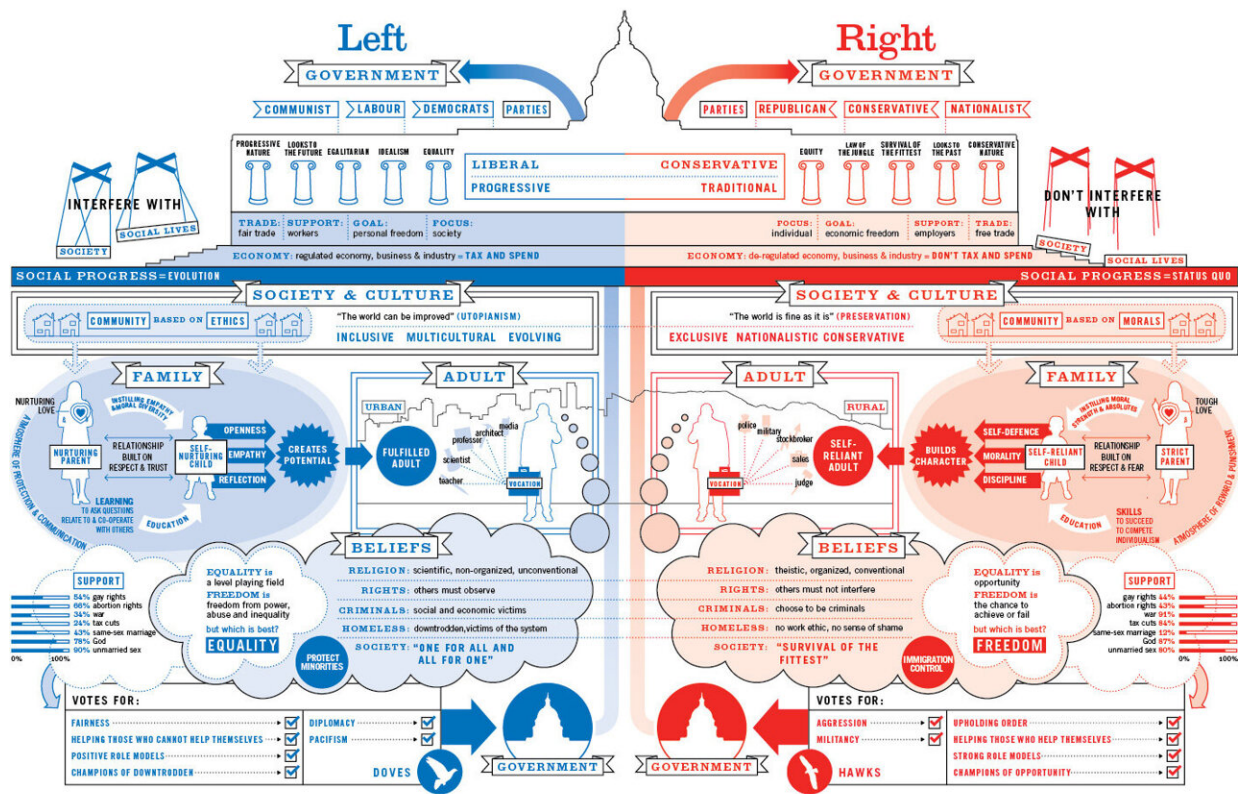


# How do we deal with the polarization around climate change?

September 26 2022, by Renee Cho



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INEVITABLE CAPITALIST AGENDA  
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A diagram showing standard world view differences between the political left and right. Credit: [Photo: David](#)

President Biden recently scored a big win in the fight against climate

change with his Inflation Reduction Act, but despite the compromises it made to the fossil fuel interest, not a single Republican voted for it—neither in the Senate nor in the House. And despite the extreme weather we've seen this year, 29% of Americans continue to believe human activity has little impact on climate change, while 24% think it has no effect at all. The United States still needs regulations and emissions limits to end our dependence on fossil fuels, but will they be possible with so much polarization plaguing the country?

Polarization is the worst it's been since 1879, just after the Civil War. It has now reached a point where some fear it could endanger democracy itself; three in 10 people surveyed believe it's one of the top issues facing our country.

