11, 2019. <<https://www.justice.gov/opa/speech/attorney-general-william-p-barr-delivers-remarks-law-school-and-de-nicola-center-ethics>>.

24. Recent studies discuss “partisan teamism” and dehumanization in American politics and its perverse effects. See, for example, J. L. Martherus, A. G. Martinez, P. K. Piff. et al. “Party Animals? Extreme Partisan Polarization and Dehumanization,” *Political Behavior* (2019) <<https://doi.org/10.1007/s11109-019-09559-4>>; and Jarret T. Crawford, Sean A. Modri, and Matt Motyl, “Bleeding-Heart Liberals and Hard-Hearted Conservatives,” *Journal of Social and Political Psychology* 1, no. 1 (2013): 86–104 <<https://doi.org/10.5964/jpspp.v1i1.184>>.<https://doi.org/10.5964/jpspp.v1i1.184>

25. Statement from Democratic Socialists of America’s National Political Committee, “Beyond Bernie,” May 12, 2020 <<https://www.dsasa.org/statements/beyond-bernie-a-statement-from-the-dsa-national-political-committee/>>.

assembling a sufficiently large coalition to achieve real change. The Squad's recent attacks against Obama had little to do with actual policy differences.²⁶ Rather, the former president failed the progressive left's purity test. His sensitivity to the political optics of slogans that could easily be distorted by political opponents was perceived as yet another "neoliberal" attempt to frustrate progress – on the issue of police reform in this case.

The far left employs a "not enough" rhetoric against the Biden administration, criticizing it for being Obama-lite. For instance, a recent opinion piece in *The New Republic* warns that Biden's Cabinet is "a lost cause for the left"²⁷ and calls for insurgents to hit the streets and break away from the Democratic Party establishment. The same author exhorts his radical readers to primarily moderate Democrats too closely aligned with the disparaged establishment and discourages political compromise, warning progressives that moderates will sell them out when given the opportunity to do so. Moderates, according to this interpretation, will give the impression of good-faith compromise with their progressive counterparts – but in reality, party elites interested in maintaining the status quo will ensure that the party governs from the maligned "neoliberal" center. That is why, the article concludes, "the left should be taking itself directly to the American people."²⁸ Evidently the immoderate impulse considers Biden's cabinet too impure to merit the cooperation of progressives.

It would be inappropriate to construct false moral equivalencies between the far left and the hard right. The practical consequences of the rhetoric employed by the radical left – which commands a limited audience beyond the antifa – pale compared to that of the hard right. There is no parallel on the left to the January 6 attack on America's political nerve center by a host of QAnon conspiracy theorists and Confederate flag-waving, cult-like militias. These are asymmetrical processes operating at different levels, with different audiences. Trump, Cruz, Hawley, and their influential conservative elite enablers have committed civic arson, inciting the darkest impulses of their followers. However, their moral bankruptcy should not deter us from reflective self-criticism. As such, we feel compelled to raise red flags about the threat the politics of warfare in *all* forms poses to our republican institutions.

The politics of warfare result from a significant decline in civic trust, with citizens losing faith in the democratic process and questioning their government's legitimacy. This trend is illustrated by under-discussed pre-election polls showing a high number of Democrats mirroring the number of Republicans unwilling to accept the democratic outcome if their side were to lose. The seeds of immoderation were deeply sown long ago. The outcome is an increasing number of citizens disengaged from normal politics or, worse, mentally seceding from our democratic way of life.²⁹

26. Caitlin Flanagan, "What Language Game are the Defunders Playing," *The Atlantic*, December 10, 2020 <<https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2020/12/what-language-game-are-defunders-playing/617348/>>.

27. Osita Nwanewu, "Joe Biden's Cabinet Is a Lost Cause for the left," *The New Republic*, December 3, 2020 <<https://newrepublic.com/article/160432/biden-cabinet-progressive-defeat-2020>>.

28. Ibid. For a critique, see Todd Gitlin, "The Democratic left Needs Biden to Succeed. Stop Trashing the Winner and Help Him Deliver," *USA Today*, December 21, 2020 <https://www.usatoday.com/story/opinion/2020/12/21/left-should-help-biden-democrats-deliver-for-america-column/3955164001?fbclid=IwAR1ld7cdywW56fmw5_8ZYYCe6eHf9-fngaaV0dl6rOGnrkmt1QHL_R5ljA>. For a more comprehensive radical agenda, see Bhaskar Sunkara, *The Socialist Manifesto: The Case for Radical Politics in an Era of Extreme Inequality* (New York: Basic Books, 2019). Sunkara is the editor of *Jacobin*, the leading journal of the radical left.

29. See Adam J. White, "Mentally Seceding from the Union," *The Bulwark*, December 1, 2020 <<https://thebulwark.com/mentally-seceding-from-the-union/?fbclid=IwAR083INLmfXjRHt1575XgKpwfVpEH9ZLPuxCO6C8aEH-WCijomi7LdieVHC>>.

