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## **Another Road to Serfdom: Cascading Intolerance**

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In one of the most influential books of the twentieth century, *The Road to Serfdom*, Friedrich Hayek warned against the dangers of state control over the economy. He was writing during World War II, a time when collectivists on the left were extinguishing private property and those on the right were empowering the state with expanding rights of ownership and management. The horrors of Stalin, Hitler, and Mussolini were widely apparent. These were not aberrations caused by madmen, argued Hayek. Rather, they resulted from placing undue faith in the capacity of government to engineer utopia. Although the democracies fighting these regimes were by and large free of the conditions that produced collectivist horrors, that was no reason for complacency. The United States could institute tyranny inadvertently, through well-intended calls on government to solve social problems.<sup>1</sup>

There is another road to serfdom, whose fount is not collectivist economic ideology. Although it may culminate in resource centralization, its starting point is the selective suppression of communications. The suppression comes from leaders harboring undue faith in their own sense of the good society, or from citizens who entrust leaders with extensive powers to direct the “right” messages. To block ostensibly harmful acts and expressions, such efforts at control limit the free exchange of ideas. One consequence of their vigilance is the distortion of knowledge in the public domain. Another is the curtailment of social experimentation, which depends on the sharing of thoughts. Limits on expression also impoverish people’s understandings of social processes. Politicians exploit the resulting combustion of hostility, panic, and ignorance through policies that may seem responsive to grievances but are ultimately counterproductive. By pandering to intolerant constituents, and stoking fear and anger, they enable the rise of a leader with autocratic ambitions. Using state resources, that leader may then reinforce and deepen the prejudices instrumental in his own ascent.

Vladimir Putin of Russia and Recep Tayyip Erdoğan of Turkey offer cases in point. Each identified and then exploited strains of intolerance to solidify political and economic power, ultimately using their followers’ sense of victimization to stoke hostility toward anyone who stood in his way. The victims of such tactics include people who, by helping to cleanse public discourse, galvanize the very processes responsible for turning legitimate democratic power into dictatorship.

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<sup>1</sup> Friedrich Hayek, *The Road to Serfdom*, ed. Bruce Caldwell from 1944 orig. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007).

Donald Trump’s meteoric rise to power has advanced certain preconditions of a similarly autocratic regime in the United States. But could the world’s most powerful country really become a dictatorship? The American political system incorporates checks and balances designed to protect individual liberties, sustain the co-existence of lifestyles, and keep groups from acting on intolerance.<sup>2</sup> These safeguards came into play as soon as Trump took power and began issuing executive orders. His successive “Muslim bans” of early 2017, which suspended visits from certain majority-Muslim countries, were blocked by courts until the Supreme Court allowed the partial implementation of a tempered version. Several of his aides with suspected ties to authoritarian governments were forced to resign, and Congress is investigating the Trump campaign’s ties to Russia.<sup>3</sup> When in August 2017 he failed to condemn violence by white supremacist, he was widely denounced by a very wide spectrum of leaders, including top officials of his own party.<sup>4</sup> Nevertheless, the effectiveness of American democratic institutions cannot be taken for granted. For one thing, intolerance may make people rationalize selective suspensions of constitutional and political protections. For another, the very fact of Trump’s electoral success points to systemic vulnerabilities of which he is more a symptom than a cause. If Trump were to disappear from American politics, sliding toward dictatorship would remain a danger. Another person with contempt for democratic values and procedures—Republican, Democrat, or Independent—could capture the Presidency through support from intolerant constituents.

### **Intolerant Communities**

Whereas in Hayek’s feared trajectory liberties are lost because of government expansion, in the present case the engine of illiberalism is communities situated in civil society—the portion of the social system outside of direct government control. These communities include associations similar to those that Alexis de Tocqueville considered vital to American democracy.<sup>5</sup> Sustained

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<sup>2</sup> For a classic statement, see James Madison, “The Federalist No. 51,” (1788) in *The Federalist*, ed. Jacob E. Cooke, pp. 347-53 (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 1961).

<sup>3</sup> For critical evaluations of the Trump administration’s first few months in office, see Deroy Murdock, “100 Days of President Trump: The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly,” *National Review*, April 28, 2017; and David Remnick, “A Hundred Days of Trump,” *New Yorker*, May 1, 2017.

<sup>4</sup> Michael D. Shear and Maggie Haberman, “Trump Defends Initial Remarks on Charlottesville; Again Blames ‘Both Sides’,” *New York Times*, August 15, 2017.

<sup>5</sup> Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, trans. Harvey Mansfield and Delba Winthrop from 1835 orig. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000).

primarily by shared interests, these associations constrain individual behaviors by promoting common understandings of right and wrong. They also limit what individuals may say or do to each other with impunity. Intolerant communities differ from idealized Tocquevillean associations partly in degree, then. They are communities whose hallmark is an unusually strong sense of proper behavior. They differ in kind because of their self-righteous determination to hold outsiders to their own standards, which they consider above criticism. Insofar as they get involved in politics, intolerant communities threaten democratic governance. They lay the foundations for tyranny by creating constituencies prepared to suspend the rule of law for some higher purpose.

Intolerant communities thrive in the presence of other intolerant communities, especially those intolerant of them. They exclude aggressively because they themselves are excluded. They hate because they are hated. They censor because their own views are dismissed, mocked, and suppressed. Clashes between intolerant communities undermine freedom of association, extinguish individualities, and incapacitate democratic institutions. Through these channels they facilitate the rise of dictatorship.

Members of an intolerant community do not consider themselves *intolerant* in any negative sense, because no one is obliged to tolerate intolerance. They define their vigilance not as the denial of others' freedoms but as drawing boundaries that are essential to human civilization. "We are protecting victims," they will say, or "we are preventing victimization." Just as the highway patrol enforces rules vital to road safety, so, in their own minds, they merely enforce rules that protect the good life for all. Intolerant communities differ, then, from a Tocquevillean association in terms of compatibility between their own self-definition and the definitions of others. In Tocqueville's America, the social functions of a parent-teacher association were not in dispute, and they drew no objections. By contrast, what an intolerant community accomplishes is a matter of huge disagreement, as is its legitimacy.

Another possible difference concerns group membership. Unlike the members of a Tocquevillean association, people who identify with an intolerant community do not necessarily recognize themselves as members. Outsiders define their membership and also ascribe to them motives and influences that may well be spurious. Thus, individuals may be treated as part of an intolerant community simply because of where they work (for instance, a university) or where

they live (Appalachia). Disagreements may exist, then, regarding the boundaries of a particular intolerant community.

Intolerant communities compete for members through methods akin to those of political parties. Like the propaganda departments of parties, they promote ideologies that focus attention on particular grievances, interpretations of history, and policy instruments. They also provide social status to their members and treat non-members with contempt. Finally, they claim to speak for entire categories of people—women, Christians—when in fact the groups include many who hold very different views. Insofar as an intolerant community is successful, a combination of indoctrination and fear expands its membership.

