# “Why We’re Polarized” is great. Here’s what it misses

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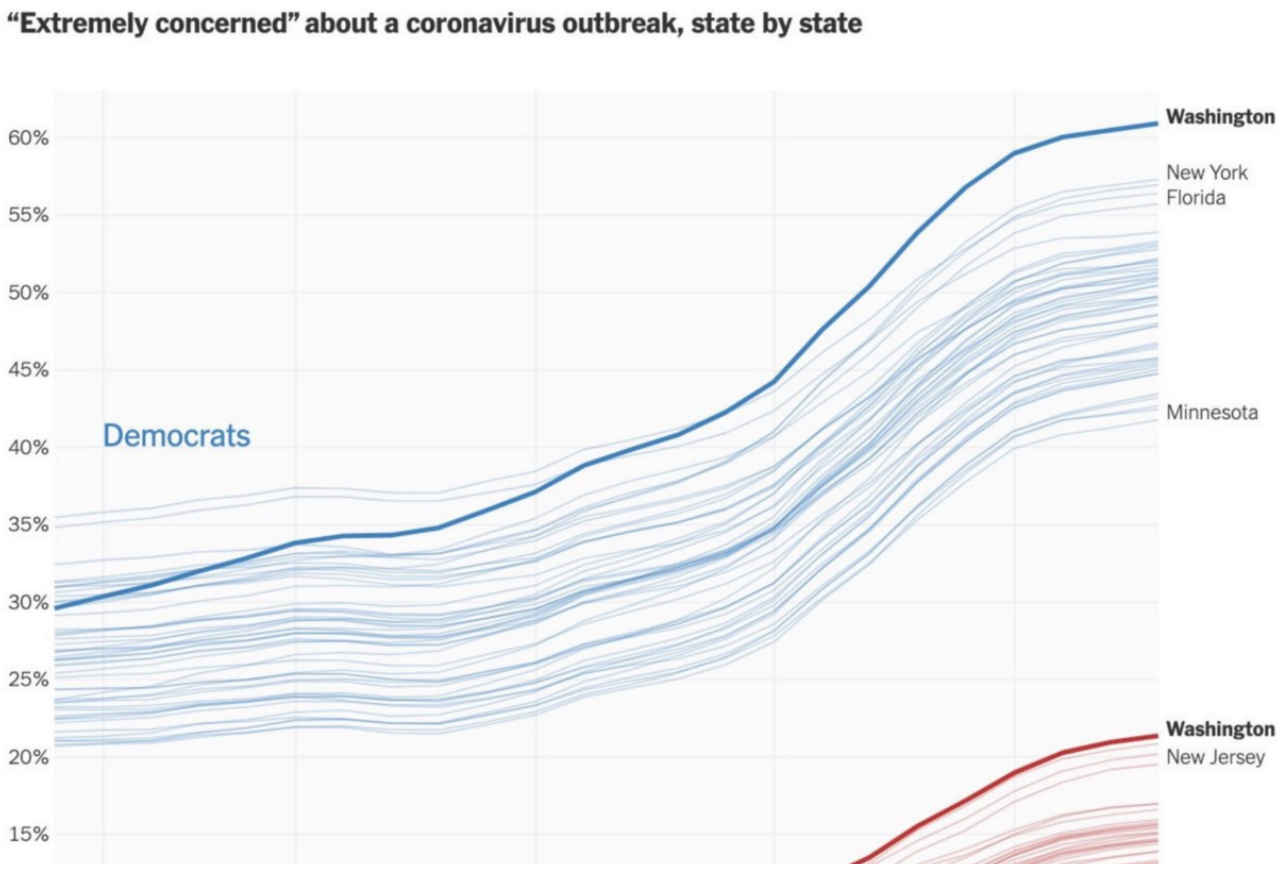
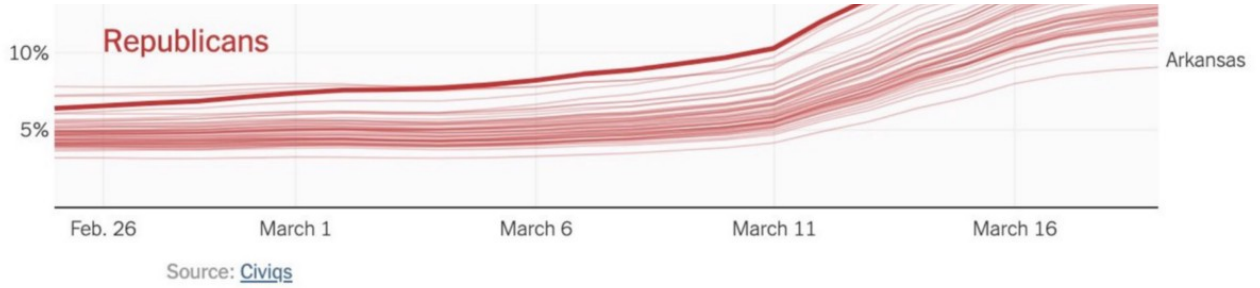
When Ezra Klein writes in *Why We’re Polarized* that there’s “a lot of disagreement about climate change… but almost none over… whether the H1N1 flu is a problem,” his best-seller released just two months ago already seems quaint.

Our reaction to the new super-flu has indeed been highly polarized, and polarization remains the ever-topical problem preventing us from solving our other problems.






Klein's book is excellent: it's broad and deep, provides many novel insights while acknowledging Klein's own viewpoint and potential biases, and is eminently readable. Klein is level-headed in analyzing self-serving strategic behavior by both parties — and asymmetries between the parties.