These phenomena are understandable and unsurprising given a long history of attempts at voter suppression and gerrymandering for immediate political gain, or efforts to use the courts to affirm certain religious and moral worldviews.

Our political life becomes toxic and intractable when based on purity tests that set the battle lines of our culture wars, instead of bargaining over competing economic and social interests. This tendency

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gives greater oxygen to the scorched-earth politics of warfare that threatens America’s civic foundations. It promotes ideological intransigence that erodes longstanding democratic customs and procedures. If one claims to be in possession of the moral truth, one will not be inclined to forge coalitions with political opponents. Moreover, such a Manichean outlook begets intellectual laziness and unreflective political judgment. If we’ve decided that we are unequivocally on the right side of history, we will not feel the need to undertake the mental exercise of trying to understand the reasoning of an opposing viewpoint.

The politics of warfare employs a morally self-righteous approach that fosters distrust and hatred toward all opponents, shutting off all avenues that might yield compromises where common ground exists. It seeks total victories and establishes impractical goals. It denies the complexity of policymaking and glosses over nuances. It presents us with false either/or options and stark contrasts, pretending simple and straightforward solutions exist for complex moral and political problems. In the end, the

politics of warfare renders constructive public debate impossible, opening the door to political paralysis, violence, and chaos.³⁰

The politics of compromise and the benefits of eclecticism

One of the lessons of the 20th century is that in times of crisis, major battles require a resolute determination to not equivocate. Instead, they require an ability to make sharp distinctions and not compromise with those who intend to harm us. Such crisis moments are rare and should not be conflated with the inevitable political disagreements that reflect a nation’s pluralism. Not all issues are a matter of life and death, and few elections can be compared to “Flight 93” situations. The January 6 events, however, did indeed represent such a critical moment in which liberal democracy had to be defended at all costs.

America’s polarized politics increasingly assumes that representative institutions cannot work properly given that one’s political adversaries are moral reprobates, inhabitants of a separate universe divided by history, genes, and guilt. There is, however, another way of conceiving of politics that lowers the temperature and protects against the fanaticism of boundless political faith. This is the image of politics as a bargain between opponents who are capable of compromise and can respect the rules of the game to which everyone has consented. Those who embrace this style of

30. For further evidence of the disconnect from reality fueled by this Manichean type of politics, see Arlie Hochschild, “Think Republicans are disconnected from reality? It’s even worse among liberals,” *The Guardian*, July 21, 2019 <<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2019/jul/21/democrats-republicans-political-beliefs-national-survey-poll>>.

give-and-take politics refuse to prioritize a single principle in every policy context. They acknowledge that we need a properly structured and pluralist framework to tackle complex challenges, but also understand that this requires a certain degree of moderation, compromise, and civility.

As Jerry Taylor pointed out in an important essay previously published on this site, “intellectual and political compromise is the *sine qua non* of moderation.”³¹ Needless to say, the pursuit of compromise for its own sake is not intrinsically moderate. Ignominious compromises – such as the Munich Agreement of 1938, or the example of those Republican elites who reconciled themselves to Trump’s deliberate assault on America’s democratic norms and procedures – were anything but moderate.

True moderates display a willingness to sit down with political opponents to identify shared interests. They are bridge builders rather than fence-sitters. Moderates privilege compromise over zero-sum interaction and abhor a temper of political religiosity which makes cooperation and the advancement of shared, overlapping ideals impossible. They exercise self-restraint in a spirit of civility. Moderates do not seek to crush or morally disqualify their opponents if they fail any litmus/purity tests. Their spirit of compromise runs counter to the ideologues and fanatics’ “monomaniacal pursuit of a single idea.”³²

Political compromise should not be confounded with rotten compromise or cowardly compromise. Moderates acknowledge that there is no value in conserving a burning house or one with rotten foundations. While moderates are open to reaching reasonable compromise with their opponents, they are uncompromisingly loyal to longstanding liberal democratic norms and institutions. They draw the line with those who deliberately undermine the legitimacy of the rule of law and the principles of an open society. Moderates do not embrace the strategy of systemic norm-breaking for partisan advantage or settling scores, nor do they seek to exact revenge against opponents. They respect the empire of laws, without which politics collapses into a war of all against all.

Many political factions pay lip service to the principles of moderation but betray them in their hostility towards political compromise. The defense of moderation may only be possible by channeling *eclecticism*, a key concept that occupies a central place in our analysis for the remainder of this essay.

Michel de Montaigne offered one of the most compelling accounts of human eclecticism nearly four and a half centuries ago. “We are entirely made up of bits and pieces,” he wrote in his *Essays*, “woven together so diversely and so shapelessly that each one of them pulls its own way at every moment. And there is as much difference between us and ourselves as there is between us and other people.”³³

31. Jerry Taylor, “The Alternative to Ideology,” Niskanen Center, October 29, 2018 <<https://www.niskanencenter.org/the-alternative-to-ideology>>. On the new politics of compromise, also see Jennifer Wolak, *Compromise in an Age of Party Polarization* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020).