In any given society, multiple intolerant communities may vie for dominance. Often, this competition sustains an equilibrium whereby they co-exist in rough balance. As I suggest below, in mid-2017 the polarized politics of the United States exhibits just such an equilibrium. At the most basic level, the U.S. has two intolerant communities, each an alliance of overlapping sub-communities that are divided themselves. Each intolerant community has distinct grievances, worldviews, and justifications for silencing others. No single term does justice to the many motives driving the alliances. Precisely because they do not recognize their own existence, they have no self-adopted names.

Given the heterogeneity of these two communities, and their diverse internal disagreements, attempts at naming are precarious. But labels offer useful analytic shorthands, provided one keeps in mind what they conceal. On that basis, I shall characterize one community as “identitarian” and the other as “nativist”. The identitarian coalition loosely connects groups that define themselves according to some form of identity, mostly gender, ethnicity, or sexual orientation. The nativist coalition encompasses groups suspicious of economic globalization, technological innovation, cultural change, and cross-border labor mobility.

In national politics, the identitarians are generally aligned with the left and the nativists with the right. But neither group defines itself exclusively or even mainly in terms of the political spectrum running from left to right. The left-right spectrum dates from the Industrial Revolution, when the principal social conflict concerned the division of economic output between labor and

capital.<sup>6</sup> Over time, left and right developed entrenched positions on a wide range of social conflicts. Some of these other conflicts have gained salience through post-industrial technological changes. For identitarians, identity-based matters are more central to the quality of life, and nativists say the same about cultural continuity and the scope of economic freedoms. It is critical that distinct conflicts are involved. The difference makes it harder to achieve compromises than in a system based on the left-right spectrum. Indeed, it is easier to make trade-offs in a single dimensional space that measures the division of the economic pie than in a multi-dimensional space. Even communication is difficult when adversaries disagree on the nature of the social conflict. Absent a common understanding of what needs to be discussed, no one will gather around a table to sort things out.

Our central question can now be restated. Put bluntly, it is whether one of the two intolerant communities might wipe out the other. This would entail the submission of one to the other's wishes by accepting, if only tacitly, its worldview and favored policies. Members of the defeated community would stop expressing their own grievances. They would pretend to share the victor's interpretations of events. Public discourses would reflect the victor's prejudices; they would get saturated with claims that the vanquished community considers contemptible. Observing other societies one sees that shocks to a social system—business cycles, job-replacing technologies, loss of institutional safeguards—can upset an equilibrium, inducing realignments that then feed on themselves. One type of intolerance starts growing at the expense of the other. Turkey's authoritarian transition exemplifies just such a process. The possibility of an analogous transition in the United States is the question at hand.

### **Identitarian Intolerance**

The intolerance of American movements based on a sub-identity is widely known as political correctness, a term coined in the 1980s as a pejorative.<sup>7</sup> These movements claimed to dignify, protect, and advance constituencies that were, and in many cases remain, underrepresented in

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<sup>6</sup> The left-right spectrum emerged in France, where by 1871 it described party positions. Moving from left to right was considered to correlate also with an emphasis on law and order. See Marc Crapez, "De Quand Date le Clivage Gauche/Droite en France?", *Revue Française de Science Politique*, 48 (1998), pp. 42-75.

<sup>7</sup> Two books played a central role in popularizing the concept: Alan Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind: How Higher Education Has Failed Democracy and Impoverished the Souls of Today's Students* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1987); and Roger Kimball, *Tenured Radicals: How Politics Has Corrupted Our Higher Education* (New York: HarperCollins, 1990).

certain lucrative and esteemed professions. Originally, the alliance aimed to serve African-Americans and other ethnic minorities, women, gays, and lesbians. In the intervening years, the scope of the alliance has expanded. It now includes a broader set of sexual minorities known as LGBTQAI and, increasingly, also new immigrants from underdeveloped countries. Depending on the context, the presumed malefactors of these sub-identities are whites, males, and heterosexuals. These groups are ostensibly committed, sometimes subconsciously, to safeguarding privileges rooted in history.

The identitarian alliance makes itself felt most prominently on college campuses and in entertainment. Its causes include multiculturalism, the sexual revolution, curriculum diversification, and affirmative action based on identity rather than economic status. Such causes face opposition, which identitarians struggle to silence through political correctness. As they see it, policing speech and behaviors offensive to their constituents enhances study and work environments; it levels an economic, social, and intellectual playing field that has long been tilted in favor of whites, men, and heterosexuals.<sup>8</sup> In the 2010s, political correctness shifted emphasis from suppressing hate speech targeted at its constituents to creating safe spaces that shelter them from discomfiting acts and expressions. The task requires curbing microaggressions, which are intrinsically trivial acts that cause unintentional harm. Examples include a smile perceived as an affront, a question treated as an act of exclusion, boredom attributed to stereotyping, and an idea treated as insensitivity. Microaggressions can be limited by issuing trigger warnings whenever a topic potentially upsetting to an oppressed constituency is on the agenda. Consider an assignment to read a novel on the tribulations of an immigrant family. A trigger warning would let victims of the anti-immigrant speech avoid the relevant content.<sup>9</sup>

The critics of identitarian political correctness consider it a system of oppression that shields unjust, inefficient, and even counterproductive identity-based policies from public scrutiny. It institutionalizes mistrust, intolerance, and hatred of others, they say, while hiding behind egalitarian slogans to create new bastions of privilege. In blocking frank and open

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<sup>8</sup> For a compendium of readings that promote some form of political correctness, see Simon During, *The Cultural Studies Reader*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (London: Routledge, 1999). For the regulation of racist speech, see in particular, Charles R. Lawrence III, "If He Hollers Let Him Go: Regulating Racist Speech on Campus," *Duke Law Journal* (1990): 431-83.

<sup>9</sup> Greg Lukianoff and Jonathan Haidt, "The Coddling of the American Mind," *Atlantic*, September 2015.

discussion of identitarian agendas, political correctness also prevents scrutiny of identitarian intolerance.<sup>10</sup> Identitarians respond that their rules of expression merely protect oppressed groups against hurt and aggression. As such, they amount not to intolerance but to its negation.

During the 2016 presidential campaign, identitarians heavily supported the Democratic candidate Hillary Clinton. In itself, that fueled speculation that if elected she would promote political correctness. She validated suspicions through a passing comment now remembered as the biggest gaffe of her campaign: the description of half of her opponent's supporters as a "basket of deplorables."<sup>11</sup> Her wording dehumanized tens of millions of Americans. She was taken to mean that in addition to rejecting the policy positions of her opponent's supporters, she despised their values and lifestyles. In other words, the characterization aligned her with political correctness while epitomizing its widely despised intolerance. By energizing her opponents, the comment may well have cost her the close election.

### **Conservative and Nativist Intolerance**

The appearance of the political correctness concept reflected resistance to the agenda that it was meant to advance. Loose-knit coalitions opposed to identitarian causes were forming, many centered in conservative churches. Televangelists such as Oral Roberts, Jerry Falwell, and Pat Robertson, and talk-radio hosts such as Rush Limbaugh and Glenn Beck were ringing alarm bells about the prevailing social and political trends. The most worrying transformations involved feminism, abortion, affirmative action, drug abuse, growth in government, environmental regulation, and restrictions on religious practices. On these issues, TV networks, leading newspapers, government agencies, career politicians in Washington and state capitals, the higher-education community, Hollywood, and labor unions all tended to be on the wrong side. They had united behind family-weakening, secularizing, repressive, and immoral policies inimical to the fabric of American society.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Paul Berman, *Debating P.C.: The Controversy over Political Correctness on College Campuses* (New York: Dell, 1992); Robert Hughes, *Culture of Complaint: The Fraying of America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993).