Peter T. Coleman, a professor of psychology at Columbia University and executive director of the Columbia Climate School's Advanced Consortium on Cooperation, Conflict and Complexity, has written extensively on conflict and polarization. We talked to him to get his ideas on how to overcome polarization both at the political level and in our daily interactions with family, friends, and neighbors.

The following interview has been edited for length and clarity.

## **How did we get where we are today?**

We are in the midst of a 50-year runaway trend of increasing polarization and alienation between the main political parties in America that has not been caused by any one thing. The sources of it are highly complex and often shifting. However, there have been some tipping-point events over this time where we saw our disdain for one another move to another level. One of these happened in the early 1990s.

Politics has always involved disagreements, but polarization in Congress

worsened considerably when Newt Gingrich became Speaker of the House. He changed the work week in Washington from five days to three days, and told his Republican Caucus, "Don't move your families here. Stay in your states. You can raise more money that way. And I don't want you fraternizing with the enemy. This is politics as war." What this did in effect was reduce the existing cross-cutting structures—spaces where kids and families grow up together, go to school together, and play or do sports together. When families were moving to Washington, there was much more of that kind of daily contact. Gingrich basically eliminated it. It was a kind of politics-as-war mindset that he brought to his chairmanship, and enacted in some of these structural policies, which has gone a long way to reshape D.C. into what it is today. It's much harder to see the other as evil, to stand up and scream and accuse the other during their State of the Union address, when your families have grown up together and you know them personally.

Editor's note: In a [Time magazine article](#), Coleman wrote that toxic divisions "typically emerge from a complex constellation of forces that align and feed each other in ways that make them unpredictable and recalcitrant. Such divisions are often perpetuated by feedback loops between our neurological, psychological, relational, informational, political, cultural, and economic structures. This means that there are no simple solutions for changing them. But they can change."

## **How do we start to do something about polarization?**

The good news about our political polarization right now, is that the vast majority of Americans are fed up with it. About 67% of us are what are called 'the exhausted middle majority.' They are weary, sick of it, and actively seeking alternatives to the political status quo.

At times like this—of instability and pain—many of us are questioning

our basic decision-making assumptions. Instability is often good soil for change, because people are more ready to change now than they would be if they're sitting fat and happy. You know 47 million people quit their jobs last year voluntarily, which tells us that people are reconsidering their basic life choices. But research on when societies change tells us that there also needs to be a clear sense of what to do—what the alternative looks like.

## **What are some strategies for going forward?**

In the *Time* article, I laid out five steps individuals can take to counter polarization. First, identify examples of positive change: Take note when people cooperate despite their political differences. Second, be intentional about how you enter potentially difficult conversations: Instead of automatically debating someone with whom you have differences, think about what you want to accomplish. Third, focus on what is actually working in your relationship: Emphasize any commonality. Fourth, don't oversimplify: Intentionally seek out information that offers a different perspective and provides a more nuanced understanding of the issues we face. Fifth, move: Actually, physically moving together outside, side by side can promote empathy between people who disagree.

This summer I piloted a challenge with a group of my students and colleagues, about 25 people. It was a four-week set of activities and it basically cycled through these five principles. The first week was about us: each of us reflecting on us and how we think about things, what we tend to do and not do, what news we watch and don't watch, and who we talk to and who we don't talk to. The second week, I asked them to identify a difficult relationship, somebody on the other side, in their family, community, or in their workplace. The third week was focused on their in-group, and how to start to do this work within their own tribe, because today we readily cancel each other, we sanction each other, we

don't allow each other to talk to other people. And then the fourth week was focused on what they can do nationally? How do you scale this up?

We developed a wide assortment of exercises for the challenge. Like take an assessment about your assumptions about change. If you're a Democrat, do you think Republicans are ever going to change? Because that basic assumption has major implications for how we may or may not respond to them. Another exercise that was more demanding was to take a day off from our devices and use that time to reflect on yourself. We're addicted to our devices, and part of what we're addicted to is outrage and retaliation, because so much of what comes in is outrageous and then we get a taste for a retaliation. Brain scientists have shown us that is an addictive substance.