32. Taylor, “[The Alternative to Ideology](#).”

33. Montaigne, *The Complete Essays*, trans. M. A. Screech (London: Penguin, 1991), 380.

As human beings, we are eclectic individuals, drawn to different sides and sometimes torn by contrasting beliefs. Not only are we made of many disparate pieces, but the world itself is made of many lights, not one single light. It accommodates many beliefs and opinions rather than one belief and one opinion.

On this view, eclecticism presupposes the ability to reconcile various identities, to balance the virtues and advantages of one by the passions and limits of others.³⁴ It opposes a one-dimensional view of society, economy, politics, and culture. It is possible to espouse progressive, “socialist” economic policies (advocating a welfare state) and adopt a religious perspective at the same time. One may be a liberal committed to constitutionalism, pluralism, toleration, and the rule of law in the realm of politics and embrace at the same time a certain type of cultural conservatism.³⁵ Such a combination may strike some as incoherent, but it is in fact logically consistent in its political practicality. Nor is it implausible if we responsibly reorient our civic lives toward the subsidiary levels of governance.

A second justification of eclecticism has to do with the intricate nature of modern society, which is inseparable from social, political, and cultural pluralism and whose strength derives precisely from its ability to incorporate so many interests.³⁶ There is no longer a single overriding interest or value that can claim precedence at all times. Legislators are often faced with the difficult task of finding a balance between freedom, equality, and efficiency while adjudicating the claims of various groups, especially in cases when the problem is not so much right versus wrong but rather (partially) right versus (partially) right.

Such a complex reality admits of no panaceas for our social and political problems. Instead, we must be politically “schizoid” and embrace sociopolitical crossovers challenging dogmas.³⁷ We must admit, given the complexity of our social and economic relationships, institutions, and structures, that no single story — not even the moderation story! — can render justice to the intricate nature of our world. If we try to reduce the latter to one single dimension, principle, or value — be that freedom, justice, or equality — we risk distorting it beyond recognition. The once acceptable aspiration to interpret society with a single prism and in light of one single transcendental principle is no longer appropriate. Our political homes, if they are to be put back in order, will have to remain eclectic and heterogeneous. Once we take this eclecticism seriously, we can no longer

34. See David Brooks, “In Praise of Equipose,” *New York Times*, September 1, 2017; also Amoz Oz, *How to Cure a Fanatic*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006), 54. For a concise defense of eclecticism, see Leszek Kołakowski, “How to Be a Conservative-Liberal-Socialist: A Credo,” in *Modernity on Endless Trial* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), 225-227.

35. Here is what Bell said: “I think I’ve been consistent all the way through. It’s not that my politics haven’t changed. Politics is basically a response to particular situations. I think my fundamental values have remained. I believe there are different realms in the society and there are different principles which underlie these realms. That’s why I’ve called myself a socialist in economics, a liberal in politics, and a conservative in culture. I’m a socialist in economics because I believe that every society has an obligation to give people that degree of decency to allow them to feel that they are citizens in this society. In the realm of economics, the first lien on resources should be that of the community in a redistributive way. I’m a conservative in culture because I believe in continuity, and I believe in judgment. I don’t believe that all opinions in culture are the same as everybody else’s opinion. I don’t believe that all art is the same. Some things are better than others, and you have to justify why it’s better than others, and you have to understand the grounds of justification. I’m a liberal in politics but liberalism has no fixed dogmas. It has no fixed points, that you can say, ‘This is the liberal position.’ It changes because it’s an attitude. It’s a skepticism. It’s a pluralism, it’s agnostic.” (Daniel Bell as quoted in Benli M. Schechter, “Why Bell Matters,” *Society*, 48, 413 (2011) <<https://doi.org/10.1007/s12115-011-9461-4>, <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s12115-011-9461-4>>. Bell’s confession was initially made in *Arguing the World*, a PBS film directed by Joseph Dorman (1998).

36. Daniel Bell, *The Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism* (New York: Basic Books, 1976), 259.

37. Saul D. Alinsky, *Rules for Radicals* (New York: Vintage, 1971), 78.

think of society in holistic terms. We must refuse to wear ideological straitjackets that force us to embrace one single perspective on the good life or society.

Nearly five decades ago, Harvard sociologist Daniel Bell introduced the principle of eclecticism as a means for governing our social and political relations. He argued that we should envisage modern society as composed of three distinct realms, “each of which is obedient to a different axial principle”: the techno-economic structure, the polity, and the culture. For the techno-economic order, the axial principle is functional rationality, and the regulative mode is economizing. For politics, the axial principle is legitimacy, and the regulative mode is the free competition for power and government by consent. Other related principles are equality before the law, equality of civil rights, equality of opportunity. For culture, the axial principle is expressive symbolism, and the regulative mode is the free expression of the self, seeking to achieve its full creative potential.