<sup>11</sup> Amy Chozick, "Hillary Clinton Calls Many Trump Backers 'Deplorables' and G.O.P. Pounces," *New York Times*, September 10, 2016.

<sup>12</sup> For two analytical works: Kathleen Hall Jamieson and Joseph N. Cappella, *Echo Chamber: Rush Limbaugh and the Conservative Media Establishment* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008); and Jeffrey K. Hadden and Anson D. Shupe, *Televangelism: Power and Politics on God's Frontier* (New York: Henry Holt, 1988). An account of the strategies of these media by conservative activists: Richard A. Viguerie and David Franke, *America's Right Turn: How Conservatives Used New and Alternative Media to Take Over America* (Chicago: Bonus Books, 2004).



In the mid-1990s, Fox News, a new cable network, became this opposition's face on television.<sup>13</sup> Fox News also championed the interests of business, including both small and large enterprises. Hence, it helped to sustain the political alliance at the core of the Republican Party, that between economic and political conservatism. No such alliance is free of tension; on any given matter, constituents may have conflicting goals. In this case, the coalition proved sustainable for a while, as the Republican Party's electoral fortunes waxed and waned. Big business interests paid lip service to Republican cultural goals, and cultural conservatives put up with economic policies favoring mega-corporations and wealthy individuals. The advent of the Tea Party movement following the 2008 presidential election was the first sign of a serious split.<sup>14</sup> The Tea Party charged the Republican leadership with hidden political correctness. It also focused attention on the shared interests of the Democratic Party leadership, which has tended to represent highly educated voters, and the big-money wing of the Republican Party.

Donald Trump's political surge owes much to his unprecedented ability to mesmerize the media through outrageous behaviors and insults. But also critical was his savvy exploitation of tensions within the two-party system. His candidacy for the Republican nomination provided a huge outlet for the anger of constituencies that have done relatively poorly in recent decades. It gave them hope as he railed against both Democrats and Republicans who benefit disproportionately from rapid technological change and advancing globalization. They succeed, he said, by "rigging the system" in their favor. In the eyes of his followers, such political rhetoric legitimized demonization of the bi-partisan "establishment". The passions that Trump aroused are apparent in video clips of his campaign rallies. His fans waited for hours just to hear him speak in person.<sup>15</sup>

What the Trump administration gives to his supporters apart from rhetoric and bravado remains to be seen. His naming of a billionaire-packed cabinet suggests that on the economic front his supporters will be disappointed, as does the initial half-year of his term. What is certain is that Trump's supporters feel more empowered to speak their minds and also to intimidate,

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<sup>13</sup> David Folkenflik, "The Birth of Fox News," Salon.com, October 19, 2013 ([http://www.salon.com/2013/10/19/the\\_birth\\_of\\_fox\\_news/](http://www.salon.com/2013/10/19/the_birth_of_fox_news/)); Stefano DellaVigna and Ethan Kaplan, "The Fox News Effect: Media Bias and Voting," *Quarterly Journal of Economics*, 122 (2007): 1187-1234.

<sup>14</sup> Ben McGrath, "The Movement: The Rise of Tea Party Activism," *New Yorker*, February 1, 2010; Vanessa Williamson, Theda Skocpol, and John Cogan, "The Tea Party and the Remaking of Republican Conservatism," *Perspectives on Politics*, 9 (2011), pp. 25-43.

<sup>15</sup> Jeff Sharlet, "Donald Trump, American Preacher," *New York Times Sunday Magazine*, April 17, 2016.

silence, and chase away people whom they consider misguided. Just as conservatives feel the need to speak cautiously on university campuses known for identitarian activism, so in distressed towns that voted heavily for Trump self-identified “progressives” know that the climate of opinion is hostile to their own viewpoints. Some Trump supporters are willing to pursue extra-legal means for achieving their objectives; the Charlottesville demonstration of August 12, 2017 provides an illustration; the marchers included armed white supremacist groups. In the eyes of such supporters, Trump has legitimized law breaking through his diatribes against the establishment-rigged system. He has done so also by flaunting the law routinely, whether in ignoring conflicts of interest, inviting Russia to interfere with American elections, questioning the loyalty of immigrant citizens, or dismissing external commitments of the United States.<sup>16</sup>

Just as political correctness demonizes its detractors as racist, misogynist, and homophobic, so Trump’s crowds disparage his critics as un-American and crooked. Supporters of nation-building abroad, free trade, and amnesty for undocumented aliens should all be treated with disdain. And they are all the more deserving of opprobrium insofar as they exhibit political correctness. Throughout his campaign, Trump lambasted political correctness as a cancer destroying America and promised to fight it. Friend or foe, everyone in his audiences knew what he meant. He would not coddle undeserving minorities, put foreigners ahead of Americans, or keep the United States in trade treaties that ship jobs abroad. He would not cosy up to Hollywood bosses whose products rarely show Evangelicals, or conservative whites, in a positive light. Furthermore, in reversing established social policies, he would remind America-hating elites that most Americans reject their values.

There is no widely accepted name for the intolerance of the movement centered around Trump. “Trumpism” sees use, but so does the “new political correctness,” “patriotic correctness,” and “populist correctness.”<sup>17</sup> “Nativist intolerance” offers the advantage of conveying the movement’s emphasis on “putting America first”. Like political correctness, this

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<sup>16</sup> Dara Lind, “Donald Trump’s Drive for ‘Law and Order’ Undermines the Rule of Law” (<https://www.vox.com/policy-and-politics/2017/5/16/15641096/trump-rule-of-law>); David Leonhardt, “The Lawless Presidency,” *New York Times*, June 6, 2017; Rosie Gray, “Trump Declines to Affirm NATO’s Article 5,” *Atlantic*, May 25, 2017.

<sup>17</sup> “Trumpism”: Victor Davis Hanson, “What Exactly Is Trumpism?” *National Review*, January 10, 2017. “New political correctness”: Paul Krugman, “The New Political Correctness,” *New York Times*, May 26, 2012. “Patriotic correctness”: John K. Wilson, *Patriotic Correctness: Academic Freedom and Its Enemies* (Boulder, Colo.: Paradigm, 2008); “Populist Correctness”: Arda Mahdawi, “Populist Correctness: The New PC Culture of Trump’s America and Brexit Britain.” *Guardian*, February 19, 2017. Because populism can belong to either side of the left-right political spectrum, it limits information about substantive goals.

is a descriptor concocted by a critical outsider. Its practitioners overlap with conservatives who practice “conservative correctness”.<sup>18</sup> Their attitudes come in many shades. My nomenclature represents an analytical shorthand that sets aside many nuances.