Over the four weeks, the conversations within our group got better and better, and deeper and more important to the participants, and more honest. They were important experiences for people to make sense of what they were doing in these exercises and to feel a sense of connection.

## **Do you have any examples of success from this pilot?**

I have a neighbor, who is a very ardent election-denying Trump enthusiast. He and I have lived together in the same building for 15 years but have had very little contact other than in the elevator. I reached out to him and said, "Would you take a walk with me and have a conversation with me?" I said that I wanted to connect with him and that I wanted to talk to him about the political landscape in our country because I'm concerned about it.

On the walk, he said some pretty outrageous things. I just listened. I would ask clarification questions, but I didn't challenge him. I didn't attack him. I didn't tell him where he was wrong or right, although there



was a lot of misinformation and hyperbole. We walked for about 50 minutes. And then an extraordinary thing happened—at the end, he kind of talked himself into his doubts and inconsistencies. He started to identify his own doubts about Trump, and about what Trump stands for, and the consequences of Trump.

When we came back, I gave him a copy of my book, "[The Way Out](#)." I said, "You don't have to read it, but this is why I reached out to you—because I'm worried about this, and I'm interested in this." About a week or two later, my son, who's 25, ran into him in the elevator. This man, who had never acknowledged him before, said, "I want you to tell your father that I started reading his book. I'm several chapters into it. And I'm impressed."

Of course, this is not the solution, this is simply a nudge in a different direction. I realized—and this has relevance for [climate change](#) and conversations about it—our society has this fantasy that books or workshops or these kind of one-off things are the solution. Yes, they can have an effect and plant seeds of change, but we're surrounded by a superstorm of polarization. Overcoming it is not something that you can do alone. It has to be something that is [built] around community. So we need other levers, and a sense of higher purpose or meaning help.

Editor's note: Coleman and Lan Phan, a doctoral student of social-organizational psychology at Teachers College, Columbia University, found another potential lever when they ran an experiment to test how willing people were to engage in activities depending on their motivations and how the activities were framed. Research has found that people usually have one of two basic motives: preventive—those desirous of preventing harm; or promotive—those aimed at fostering tolerance or harmony. The experiment involved equal numbers of Republicans, Democrats, and Independents. It revealed that people were more willing to engage in an activity when the way it was framed

matched their particular motivation. The finding suggests that understanding people's motivations up front can help to frame bridge-building activities in a way that has a greater probability of success.

## **Is Congress doing anything to decrease its polarization?**

There's a group I've been working with in Congress called the Select Committee for the Modernization of Congress. A couple of years ago, when the enmity and hostility and polarization and dysfunction of Congress got to a certain level, they appointed this select committee of six Republicans, six Democrats, and Republican and Democrat co-chairs. They model bipartisanship, they share their budget, they do consensus decision-making. And their mandate has been to study the structures around Congress that pit them against each other and propose potential remedies. They have offered Nancy Pelosi and others about 98 recommendations.

For example, they started with their freshman Congress people, and they were looking at how they socialize them, how they train them, and bring them in. And the first thing they had been doing on day one was putting them on a red bus and a blue bus, and sending them off in different directions to have war councils. So, one recommendation was, don't do that. Give them a week together where they start to realize the enormity of their responsibilities, what they're trying to do, and what matters to them before you pit them against each other. Another thing was the effect of cameras. Because there are cameras everywhere in Congress, you rarely have a Congress person that is speaking directly to another Congress person. They're all speaking to their base because they're always in front of cameras. That eliminates the chance of people actually thinking creatively and problem-solving. They're always just on message.

(Editor's note: The committee also offered [recommendations](#) to create a bipartisan-only space in the Capital to foster collaboration between the parties, and to institute biennial bipartisan retreats for Congress members and their families.)

In terms of climate change, this is good news because at least some in Congress are recognizing the severity of the problem of polarization.

## **Are you hopeful that the United States can overcome its polarization?**

The idea that you can just turn to self-help to fix yourself is wrong in this situation, because our current state of polarization is too powerful. But I am hopeful that in the long term we will be able to connect because there are thousands of groups doing political work and organizing to deal with this. There is a lot happening piecemeal, but you just don't know what could have an effect. There's no easy way out—it will be hard and take a lot of work.

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