Between these different realms, Bell insisted, there is often discordance and disjunction rather than harmony and conjunction. The three major spheres — techno-economic, political, and cultural — do not form a perfectly integrated web any longer; they are not congruent with each other and follow different rhythms of change.³⁸ Yet radicals on both ends of the political spectrum believe the three spheres can be united and harmonized with each other through different sets of policy. This is a utopian dream, for there is no common value system or sphere of production that can control all the ramified elements and patterns of interaction in modern society. In other words, there is no single cockpit in modern society. The free market is often described as such a commanding height, but mostly for ideological reasons that do not adequately reflect reality.³⁹ Many areas of life remain beyond the supply and demand of the market and obey a different logic.

That is why any Procrustean attempts to fit disparate policy orientations and plural interests under an overarching, coherent ideology are bound to fail. Principled ends clash both between and within parties, but that does not mean individuals or interest groups function as monads, without the possibility for reconciliation. Moderates understand that our overlapping identities transcend party lines, while maintaining skepticism toward radical institutional changes to our system to remedy seemingly intractable problems.

A new balancing act

As historian David S. Brown has argued, the politics of moderation has stewarded America through some of the greatest crisis points in its history.⁴⁰ America’s stability has always depended on finding a proper balance between its diverse elements, interests, and constituencies. The balancing acts and realignments have varied over time, depending on circumstances. The Founding Fathers were obliged to find a balance to channel various interests and ambitions within the three branches of power. They sought to facilitate the cooperation between big and small states in the Senate and arrived at an eclectic solution that imperfectly combined the interests of voters (who elected the House of Representatives), the authority of state legislatures (that chose the Senate),

38. Bell, *The Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism*, 10.

39. For an opposing view, see Ryszard Legutko, *The Demon in Democracy: Totalitarian Temptations in Free Societies* (New York: Encounter Books, 2016), 23.

40. David S. Brown, *Moderates: The Vital Center of American Politics from the Founding to Today* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2017).

and the executive power elected by the Electoral College. Eight decades later, confronted with the reality of secession and insurrection, Abraham Lincoln’s statesmanship saved the Union during its darkest hour, when the country was facing its deepest existential crisis. If Lincoln was a political moderate, he was a bold moderate who did not waver in his commitment to the liberal democratic process itself. He knew that we cannot have a viable nation if one part of it splinters off whenever it disapproves of democratic outcomes.

These historical examples are convincing, but today we need innovative solutions to confront our present, complex dilemmas. The Founding Fathers did not foresee the crystallization of a

two-party system and were mostly concerned with balancing the interests of factions and states. Today we have both parties and factions, and it is likely that the situation will not change anytime soon. We will need to adapt ourselves to this reality.⁴¹ According to Ezra Klein, “The problem in our system is that what we balanced for is no longer what’s competing. Today, the strongest and most politically important identities are partisan identities. We don’t talk about big states and small states but about red states and blue states. If there is a threat to American unity, it rests not in the specific concerns of Virginians or Alaskans but in the growing enmity between Democrats and Republicans.”⁴² We agree with this point. The country needs a new and bold balancing act that *both* draws from past examples and responds to the exigencies of the present moment.

“ A new balancing act requires greater emphasis on localized civic engagement that can promote deliberation and cooperation at the grassroots level.”

Moderates who refuse to see the world in black-and-white contrasts can play an important role in this interregnum between the old world and a new one. On the one hand, they should not eschew bold ideas in addressing complex, long-standing problems rooted in our history and partly sclerotic

political system — though, of course, these should be pursued in tandem with other players. On the other hand, as E. J. Dionne has argued, progressives would be wise not to dismiss the moderates’ initiatives and ideas as signs of timidity or cowardice.⁴³ Both camps could join forces in pursuit of a “visionary gradualism”⁴⁴ promoting a long overdue realignment of political forces and interests in order to bring about a new equipoise in society.

A new balancing act requires greater emphasis on localized civic engagement that can promote deliberation and cooperation at the grassroots level, where people interact with each other beyond their one-dimensional, rights-bearing selves. It is mostly (though not exclusively) at this level that the merits of compromise and diplomacy can shine over the politics of warfare and division. The magnetic idea for moderation is intrinsically connected to local venues of democracy where alliances across the aisle will more likely coalesce.

In this regard, we agree with the New York Times columnist David Brooks that the “big idea for moderates should be solidarity, fraternity, conversation across difference. A moderate agenda

41. See Teles and Saldin, “The Future is Faction.”

42. Ezra Klein, *Why We’re Polarized* (New York: Avid Reader Press, 2020), 259.

43. E. J. Dionne, *Code Red: How Progressives and Moderates Can Unite to Save our Country* (New York: St. Martin’ Press, 2020), 131.

