

America's Dilemma: Polarization
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We are suffering from one of our nation's recurring problems: polarization. Our very nation's birth took place during a phase of polarization: those wanting independence from our British governors, those rejecting this independence (preferred the status quo), and those too ignorant to care.

In those days, our most educated sector opted for creating a new nation, one not ruled by the British king and country. They wanted self-rule, an opportunity for those steeped in the history of the ancient Greece and Rome republics, in which citizens voted for their leaders. They prevailed, and until President Andrew Jackson (1827-1835), that is the government we had.

While these elites ruled, something else was afoot in the country. There was a revolt of the uneducated, who had a religious "awakening," during which their resentment of the educated roared to life, along with a preference for conspiracy theories over facts.

Andrew Jackson responded to that resentment, and immediately gave the vote to every white adult man, (sober or drunk), who then voted for politicians who bribed them the most. Corruption entered the system, simultaneously with the country expanding across the continent.

Although the majority of our population at that time was illiterate, some good things were happening. Those moving west and founding new towns, initially violent, soon summoned women as wives, and these women demanded churches and schools for all children, a process that civilized these communities and set the tone for what America's rising middle class would be. Along with churches (for a moral code) and education for universal literacy were small town newspapers, providing important local news, and with the invention of the telegraph, national and international news as well.

This account, of course, omits the slave states in which educated and propertied white men ruled, uneducated white men provided the policing, Black slaves provided the labor, and poor Whites struggled to be one notch about Black men in the pecking order. This made for a bitter brew, which began the process of polarization so serious that the country finally fell into Civil War, upon the election of Abraham Lincoln, a man from the poorest stratum who educating himself in the law, Thanks to his obvious talent, he was elected by the non-slave majority, the North.

The literate Middle Class continued to be the majority who shared values: literacy, honesty, increasing respect for science and technology, and carefully expanding participatory governance. They shared beliefs in our republic, our system of elections and governance, the process of losers yielding gracefully to winners in elections.

Simmering in the country's underbelly were the lesser-educated, looking for rivals to hate (Blacks, immigrants, women, elites). Periodic outbreaks of rumors, conspiracy theories, and religious bigotry roiled the country during economic crashes. Snake-oil salesmen did well in providing remedies for all ills (usually high in alcohol), as did religious snake-oil pastors selling imaginary cures for both physical and spiritual ills.

This was the beginning of "alternate facts," belief in rumors and lies rather than the commonly accepted information that most widely read newspapers provided.

During the 1930s, the economic crash brought out the first challenges since the Civil War to American participatory democracy. Challengers with their own snake oil to sell gathered followers: Communism which promised a "dictatorship of the people" and Fascism, which promised a dictatorship by a great leader. Roosevelt, who was neither of these things, presided over a democratic system that experimented with improving the lives of all Americans.

It was touch and go with the authoritarians who preferred dictatorships and promoted "America First," refusing to help Europe that was falling to the Nazis, until the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor ended the debate.

Democracy prevailed, defeating the Nazis and then our great rival, the Soviet Union, collapsed under its own weight, leaving us in charge of "making the world safe for democracy."

The sane and educated among us are still the majority after four years of Trump's misrule, a fact he and his followers deny. We survived an attempted violent coup, elected a decent president, and now watch as a delusional minority and a conservative political party melt down.

Let's hope that Democracy will ultimately prevail.

686 words

Next time: global polarization

Dr. Laina Farhat-Holzman is a historian, lecturer, and author of "How Do You Know That? Contact her at Lfarhat102@aol.com or www.globalthink.net.