### **Mutually Reinforcing Intolerances**

Interactions among the rival intolerances are complicated by the fact that neither situates itself along the traditional left-right axis. They are at odds, above all, over the primary axis of conflict in the United States. For identitarians, the fundamental conflict is between groups defined by ethnicity, race, gender, sexual orientation, and citizenship status—factors generally determined at birth. Nativists reject the focus on identity as artificial. For them, the principal fault line of American society runs between ordinary folk, by far the majority, and elites, who control the levers of power. America needs policies that put America first, they say, without slicing Americans into hyper-selfish constituencies. If the mantra of the identitarians is “justice for minorities,” that of nativists is “making America great again”. Basic disagreements over what needs discussion limits communication between the two sides. It also makes it easier for each to treat the other as deranged, if not subhuman.

Identitarians see the nativist agenda as a reaction to privileges slipping away, as another gasp to undo whatever progress the country has made toward equalizing rights and opportunities across genders, ethnic and racial groups, sexual classifications, and citizenship categories. It proves that the struggle for justice will be long and painful, as they have said all along. The extent of the reaction shows that massive work is required just to maintain gains of the past half-century. The intimidations endured by undocumented immigrants testify to the dangers to minorities, as do mosque burnings, the prevalence of rape, police violence against African-Americans, and rules meant to suppress voting by non-whites. The persistence of these dangers proves the wisdom of censoring sexist, racist, and nationalist expression. They reconfirm that when speech is poorly monitored, offensive discourses spread like cancer. Identitarian intolerance thus derives vitality, even purpose, from nativist intolerance. The big boost that nativists received from Trump’s presidency has energized identitarians as well.

For their part, the nativists depend on identitarian activism. Without identitarian policies or associated political correctness, they would be attributing their misfortunes mainly to

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<sup>18</sup> Wilson, *Patriotic Correctness*, chap. 5.

technology, trade, and immigration. These are all factors resolvable through bargaining within the left-right political spectrum. The identitarian agenda infuriates them by privileging the problems of groups from which they are mostly, if not totally, excluded. An American-born heterosexual white male miner fits none of the victim categories of the identitarians. As he sees it, universities, the mass media, Hollywood, government agencies, and the non-profit sector ignore his own problems, and they do so because the identitarian worldview blinds them to all but a sliver of human sufferings. Adding insult to injury, identitarians also look down at him as an uneducated, superstitious, and unpolished—as an inferior creature who does not deserve a hearing. The identitarians may also consider him a villain merely because of his innate persona. Some think that he cannot be a victim of anything, because he belongs to groups that define the establishment. His woes merit no sympathy, identitarians may say, because they represent retribution for past discrimination.

Positions on each side harden, then, because of the other's reactions. Perceived indifference to deep grievances fuels anger, which then undermines empathy for others. An ambitious teenager from a poor family in America's rust belt perceives that the academic establishment is more welcoming to immigrants than to underprivileged Americans like himself; the resulting anger keeps her from appreciating the challenges of being an undocumented college student in the age of Trump. The sense that one cannot speak honestly in milieus dominated by a rival intolerant group leads to disengagement from the problems of others. Imagine a small-town bar that tolerates anti-gay slurs. The atmosphere makes a gay visitor conceal his sexual identity and keep quiet during a political discussion. That discomforting experience then makes him insensitive to evangelical concerns about declining religious freedoms. Consider, finally, a college student who planned to attend an event featuring a conservative speaker. The speaking invitation is withdrawn under threats of violence from identitarian activists. The episode makes him lose interest in a course on feminist literature. In all such cases, ordinarily equitable people end up embracing double standards. They start denying to groups that they perceive as unsympathetic and insensitive, if not also hostile, rights that they readily grant to members of their own groups. They become intolerant because of others' intolerance.

The political system can reinforce the illustrated polarization. For one thing, polarized voters are more likely to nominate extreme candidates and to take the trouble to vote. For another, politicians whose career success depends on pleasing an extreme constituency are less

likely to make compromises.<sup>19</sup> Polarized politicians inflame animosities between citizen blocs that scarcely communicate with one another. Legitimizing intransigence, they also strengthen the logic for pressing one's own causes and dismissing those of the other side. Institutional devices designed to tilt the political playing field, such as gerrymandering and voter-registration restrictions, can complement these effects, partly by narrowing the voter base that the politicians feel obligated to serve, but also by fueling perceptions of partisan mischief.<sup>20</sup>

### **Availability Chambers as Reinforcers of Intolerance**

In a polarized environment, people do not willingly step into situations that subject them to rancor. To pick up earlier illustrations, a gay visitor would rather spend time among people who accept his identity; and a student seeking a well-rounded education would rather attend a college hospitable to open-ended political debate. In an ideal world, the menu of options would be sufficiently broad to present gay visitors and college students ideal choices in every possible encounter. Alas, the choices can be quite limited. Some American towns have no gay-friendly bars at all. Most research universities of the United States have student groups who will kick up a storm if an invitation goes out to a speaker whom they find offensive.

Many other settings allow Americans to avoid views, attitudes, and even people whom they find offensive. Cities offer gays abundant opportunities to relax in an LGBTQAI-friendly environment. At least after freshman year, college students can pick compatible roommates. In certain walks of life, then, Americans can sort themselves into groups of like-minded, mutually respecting people. If they so choose, they can socialize only with people who are comfortable with political differences. By the same token, if they are intolerant themselves, they can self-select into suitably prejudiced social and professional groups.

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<sup>19</sup> Alan I. Abramowitz and Walter J. Stone, "The Bush Effect: Polarization, Turnout, and Activism in the 2004 Presidential Election," *Presidential Studies Quarterly*, 36 (2006): 141-54; Nolan McCarty, "The Policy Effects of Political Polarization," in *The Transformation of American Politics: Activist Government and the Rise of Conservatism*, pp. 223-55, ed. Paul Pierson and Theda Skocpol (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007).

<sup>20</sup> The direct effect of gerrymandering on polarization is ambiguous (Nolan McCarty, Keith T. Poole and Howard Rosenthal, "Does Gerrymandering Cause Polarization?" *American Journal of Political Science*, 53 (2009), pp. 666-80). Nevertheless, it is widely viewed as a key source of polarization. See, for instance, Jeffrey Toobin, "The Great Election Grab," *New Yorker*, December 8, 2003; and Elizabeth Kolbert, "How Redistricting Turned America from Blue to Red," *New Yorker*, June 27, 2016.

Such groups of politically like-minded people form communication networks known as “echo chambers.”<sup>21</sup> The concept refers to surroundings that amplify and reinforce our ideas, beliefs, and information through constant repetition. Idealized Tocquevillean communities served as echo chambers insofar as their members reinforced each other’s worldviews through repeated references, often implicit. These worldviews encompassed perceived facts about African-American abilities, the effects of smoking, and the origins of the human species. “Availability chambers” is a superior descriptor, because within groups of like-minded individuals the reinforcement process involves more than exchanging ideas. Understandings get reinforced through a combination of communal and social pressures. Ideas acceptable to the group get “echoed” both because many people share them and also because members with doubts refrain from speaking honestly. The joint effect of these two mutually reinforcing processes is that ideas the group appears to deem acceptable become increasingly available in its public communications. The flipside of the high availability of acceptable ideas is the low availability of what is unacceptable. In concentrating their members’ attention on acceptable ideas, availability chambers limit their exposure to conflicting facts and arguments.