44. Michael Harrington as quoted in Dionne, *Code Red*, 131.

should magnify our affections for one another.”⁴⁵ This can be done mostly — though not always — at the grassroots level. It is at the neighborly level where we learn to exercise civility and practice decency and empathy toward one another, even when others challenge our moral and religious convictions. Our empathy begins in town halls, university classrooms, churches, and softball leagues. It may then funnel into formal political life as we become attuned to possibilities for compromise with fellow citizens outside of our immediate tribes. This is how we learn to accept the legitimacy of the other side and learn to test and develop sound skepticism toward some of our own ideas and beliefs.⁴⁶

A promising example of building this type of social capital can be found with “Braver Angels,” a new nonpartisan organization with local chapters across the country. One of its stated goals is to encourage, through various workshops and debates, the free and civil expression of ideas. Such fora encourage a greater openness to alternative views. They illuminate common ground, enabling Americans to arrive at practical solutions to seemingly intractable problems. Braver Angels’ strategy for “depolarizing within” rests on the assumption that people on both sides would be more amenable to compromise if given the opportunity to interact at the neighborly level with citizens outside their political tribe. The activities promoted by its local chapters show that it is possible to listen and relate to others on the opposite side of the political spectrum through openly canvassing rival principles and interests in a civil venue.⁴⁷

In our view, such organizations are indispensable to any prospective rebalancing agenda because they help shift the focus away from the national conversation to local settings where politics can become meaningful again and where pragmatism trumps litmus tests. As community organizer Michael Gecan pointed out, “[t]his is something that can only happen on a local level, where people maintain relationships that are mixed by their religious, work, recreational, and neighborhood lives.”⁴⁸ As such, we should pay more attention to restoring institutional structures that harness our eclecticism and empower the moderate voice. As the Braver Angels initiative demonstrates, people may overcome their sense of powerlessness when given the opportunity to relate with one another and resolve concrete problems in their daily lives.

We endorse a moderate agenda seeking to localize responsibility, agency, and choice as much as possible.⁴⁹ In energizing the subnational spheres of human activity, we can become more socially connected and less tribal. Strong institutions from the grassroots level upward can inoculate citizens against fanaticism and zealotry in the future. “Seeing like a citizen” reflects the moderates’

45. David Brooks, “An Agenda for Moderates,” *New York Times*, February 25, 2019 <<https://www.nytimes.com/2019/02/25/opinion/moderate-politics.html>>. Also see David Blankenhorn, “The Two Rules of Curing Political Rancor,” *Deseret News*, December 15, 2020 <<https://www.deseret.com/opinion/2020/12/15/22174239/political-rancor-divisiveness-two-rules-friendship-civility-good-manners-health-polarization>>.

46. For a similar view, see Andrew Sullivan, “Christianism and our Democracy,” *The Weekly Dish*, December 11, 2020 <<https://andrewsullivan.substack.com/p/christianism-and-our-democracy-Occ?fbclid=IwAR3UMvrib6f2MWBvLVx0tIGkvMMpPEX9QypKxiKJuAl8tGSFBRKoty91pfM>>.

47. For more information, see <https://braverangels.org/what-we-do/#red-blue>; <https://braverangels.org/what-we-do/red-blue-pairs/>

48. Michael Gecan “In Defense of Politics,” *Boston Review*, October 31, 2020 <<https://bostonreview.net/politics/michael-gecan-defense-politics>>.

49. David Brooks, “Moderates Have the Better Story to Tell,” *New York Times*, July 1, 2019 <<https://www.nytimes.com/2019/07/01/opinion/moderates-progressives-warren.html?searchResultPosition=3&fbclid=IwAR3tri2EPxFDKc5iOK9SNb4aXC8NouJzXSQ8xLpCILAk8kU7BHyF1NgI9Ow>>.

belief in the possibility of building societies that govern themselves for themselves, bottom-up. Implicit here is a critique of “seeing like a state,” an approach that attempts to govern society top-down and relies upon absolute faith in the power and omniscience of a single agent which has the monopoly of sovereign authority.

Our commitment to eclecticism makes us skeptical of any such top-down attempts. Citizens should not be passive and helpless recipients of orders, lacking the agency to handle complex problems on their own. Such a naïve faith in the power of “the state” or federal agencies is not only unable to account for the myriad of institutional frameworks formed by human relationships in everyday life; it is also incompatible with the maintenance of republican institutions of local self-government.⁵⁰

It is essential to distinguish between small- and large-scale frameworks of governance and recognize that effectiveness almost always depends on scale. Sometimes governments are too big to handle complex local issues, while at other times they may be too small to address issues that require a larger scale of cooperation. Some issues are often (though not always!) best solved locally, while others are best addressed globally. As the late political economist Elinor Ostrom and her collaborators demonstrated in their studies of self-government on several continents, there is no panacea; a balancing act is needed, one grounded in the recognition that there are no universal, one-size-fits-all solutions. In other words, there is no single form of organization that can be declared “good” for all actors and in all circumstances and contexts. All levels of government and civil society must be on board. However, our policy solutions and strategies need to be context-specific, sensitive to the limits of each jurisdiction of governance. Top-down policy needs to leverage prudential judgment and local knowledge, both of which are necessary complements of pragmatic policy making.