But the book does have substantive shortcomings, which I think drive an important conclusion of the book: Klein's ultimately pessimistic view on one of the key questions — can we learn to be less polarized? (He basically thinks we can't.)

Klein's discussion of social science is generally solid, but he makes one claim that stands out as questionable: "Reading the other side doesn't change our minds, it deepens our certainty" (p.158). Sure, that's sometimes true, but not always. Klein's subsequent discussion supports the claim with just two studies.

There have been several studies released or published in just the last year or so pointing in the other direction, showing that online exposure to the other side's media outlets can be effective in moderating views. The "backfire effect," which Klein implicitly refers to, seems to have been overstated. Exposure to longer, more personal and nuanced-alternative perspectives has been found to be even more effective in yielding depolarization.

So, Klein's claim — that exposure to the other side's views only deepens our certainty — perhaps lacks nuance and seems relatively poorly-sourced. And the claim is important, because it aligns well with the book's focus on "identity-based polarization." I put this term in quotes because affective polarization is the most closely related standard term, referring to emotional polarization, which is a similar, but not quite the same, phenomenon.

In a nutshell: Klein's argument, based on (but distinct from) the work of Liliana Mason, is that the stronger that we feel about one of our identities (any aspect of ourselves,

permanent or temporary: demographic characteristics, family roles, occupation, interests, beliefs, and preferences) and the more this identity differs from that of other social groups, the more antagonistic we'll be toward those other groups.

We love to hate and we automatically hate those in groups that are different from our own. So, as Democrats and Republicans have become more different from one another, due to partisan sorting and other factors, we've naturally grown to dislike each other more. I'm not doing Klein's (or Mason's) work justice here, but this is the key idea. There's certainly a lot of truth to it.

So what does Klein leave out? First, that we of course have *reasons* for our difference-driven enmity, and it is not purely emotional and automatic. We end up believing those who are different from ourselves are inferior in all sorts of ways — less honest, moral, intelligent, even less human. We draw these inferences from the limited information we observe — and end up overconfident in what we infer. These inferences contribute to animosity both between social groups (namely, parties) as well as within them (see below).

*"This will never work, Tom. We're from opposite ends of the same wing of the same political party."*

Klein doesn't discuss such distorted beliefs at all, but if asked might say: "sure, but these beliefs are, for practical purposes, irrelevant since they're 'motivated,' and basically arbitrary and impossible to ameliorate."

A growing body of work, however, has shown that motivated reasoning is typically not the full explanation for partisan biases. "Unmotivated" biases and overconfidence are

likely also an important part of the polarization puzzle, helping explain why, e.g., differences in moral foundations lead to hostility. Klein doesn't explicitly mention such biases, overconfidence, uncertainty, or intellectual humility (much less ideal belief formation, i.e., Bayesian reasoning) throughout the book.

This neglect of (unmotivated) overconfidence and *accuracy* of beliefs has a few implications for Klein's analysis, causing him to: 1) muddle rational and non-rational behavior (Klein refers to the polarized political system being "full of rational actors making rational decisions", but a common broader conception of rationality includes Bayesian belief formation); 2) fail to explicitly recognize when enmity actually is by all appearances normatively justified (e.g., toward a politician not complying with long-standing norms widely considered to be socially beneficial, such as Mitch McConnell's refusal to conduct hearings for Merrick Garland, which Klein abstains from criticizing); and 3) under-estimate the value of exposure to new information in moderating our views.

Beyond Klein's claim on this topic that I note above (that exposure to counter-partisan media backfires), he also professes pessimism about the effectiveness of civics education, and in the final chapter on managing polarization in ourselves, he recommends meditation — and does not suggest even trying to understand the other side's point of view.

Again, though new information about political topics doesn't always change our minds, it certainly does sometimes. Beliefs do typically, eventually, converge to truth. We "aren't doomed to be unreasonable, even in highly politicized times." This is why couples who become "polarized" (despite coming from the same social group) can reconcile via better understanding of one another, and why contact with different social groups is often depolarizing (a point also noted by Mason)— exposure helps us to understand them better.

More generally, more information makes us see (though perhaps at an unconscious level) that things are more complicated than we realized. "Ignorance more frequently begets confidence than does knowledge" (Darwin) and "the more you know, the more you know you don't know" (Aristotle). Reducing confidence in the beliefs justifying our animosity toward the out-party is a step in the right direction.

Maybe Klein was inclined to focus on "automatic" polarization (unaffected by reasons and information) because he has not experienced polarized emotions — and any subsequent depolarization — himself. Maybe to him polarization is something of a black box. He admits that, although obsessed with baseball statistics as a kid, he never developed an allegiance to one team, and thus, no hatred toward its rival. By contrast, Jonathan Haidt, author of perhaps the other most prominent popular book on polarization, *The Righteous Mind*, was "conservative-hating" in the early 2000s, but had his anger dissipate after growing to better understand conservatives' way of thinking.

Maybe it's also Klein's experience as a journalist that's led him (perhaps unconsciously) to understand the value of a clear message. Maybe "we can't depolarize" gets more clicks than "it's complicated".

But the answer to the question of whether we can learn to depolarize is indeed that it's complicated. And because of the prevalence of positive-sum policy opportunities (which Klein discusses at length) and positive feedback loops driving both pandemics and polarization (also discussed extensively by Klein) — and thus also, potentially, driving *depolarization* — the opportunity cost to society of neglecting opportunities to increase our intellectual humility, and our chances of depolarizing, is very high.

Lack of social distance can cause disaster in a pandemic. Too much distance in our media consumption — increasing confidence in our own righteousness, and others' lack thereof— can cause disaster at any time.