The concept of availability chamber harkens to availability cascade, which is a self-reinforcing process of collective belief formation. Under an availability cascade, an expressed perception triggers a chain reaction that gives that perception increasing plausibility through its rising availability in public discourse.<sup>22</sup> The process is intermediated by the availability heuristic, a pervasive mental shortcut through which the perceived likelihood of any given event depends on the ease with which its occurrences can be brought to mind. Cognitive psychologists find that individual beliefs regarding truth and falsehood are generally based on the ease with which pertinent examples come to mind. That ease depends on the relative availability of evidence pointing in one direction or the other.

Availability chambers are particularly visible online. Facebook users select their own friends, and Twitter users choose whom to follow. Such social media are conducive, then, to intolerant communities forming and reinforcing their worldviews. People who consider

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<sup>21</sup> Cass R. Sunstein, *Echo Chambers: Bush v. Gore, Impeachment, and Beyond* (Princeton: Princeton Digital Books Plus, 2001); Cass R. Sunstein, *Republic.com 2.0* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007), especially chaps. 2-3; R. Kelly Garrett, “Echo Chambers Online? Politically Motivated Selective Exposure among Internet News Users,” *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, 14 (2009): 265-85.

<sup>22</sup> Timur Kuran and Cass R. Sunstein, “Availability Cascades and Risk Regulation,” *Stanford Law Review*, 51 (1999), pp. 683-768.

immigrants the source of unemployment interact within chambers consisting of immigration opponents. For their part, people worried about anti-immigrant discrimination self-select into chambers of immigration supporters. Within each chamber, different aspects of the issue get communicated and amplified; different myths get concocted, elaborated, and disseminated; and different entities get demonized. Unsurprisingly, public opinion research finds that online social networks are associated with political polarization.<sup>23</sup>

The same research shows also that online networks boost exposure to materials from their less preferred side of the political spectrum. Though counterintuitive within the analytical framework of an echo chamber, this is entirely plausible once we recognize that intolerant Americans self-select into availability chambers. Members of availability chambers do not simply pass on information about favored policies. They also inform their members about the other side's machinations. To that end, they re-post communications of their opponents, but selectively, in order to heighten the sense of a clear and present danger. Thus, news about violence by white supremacists goes viral in identitarian circles, and nativist circles explode with outrage whenever a conservative speaker is prevented from speaking on some campus. In each case, vast numbers of people are held responsible for the excesses of a few.

Members of availability chambers do not simply distort reality by communicating information selectively. They also teach their members to express outrage at the messages of opponents, to despise people with different opinions, and to shame anyone, especially insiders, who might dare to suggest that something in a rival position is worth considering. Teaching members to hate the other side requires communicating information about what opponents are trying to accomplish. In sum, online political networks are not only censoring agents that truncate exposure to political information. They serve also as outrage machines that intimidate and punish anyone who questions their dogma or seems inclined to see some merit in opponents' positions. But in censoring and intimidating, they do not keep their members ignorant about the goals of opponents. Rather, they give their members exaggerated and unrepresentative impressions of rival agendas. Insofar as availability chambers keep views from being heard, they constrain their own members' access to information. Like offline intolerant communities, their online counterparts are agents of illiberalism toward both outsiders and insiders.

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<sup>23</sup> Seth Flaxman, Sharad Goel, and Justin M. Rao, "Filter Bubbles, Echo Chambers, and Online News Consumption," *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 80 (2016): S1298-320.



Tensions exist within every network of every intolerant community; no two network members will have identical needs or perspectives. Differences are easy to spot within both nativist and identitarian networks. For instance, the interests of African-Americans at the bottom of the labor market conflict with those of unskilled new immigrants, who depress wages. And in extinguishing low-tech jobs, trade treaties benefit job-losing constituencies through cheaper industrial goods. Intolerant communities deal with such complexities by discouraging their exposure. As within any coalition, whether based on shared heritage, a shared environment, or a shared political agenda, participants are expected to overlook inconsistencies between the goals of individual members. True, its subcommunities will enjoy some discretion in prioritizing selected elements of the favored policy package. Provided they pay lip service to the community's unity, and they accept its core principles and goals, they may tailor their positions to special needs. Feminists often include African-American men among the victimizers of American women. Likewise, the proponents of racial justice commonly hold the "white majority" responsible for racial discrimination. Nevertheless, feminists and racial activists maintain harmony within the grand identitarian coalition. They do so by focusing their animus on their common adversaries whenever they join forces.

If one requirement for membership in an intolerant community is shared goals, another is participation in the shaming of villains. That is one reason why so much of their internal discussions convey loathing and why online networks tied to an intolerant community seldom produce constructive ideas for resolving differences peacefully. Network members are expected to enforce their intolerance by persecuting compromisers and by stigmatizing them as ignorant, misguided, selfish, dangerous, and immoral. Failing to display outrage at violators, or neglecting to punish them through denial of opportunities, can cast doubt on one's own intolerance. Members must display hate toward compromisers to prove their own credentials. Consider the identitarian view that discrimination is a core reason for victimization and marginalization. For an intolerant identitarian who subscribes to this worldview, inviting a scholar who focused on self-destructive behaviors would amount to enabling a campaign to "blame the victim". For intolerant nativists, likewise, gun control of any sort is anathema. Letting someone make a case for banning assault weapons would amount to rewarding a liberal bent on extinguishing the American way of life. The villains here are elites who make streets unsafe through softness on



crime and policies responsible for social dysfunction. Such elites must be demonized, along with anyone who seeks to legitimize the liberal agenda.

Loss of expressive freedoms has become a growing source of concern in the United States. The opponents of identitarian policies complain about rules and pressures that hinder honest discourse; and the opponents of nativist policies have analogous grievances.<sup>24</sup> Yet people tend to worry specifically about losing their own voices, not about threats to expressive liberty generally. When identitarian campus activists block a conservative speaker, protests come mostly from conservatives and nativists of various stripes. Similarly, when President Trump bars questions from “fake-news media,” objections come largely from groups that voted against him. Moreover, neither side pays much attention to expressive restrictions within its own camp. Yet, these restrictions play a key role in turning public discourses into hysterical melees. The internal exchanges of political communities hide complexities, nuances, and variations. They tend to turn ranges of similar views into a single position immune to compromise. Just as a gun rights advocate may also believe in banning the private ownership of assault rifles, so a supporter of affirmative action may believe that without income thresholds, its benefits will go primarily to already privileged applicants. However, for fear of reprisals from their own political soulmates, both will self-censor themselves. Hiding their private preferences and private knowledge about their group’s agenda, they will pretend to share its public consensus.