To recap, we pay far too much attention to national politics and not enough to local and state politics; the Archimedean point of civic life needs to shift from Washington to our subsidiary institutions of governance to empower America’s underrepresented moderates.⁵¹ At the same time, it is important to remember that some forms of local politics have their own pathologies.⁵² In two disturbing occurrences that took place recently in Michigan and Georgia, local militias threatened the lives of democratically elected governors and local officials who committed themselves to maintaining the integrity of the 2020 presidential election. Such cases are the direct consequences of how our localized spheres of human association have “become proxies for national power struggle.”⁵³ Destructive controversies and dangerous disagreements that sometimes originate at the local level — where deep divisions have existed over contested issues such as (de)segrega-

50. This perspective reflects the view of the “Bloomington school” founded by Elinor and Vincent Ostrom. On this issue, see *Elinor Ostrom and the Bloomington School of Political Economy, Vol. 1: Polycentricity in Public Administration and Political Science*, edited by Daniel H. Cole and Michael D. McGinnis (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books 2014). For another critique of state-centered approaches, see James C. Scott, *Seeing Like a State* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998).

51. On this issue, see Daniel J. Hopkins, *The Increasingly United States: How and Why American Political Behavior Nationalized* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2018).

52. On this issue, see Brian Shaffner, Jesse Rhodes, and Raymond La Raja, *Hometown Inequality: Race, Class, and Representation in American Local Politics* (New York: Cambridge University Politics, 2020). Also relevant are the topics addressed by the recent literature on captured economy, in particular Brink Lindsey and Steven Teles, *The Captured Economy: How the Powerful Enrich Themselves, Slow Down Growth, and Increase Inequality* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017).

53. White, “Mentally Seceding from the Union.”

tion, history, patriotism, education curriculum, family lives, and criminal justice — may actually amplify our polarization if our rebalancing act does not take place at all levels of governance.

The road ahead

Striking the right balance is a difficult agenda that must be pursued patiently and gradually. Localism and subsidiarity in themselves can work marvels in counteracting fragmentation and alienation, but can also have perverse effects, promoting dangerous forms of parochialism and nativism. This is not to negate our enthusiasm for the Braver Angels approach. Such grassroots organizations' productive efforts at enlivening "the better angels of our nature" are critically important for our depolarization.

Nonetheless, any gains they make will likely be reversed if a critical number of elites continue to blunt our impulses for civility and civic friendship by deliberately inciting our more deeply embedded tribal instincts.⁵⁴ The balancing act we have in mind can only succeed with a lowering of the political temperature at the top. Simply put, statesmanship and courageous leadership among our political and intellectual elites still matter. What changes at the top might be necessary to empower moderates, however, remains an open and difficult question. Our aim here is to offer some practical signposts for navigating this problem.

As long as moderates are vulnerable to getting primaried by extremist candidates at the level of national party politics, their voices will continue to diminish. Both parties need to reinstate mechanisms that weed out fringe candidates who deepen America's tribalism. But merely redesigning the formal party rules may be insufficient. Moderates will also need to work hard to find leverage *within* the two main parties, not outside of them. In other words, as political scientists Steven Teles and Robert Saldin put it, moderate politicians will need "to organize as a coherent bloc, recruit attractive candidates, mobilize moderate voters in each party to participate in partisan politics, and develop ideas to inspire their bases."⁵⁵ They will have to choose their priorities and issues with a high degree of pragmatism to avoid wasting political capital on futile battles. In sum, moderates need to be deeply involved in the hard practice of liberal-democratic politics. If they want to shift their respective parties' centers of gravity, they need to build a compelling political brand that is grounded in pragmatism but whose boldness inspires the public mind.

More broadly, elites in civil society also need to play a prominent role in lowering the temperature if we are to channel our eclecticism at the retail level of politics. As political scientist John Zaller aptly observed three decades ago, elites themselves are primary drivers of public opinion, shaping our polarized judgments at all levels of civic engagement.⁵⁶ We can observe these dynamics at play among both liberals and conservatives.

54. Cf. Abramowitz and Webster, whose important study demonstrates how ideological polarization among elites is fueling affective (or tribal) polarization in the broader population.

55. Teles and Saldin, "The Future is Faction." As Jonathan Rauch pointed out, as "parties weaken as institutions, whose members are united by loyalty to their organization...they strengthen as tribes, whose members are united by hostility to their enemy." "Rethinking Polarization."

