

Wicked Polarization: Breakthrough Journal Issue 3



Experts have long been viewed as a bulwark against populist irrationality. Where the masses are driven by myths, superstition, and emotion, it has been the job of monks, university professors, and journalists to make passion a slave to reason. Now, in a special issue of Breakthrough Journal, a group of scholars argues that rather than playing a moderating role, the expert class is contributing to America's political polarization. On questions of economic growth and inequality, global warming, obesity, and polarization itself, battling tribes of ideological experts frame new social and environmental problems in ways that undermine pragmatic political action. And rather than counter-balancing the expert ideologues, the news media have been caught up in the hyper-partisan spiral, making it easier than ever for politicians and voters alike to insulate themselves from information that challenges their assumptions. The special issue draws on the theory of wicked problems. Problems like inequality, climate change, and obesity are problems of affluence, not scarcity. Where the mortal problems of old infectious disease, hunger, deprivation unified the public, wicked problems divide us. Our wealth allows us to self-sort into ideologically conforming Congressional districts and fund intractable political battles. Against the view that corporate power has corrupted democracy and disempowered citizens, the authors argue that greater, not diminished democracy is behind today's political divide. The real problem is not that our democracy is broken but rather that much of the American electorate has lost confidence in national institutions, whether big business or big government. What will it take for Americans to come together? The creative destruction of the old ideological fault lines on both the Right and the Left. Reformers must challenge the simplistic framing of

issues as the consequence of either unchecked corporate power or unchecked government. This will require a renewal of the American tradition of democratic pluralism and a pragmatic commitment to concrete common actions. About the Breakthrough Institute: Breakthroughs mission is to accelerate the transition to a future where all the worlds inhabitants can enjoy secure, free, and prosperous lives on an ecologically vibrant planet. The Breakthrough Institute is a paradigm-shifting think tank committed to modernizing liberal thought for the 21st century. Our core values are integrity, imagination and audacity.

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clearly defined . 3. While the roots of our increasingly polarized politics are long-standing and run deep, it seems clear that .. ideas that have been carefully curated, as New York magazine recently described. .. WICKED POLARIZATION.

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