No political network forms an assembly whose members evaluate evidence, weigh the pros and cons of policies, and make reasoned tradeoffs in the manner of a collegial research workshop—certainly not if its defining traits include intolerance. Preference and knowledge falsification distort public perceptions of the inclinations and thoughts of their members. They make the typical group member look more homogeneous, more rigid, angrier, and more hateful than in reality. A by-product of concealing doubts and differences is ignorance. Within intolerant networks, falsified communications leave other members in the dark about possible solutions to social problems, even about the existence of certain the problems themselves. In other words, they truncate the public availability of knowledge concerning passionately defended policies. Impoverishing public discourses, they hinder the identification and execution of viable responses

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<sup>24</sup> Conor Friedersdorf, “The Value of Fighting Attacks on Free Speech Early and Often,” *Atlantic*, January 6, 2017; Jonah Goldberg, “Free Speech Isn’t Always a Tool of Virtue,” *National Review*, June 21, 2017.

to social troubles; and, in the process, they aggravate the very intolerances that inhibit honest communication in the first place.<sup>25</sup>

Participants in politically “extreme” online networks often have “normal” interactions offline. In fact, most Americans who belong to hate-spewing networks regularly visit “mainstream” news outlets such as CNN, CBS News, and *USA Today*.<sup>26</sup> They thus get exposed to diverse perspectives first-hand. They do not avoid news sites that cover complexities, present bigger pictures, aim for balanced reporting, and feature commentators who appreciate the conflicts among widely held principles of morality. Exposure to contrary opinions does not make an “extremist” politically neutral; judging by the internet searches of participants in “extreme” online networks, the recipients of mainstream news remain sympathetic, in one degree or another, to positions associated with extremism. Within their online availability chambers, they take positions that their mainstream news sources characterize as extreme. In other words, they take on a radicalized persona.

Once again, this radicalization is not simply a matter of developing extreme ideas. The process is not limited to turning a potentially nuanced communal discourse over competing priorities into rigid and absolute claims about public policy. It also involves heightened intolerance of contrary views. It entails the harassment, shaming, and demonization of people who convey reservations about agendas treated as beyond compromise.

### **Hatred Triumphant**

Intolerant communities are never satisfied with sharing political power. Precisely because they despise their opponents, they want to drive them out of public spaces, if not to wipe them out. Comments such as “I’m glad he got shot” (referring to a political assassination attempt) convey the extremes that intolerance can reach.<sup>27</sup> Picket signs such as “Death Penalty 4 Fags” offer another grisly example.<sup>28</sup> Intolerant communities also seek to win over people with moderate

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<sup>25</sup> On the dynamics of preference and knowledge falsification, see Timur Kuran, *Private Truths, Public Lies: The Social Consequences of Preference Falsification* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1995).

<sup>26</sup> A mainstream news outlet is one for which the two-party fraction of its readership that voted Republican in the last presidential election is between 0.3 and 0.7. For the three outlets mentioned, the shares are 0.42, 0.45, and 0.47, respectively (Flaxman, Goel, and Rao, “Filter Bubbles,” Table 2).

<sup>27</sup> Herman Wong, “‘I’m Glad He Got Shot’: Nebraska Democrat Caught on Tape Criticizing Rep. Steve Scalise,” *Washington Post*, June 23, 2017.

<sup>28</sup> Kate Dailey, “Fred Phelps: How Westboro Pastor Spread ‘God Hates Fags,’” *BBC News Magazine*, March 21, 2014.

views, especially those who see matters from multiple perspectives and favor compromises. Through a combination of repression and conversions, they try to expand their social presence, salience, and influence.

By no means is success guaranteed. First of all, rival intolerant communities limit each other's influence by publicizing the other side's incivility and destructiveness. Thus, identitarian communities have framed the Breitbart News Network as a source of malicious stories and destructive policies far outside of mainstream American conservatism.<sup>29</sup> Likewise, nativists have lambasted Black Lives Matter as a movement inimical to the U.S. civil rights tradition and a threat to decent whites.<sup>30</sup> Many tolerant Americans find both the Breitbart News Network and Black Lives Matter to be extreme. Second, the illiberal activities of intolerant communities can antagonize potential recruits; people sympathetic to their core substantive objectives, whether racial justice or protecting domestic jobs, may find their tactics unacceptable. Finally, legal institutions may block an intolerant community's expansion by denying its agenda "mainstream" status. Thus, attempts to constrain American Islam face a huge hurdle: the U.S. Constitution, which protects freedom of religion.<sup>31</sup> Besides, the complex procedures of Congress make it extraordinarily difficult to pass bills fully satisfactory to any given "mainstream" special-interest group, let alone to legislate the agenda of an intolerant community that rival media keep under heavy scrutiny. Furthermore, the federal government shares power with 50 states, which have their own protections for individual liberties. If some school district bans books on evolution or eugenics, other jurisdictions need not follow; and, in any case, state and federal courts are likely to step in, maintaining general access to the controversial literature.

For all these reasons, the political status quo could survive indefinitely without any fundamental change in either the size or practical influence of existing intolerant communities. Shocks along the way could give one community a temporary boost. An Islamist attack might lift nativist support, or a mass shooting of African-Americans might energize identitarians. If such horrors followed a random walk, and the two intolerant communities continued to sow alienation through initiatives that frighten broad constituencies, the present political balance would likely

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<sup>29</sup> Lloyd Grove, "How Breitbart Unleashes Hate Mobs to Threaten, Dox, and Troll Trump Critics," *Daily Beast*, March 1, 2016.

<sup>30</sup> David French, "Black Lives Matter Keeps Getting More Radical — Will the Media Care?" *National Review*, August 5, 2016.

<sup>31</sup> Establishment clause of First Amendment: "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof."

persist. Millions would continue caring more about blocking despised opponents than about alleviating their social maladies. Massive dysfunctions, such as schools that fail to prepare students for the global economy, could just fester. Congress could remain deadlocked on many matters, with the extremes of the two parties blocking attempts at compromise. Every new Supreme Court nomination could turn into a life-and-death matter for both sides, repeating the no-holds-barred drama that followed Justice Antonin Scalia's death in 2016.<sup>32</sup>

After all, the U.S. was already a hyper-polarized society before the political ascent of Trump. Depending on the measurement technique, the language of politics has been becoming increasingly polarized since somewhere between the 1970s and early 1990s.<sup>33</sup> In a 2008 YouGov poll, a fifth of both Democrats and Republicans indicated that they would be "somewhat upset" or "very upset" if a son or daughter married someone of the other party.<sup>34</sup> In the 1960s, very few people were offended about the party choice of their relatives.<sup>35</sup> Political scientists of that era repeatedly demonstrated that Americans did not think of parties in ideological terms, as most do now.<sup>36</sup>

If the status quo is awful and the prospect of its perpetuation frightening, it is not the worst possible scenario. Any number of plausible developments could undermine the prevailing equilibrium in American politics and set off a cascade favoring one intolerant community or the other. The possible triggers include emerging technologies. Driverless cars and automated stores will displace millions of drivers and cashiers, swelling the ranks of Americans without marketable skills. Just as China, Mexico, and foreigners generally have been blamed for the loss of industrial jobs, so the unfolding automation could heighten xenophobia and anti-globalism, swelling the numbers of nativists. For another alarming scenario, imagine that the collapse of a pivotal Arab state makes Middle Eastern wars spread to new countries, dragging the U.S. into a Vietnam-style quagmire. The resulting refugee flows would energize nativists, and daily casualty reports would energize identitarians, especially if ethnic minorities suffered disproportionately.