56. John Zaller, *The Nature and Origins of Mass Opinion* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992).

Too many prominent conservatives have appeased or have been complicit in Donald Trump's constant attacks against the mainstream media and his blatant disregard for the rule of law. They have remained silent as he relentlessly kept spreading fake news, fired independent inspectors in federal agencies, and attempted to collude with foreign agents for domestic electoral gain.⁵⁷ That is why reinventing conservatism will not be an easy task in the aftermath of the January 6 events. Conservatives will need to reckon with the fact that, according to a [YouGov poll](#), 45 percent of Republican voters actively approve of the insurrection that took place on that day.

The GOP's situation mirrors to a certain degree that of the Whig Party in the 1850s.⁵⁸ The issue of slavery dealt a mortal blow to Whigs, who were then relegated to the dustbin of history. Today the stumbling block seems to be Trump-inspired populism. In addition to healing the deep wounds inflicted by Trumpism, conservative elites need to cease their deliberate attempts at sowing paranoia over identity for political gain. For instance, they need to acknowledge that the Black Lives Matter and LGBTQ+ movements are not merely "woke" excesses but legitimate communities that coalesced out of a common aim to achieve equality and dignity. These communities can be seen as "patriotic" in their struggle for "a more perfect union," demanding an equal opportunity to pursue the American dream. Conservatives may acknowledge these empirical facts without needing to accept the view that all human inequality is reducible to racial bias, toxic masculinity, or heteronormativity.

The situation on the left does not seem to be as dire, and the Biden team has taken great strides in lowering the temperature by giving progressives a proportionate voice in the new administration. However, liberal elites will need to exercise courageous leadership as well by confronting their own party's excesses. The far right's debasement should not absolve liberals of the need to practice healthy self-criticism, given that the decline of civic trust transcends party lines.⁵⁹ Liberal thinkers such as Mark Lilla and Ronald W. Dworkin have warned that the morally charged politics of identity embraced by the progressive left is unlikely to foster a new sense of civic solidarity, in spite of its legitimate ideals.⁶⁰ It tends to place too much focus on autonomy and empowerment, and too little on building civic bridges and solidarity. Such politics emphasizes the suffering and real injustices of certain marginalized groups while remaining insensitive to others, including many of those in the white working class who voted for Obama in 2008. They became responsive to Trump's populist incitements as the reverberations of the Great Recession and the forces of automation ravaged their communities.

Moderates on the left must also confront the free speech problem within their own camp. Free speech intolerance on university campuses and the "cancel culture" are real phenomena that

57. Robert Reich, "Americans' Acceptance of Trump's Behavior Will Be his Vilest Legacy," Yahoo News, December 27, 2020 <<https://news.yahoo.com/americans-acceptance-trump-behavior-vilest-060037636.html>>.

58. On this issue, see the seminal work of Daniel Walker Howe, *The Political Culture of the American Whigs* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979).

59. David Brooks, "America Is Having a Moral Convulsion," *The Atlantic* <<https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2020/10/collapsing-levels-trust-are-devastating-america/616581/>>; also "Many Americans are ready to question the results of the election," *The Economist*, July 7, 2020 <<https://www.economist.com/graphic-detail/2020/07/07/many-americans-are-ready-to-question-the-result-of-the-presidential-election>>.

60. Mark Lilla, *The Once and Future Liberal: After Identity Politics* (New York: HarperCollins, 2017); Ronald W. Dworkin, "A Moderate's Manifesto," *American Purpose*, November 11, 2020 <https://www.americanpurpose.com/articles/a-moderates-manifesto/?fbclid=IwAR29GTimwNTiCtEOcyJY_GWqHGyoyqhsV2bvHaKMwI8FE5m9g3vGFzIoF58>.

reflect our excessively moralized and divisive political culture. Progressives will also need to acknowledge that some pro-life supporters do not want to control women's bodies but genuinely honor the sanctity and dignity of human life. Moreover, liberals should not smugly dismiss "religion" and "patriotism" as merely Alt-right tropes, but should construct more attractive alternatives that reflect their civic commitments. For example, liberals might compellingly argue that they better embody the exhortations of the Gospels in their serious commitment to combating racial and economic inequality. By contrast, purists on the far right who purport to advance

Christian love and charity are too preoccupied with the culture wars to actually pay real attention to the working poor. With respect to patriotism, progressives need to demonstrate how their embrace of pluralism and openness to the ways of life and values of America's diverse cultures better exemplify the American spirit than so-called patriots on the far-right, who cruelly target immigrants who arrive in America to actually practice and embrace its values.

“ The virtualization of civic life has amplified radicals’ moralism and self-righteousness, with growing hostility even toward those who sympathize with their positions but fail their tribe’s litmus tests.”