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<sup>32</sup> Russell Berman, "Democrats Go to War Over Neil Gorsuch," *Atlantic*, March 30, 2017; Ed O'Keefe and Sean Sullivan, "Senate Republicans Go 'Nuclear,' Pave the Way for Gorsuch Confirmation to Supreme Court," *Washington Post*, April 6, 2017.

<sup>33</sup> Matthew Gentzkow, Jesse M. Shapiro and Matt Taddy, "Measuring Polarization in High-Dimensional Data: Method and Application to Congressional Speech," NBER working paper, May 2017.

<sup>34</sup> YouGovPolymetrix, "Anglo-Saxon Attitudes: A Survey of British and American Views of the World," London: Economist, 2008.

<sup>35</sup> Matthew Gentzkow, "Polarization in 2016," working paper, Stanford University, 2016.

<sup>36</sup> Shanto Iyengar, Gaurav Sood, and Yohtach Leikes, "Affect, Not Ideology: A Social Identity Perspective on Polarization," *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 76 (2012), pp. 405-31.

Depending on specifics, then, either coalition could be the main beneficiary. Yet another possible destabilizing trigger consists of multiple shocks that sow panic. Several synchronized mass killings by white supremacists might precipitate cascading intolerance against non-identitarians in general.

Social forecasting is risky, especially, it has been said, when it is about the future. No one knows when the prevailing political equilibrium in the U.S. will get disrupted, let alone what would replace it. The social sciences can predict only the mechanisms likely to unfold under particular contingencies. We can thus identify dangers. We can also say why certain events would make intolerance deepen and spread.

Remember that intolerance now gets perpetuated through availability chambers. Within networks that unite political soulmates, people accept falsehoods as true because frequent repetition gives them validity, but also because members with reservations refrain from saying what they really think, from correcting overgeneralizations, and from resisting internal pressures. When a shock compounds the outrage felt toward outsiders, it becomes riskier than ever to promote civility or advance nuanced points. Objections that would have brought scorn in the past are now treated as treasonous. Preference and knowledge falsification spreads. Meanwhile the just-electrified intolerant community gains because of shared genuine outrage on the part of previously tolerant people and also because people tolerant in private adapt their public faces to the changing political winds. Such transformations could follow, for instance, two back-to-back 9/11s. Anti-Muslim Americans would feel vindicated; and, on that basis, they would feel freer to spew hatred at Muslims. Heretofore vocal defenders of religious freedom, civil rights, due process, and respect for lifestyle diversity would start going quiet. Some would turn against Muslims for opportunistic reasons, say, for career promotion on the back of public hysteria. Crimes associated with Islam would become even more available in public discourses. Communications favorable to Muslims or Islam would now be equated, more commonly than ever, with ignorance or appeasement. The peaceful and constructive sides of American Muslims would become less available still.

Such a scenario is not far-fetched. The U.S. reached its present predicament through the rising availability of discourses motivated by resentment and loathing, and replete with exaggerations, distortions, and outright lies. The forecasted trajectory involves further polarization and a hardening of positions within rival camps until some shock upsets the

prevailing balance and allows one coalition to begin crushing the other. The cascade would be reflected in party politics as well. Party factions with ideological affinity to the triumphing intolerance would adopt policies that make their previous pursuits look tame. Turnover in the courts would enable landmark decisions endorsing the trimming of liberties once taken for granted. News outlets committed to balanced journalism would start disappearing—less because of falling readership than because “middle-of-the-road” journalists start radicalizing themselves, perhaps out of conviction, but mostly out of fear. In sum, the institutions protecting Americans from tyranny would disintegrate, forcing them to embrace an illiberal ideology for the sake of personal safety.

What would happen to the small and overlapping associations that Tocqueville considered vital to American democracy? In his time, they were formed freely, they acted autonomously, and generally they respected the liberties of others, African-Americans being the top exception. Although they enforced internal codes of behavior, freedom of association and mobility allowed individuals to escape rules and regulations they found oppressive. Given the ubiquity of hatred now, there is no longer room for Tocquevillean associations. It is not an option to avoid national politics and live the life of one’s choice. One cannot interact with society through autonomous associations. Individuals and their associations are both expected to display animus toward the losing form of intolerance. They must treat designated enemies, whether campus liberals or rural whites, as blots on humanity.

### **From Intolerance to Serfdom**

If that point were reached, the U.S. would be the land of the oppressed. Its people would be living like Václav Havel’s paradigmatic victim of communism, the greengrocer who, just to be left alone, keeps on his fruits and vegetables the slogan “Workers of the World Unite!”<sup>37</sup> Through words and deeds, Americans would be voting routinely for agendas that they dread. Shunning evidence of their senses, they would be parroting slogans and forcing others to do the same. They would be persecuting people with whom they actually agree, or at least consider worthy of taking seriously.

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<sup>37</sup> Václav Havel, “The Power of the Powerless,” in *The Power of the Powerless: Citizens against the State in Central-Eastern Europe*, ed. John Keane, trans. Paul Wilson from 1979 orig., pp. 27-28 (Armonk, N.Y.: M.E. Sharpe, 1985). For an interpretation, see Kuran, *Private Truths*, chaps. 7, 13.

Such a political environment offers fertile ground for demagogues promising deliverance from the other side's outrages. By virtue of his (possibly her) organizational, oratorical, tactical, and strategic skills, one of them becomes the recognized chief of the now-dominant intolerant community. He preserves and expands the coalition through more fearmongering and unrelenting demonization. Insofar as electoral success follows, the group's intolerance begins to benefit from state resources. That then brings into play all the horrors that Hayek attributed to centralized economic governance. State agencies start favoring the victorious side blatantly. Resources are redirected to uses matching the leader's priorities. Programs dear to despised opponents are axed. The leader becomes fiscally unaccountable.

But the leader's fundamental function is not economic redistribution. Rather, it is to harass, humiliate, silence, disempower, and crush the opposition. So it is that Donald Trump, a wealthy businessman with no significant record of helping the poor or the uneducated, came to lead a coalition whose members belong disproportionately to America's disadvantaged. Whereas voters with a college degree backed Hillary Clinton in the 2016 election by a 9-point margin, Trump outperformed her by an 8-point margin among non-college graduates.<sup>38</sup> The same logic explains why he received enormous support from groups whose values he offends through his lifestyle; evangelicals who frown upon divorce and womanizing provide a case in point.<sup>39</sup> The foregoing logic also illuminates why poor voters stuck with him after he boasted about exploiting loopholes useful only to super-rich tax filers with expensive tax accountants. In their minds, his own financial exploitations are secondary to his nativist platform. Besides, in demonstrating his shrewdness, his financial machinations made him seem all the more capable of outsmarting America's enemies. Nativist voters' relegation of economic matters to secondary status reveals, further, why Trump's electoral fortunes survived evidence of his personal enrichment at the expense of poor Americans.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Nate Silver, "Education, Not Income, Predicted Who Would Vote for Trump," *FiveThirtyEight*, November 22, 2016; Alec Tyson and Shiva Maniam, "Behind Trump's Victory: Divisions by Race, Gender, Education," *Pew Research Center FactTank*, November 9, 2016.