These are some ways to temporarily lower the political temperature. However, it would be quixotic to expect a critical number of elites who have accustomed themselves to the politics of warfare to simply stand down. We need to reckon with the virtual civic platforms that are accelerating our depolarization. Politicians, economic actors and public intellectuals of all persuasions will need to resist the temptation to uncompromisingly assert their will into politics through media whose algorithms disincentivize moderate and civil discourse. Social media is fueling the status anxiety that is driving the hyper-moralized politics of identity on both sides of the aisle.⁶¹ Twitter and Facebook may be useful fora for disseminating

information and sharing output, but their algorithms undermine civic dialogue across the aisle and stifle compromise. They reward punchy, weaponized slogans that disincentivize reasoned, civil deliberation. The virtualization of civic life has amplified radicals’ moralism and self-righteousness, with growing hostility even toward those who sympathize with their positions but fail their tribe’s litmus tests. There is a significant difference between executing an idea and finding gratification through the digital sphere on the one hand, and actually achieving something valuable and constructive through the slow and patient exercise of politics on the other. It is easier to win a culture war on Twitter than it is to win a policy battle, for example, on reforming the health care system or fixing the student debt problem.

The recent insurrection is likely to trigger an overdue reckoning with virtual civic spaces that embolden the radical voice. Separation of government powers, effectual subsidiary governance, commercial dynamism, widespread literacy, and scientific knowledge were the foundational pillars of the Enlightenment project meant to blunt our tribal instincts. However, current-day technologies are working in the opposite direction. While it is true that platforms such as Twitter empower previously underrepresented voices, in reality they are also deepening our polarization and exacerbating social and economic inequality.

61. Thomas B. Edsall, "The Resentment that Never Sleeps," New York Times, December 11, 2020 < <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/12/09/opinion/trump-social-status-resentment.html>>.

We need to be more mindful of our virtual civic engagements if we are to successfully channel our eclecticism toward a politics of moderation by energizing the subsidiary levels of governance. We do not have a magic bullet response to this problem. How do we persuade our elites who have gained politically and economically from the platforms that are fueling our ideological and affective polarization to disengage and embrace moderation? It is doubtful that mere urgings for self-mastery will work. Future studies will have to explain in further detail how and why a seemingly benign social utility, which on its face appears to be giving greater voice to the previously disenfranchised, is insidiously accelerating our polarization.

We live today in a “fractured republic” that risks “coming apart” if no urgent measures are taken.⁶² It would be hard to deny that, in the words of Teles and Saldin, the “decline of political moderates lies at the root of many of our fundamental governing problems.”⁶³ Moderate politicians are a dying species in need of urgent protection. As Todd Gitlin put it, “The sure road to irrelevance under a government that brings together disparate forces is to inflame rage at the moderates.”⁶⁴ This is the road we have travelled lately. Rebalancing our polity will require leadership among Democratic and Republican moderates, who need to steer their parties between the Scylla of radicalism and Charybdis of reaction.

We should be cautiously optimistic about the road ahead but should not underestimate the daunting challenges we are facing. As Teles and Saldin remind us, “moderate factions do not need to be dominant to force such changes. In fact, a relatively small but pivotal number of disciplined moderate dissenters in each party would be enough to provide the political leverage to demand rules changes conducive to greater cross-party agenda-setting.”⁶⁵ Finding new donors and relying on the expertise of think tanks devoted to promoting moderation — like the Niskanen Center, Third Way, and No Labels, to name only a few — will be essential.

The depolarization agenda can rely on organizations such as Braver Angels, whose pragmatic agenda may help lower the political temperature as people begin listening to each other and are encouraged to reflect more critically on their own civic outlooks.⁶⁶ It is at this level, “with malice toward none,” that we may be able to bridge partisan divides and counter the unfavorable view both major parties have toward each other. It is at this level, where litmus tests seem less relevant, that we might begin to tackle our social disconnection.

Yet ideas by themselves, no matter how good they are, will not be enough. It will require responsible and courageous leadership from our elites in political and civil society to lock in the modest gains we have already made at the grassroots level and turn this agenda into a reality. A transformational figure alone will not be sufficient, but an ethos of decency, moderation, civility, and bridge-building will afford us time to restore the bedrock of our democracy.

62. See Charles Murray, *Coming Apart: The State of White America, 1960-2010* (New York: Crown Forum, 2013); Yuval Levin, *The Fractured Republic: Renewing America's Social Contract in the Age of Individualism* (New York: Basic Books, 2017).

63. Teles and Saldin, “The Future is Faction.”

64. Gitlin, “The Democratic left Needs Biden to Succeed. Stop Trashing the Winner and Help Him Deliver.”

65. Teles and Saldin, “The Future is Faction.”

66. One of conclusions of Jennifer Wolak's recent book, *Compromise in an Age of Party Polarization*, is that people want the two parties to engage in compromise — even if it goes against their partisan goals. Her main argument is that people care about the process of politics and not just the outcome. If she is right, this bodes well for the future of our democracy.

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