<sup>39</sup> According to exit polls, 81 percent of white evangelicals voted for Trump (Gregory A. Smith and Jessica Martinez, "How the Faithful Voted: A Preliminary 2016 Analysis," *Pew Research Center Fact Tank*, November 9, 2016). For an interpretation, see Molly Worthen, "A Match Made in Heaven," *Atlantic*, May 2017.

<sup>40</sup> They include his settlement of a lawsuit against Trump University and his companies' apparent preference for immigrant workers over Americans. For relevant insights, Ben Shapiro, "Is Donald Trump a Pragmatist," *National Review*, November 16, 2016; Peter Beinart, "The Anti-Anti-Trump Right," *Atlantic*, February 13, 2017.



For nativist voters in 2016, the numerous blots on Trump’s record were all forgivable provided he served their overriding goals: to defeat Hillary Clinton, humiliate the identitarian coalition behind her candidacy, and secure the Scalia-vacated Supreme Court seat for a judge who would stand up to identitarians. Trump did not have to be a model of perfection himself. What mattered first and foremost is that he—and only he among all anti-identitarian politicians—could put identitarians in their place and, by hook or by crook, undo their damage.

The composition of Trump’s cabinet accords with the primacy of cultural matters over economic inequality and redistribution for his key constituencies. In assembling the wealthiest cabinet in U.S. history, he did not make even a token attempt at giving representation to Americans resembling his core voters economically.<sup>41</sup> The key reason is that his political brand does not require signals of intergroup equity. It even benefits from choices that avoid the appearance of pandering and tokenism, long associated with politicians seeking identitarian support through gender-balanced and ethnically diverse appointments.

Had economic redistribution been a key motivate in the 2016 election, Trump’s voter base would have treated his cabinet selections as a punch in the face. On the contrary, some of his wealthiest cabinet officials have received enthusiastic support for their agendas. For example, Secretary of Education Betsy DeVos excites Trump’s base for her determination to promote charter schools and private schools. Unsurprisingly, Trump’s supporters include people who are displeased with his economic policies. But they favor Trump over his opponents on balance, because of his political stands on immigration, religious education, and other issues with cultural resonance.

As of mid-2017, the United States appears far from a bona fide dictatorship. Its institutions designed to prevent tyranny safeguard the liberties of Trump opponents. The press and social media overflow with critical commentary. Major initiatives face resistance from Congress, even from elected officials of his own party. Hyphenated Americans still enjoy legal protections; the government is not making them choose between Americanness and their origins. But the erosion of American democracy continues, and the mutual intolerance at its roots has only intensified. Reasoned and respectful discourse between the two sides remains the exception. Both nativists and identitarians think that the system favors the other side, and they deem each

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<sup>41</sup> For estimates, see Larry Buchanan, Andrew W. Lehren, Jugal K. Patel and Adam Pearce, “How Much People in the Trump Administration are Worth,” *New York Times*, April 3, 2017.



other guilty of double standards. Trump opponents see in his initiatives, appointments, tweets, and even body language mounting evidence of solidifying autocracy. For their part, his supporters think that their hero gets skewered for exercising powers that Barack Obama exploited routinely with impunity. In fact, double standards lie at the core of both nativist and identitarian modus operandi. If a major global crisis were to erupt, identitarians would rush to blame Trump, and nativists would see it as confirmation of mismanagement by global elites. Whoever is in power could use the crisis as an excuse to curtail liberties of the other side. In all likelihood, the governing team's illiberal policies would receive enthusiastic support from millions of people accustomed to considering their opponents subhuman.

Under the Trump administration, the domain of courteous public policy discussions has shrunk further than ever before. His policy zigzags, which are particularly salient in foreign policy, provide another pattern consistent with dictatorship. Although the zigzags could point also to ignorance or inexperience, they betray arbitrariness. Middle Eastern alliances get formed and dissolved in short order, through dictatorial decisions whose motives are not always transparent. Likewise, Trump's declared policies on Qatar and healthcare, and even China, NAFTA, and immigration—signature issues of his campaign—have made dizzying turns.<sup>42</sup> In democratic regimes, policies change slowly, except after elections or referenda that reveal substantial shifts in voter sentiment. Sluggish adaptation is the norm, because transforming public priorities, legislative procedures, and executive consultations all take time.<sup>43</sup>

In Hayek's dystopia, most people are serfs. As such, they are excluded from policy making. They produce wealth on command, without any say in either how they work or how the fruits of their labor are spent. They have enslaved themselves by empowering others through government ownership; and they have transferred power to their tormentors in the naïve belief that a centralized government makes better decisions than decentralized markets. In the United States today, people have granted enormous power to someone not because they believe in "big government" but, rather, because they consider this transfer essential to crushing their rivals. Nevertheless, the result is serfdom. As in Hayek's dystopia, they have no say over policies,

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<sup>42</sup> Stephen Sestanovich, "The Brilliant Incoherence of Trump's Foreign Policy," *Atlantic*, May 2017.

<sup>43</sup> A vast political economy literature develops the mechanisms involved. For a sampling, see the essays in Jon Elster (ed.), *Deliberative Democracy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998) and Gérard Roland, "Understanding Institutional Change: Fast-Moving and Slow-Moving Institutions," *Studies in Comparative International Development*, 38 (2004): 109-31.

which are not particularly responsive to their needs. Nativist loathing of identitarians gives Trump the political and social leverage to curtail the influences of his opponents; it does not necessarily produce initiatives that benefit his core supporters economically. Even more troubling, the hate-filled social atmosphere that nativist crowds have helped to create makes it difficult for them to go back, should they want a new leader. As individuals, they cannot easily switch sides without enduring the stigma that they helped to produce. They are effectively slaves to the political outcome they helped passionately to construct.

It is tempting to view Donald Trump's presidency as an aberration, and the man himself as the type of politician who gets taken seriously only when many stars line up. The obvious implication is that if Trump were to vanish, American politics would return to normal—to musical chairs between Republicans and Democrats who argue with each other endlessly over mostly symbolic differences. That is wishful thinking. The competing intolerances that made Trump electable would remain, and they might have gained intensity. Besides, on both sides of America's deep political divide, there are politicians ready to take his place as uncompromising punishers of the other side. Their governing styles would almost certainly differ from that of Trump; they would probably not tweet personal insults to critics who get under their skin. For that reason, though, they would probably be more effective at enacting their side's agenda.

A glimmer of hope is that the "mushy middle" in American politics is rediscovering the value of moderation and compromise. For instance, some liberal Democrats who were accustomed to vilifying former Republican presidents, presidential candidates, and legislators are discovering in these leaders virtues that they overlooked. To their eyes, certain Republican leaders now look committed to the core values of American politics and reasonably respectful toward political rivals. For their part, influential Republican leaders are distancing themselves from Trump and participating in bipartisan legislative initiatives. Meanwhile, ordinary Americans of diverse political affiliations show alarm at their country's hyper-polarization.

Whether the "mushy middle" can have a measurable impact on the trends identified in this article is another matter. A successful American movement of moderates requires sustained collective action by citizens willing to speak for moderation and confront rival forms of intolerance. It also requires organization and agreement on leaders. Yet, collective action is difficult even under the best of circumstances, when the challenge is only the apportionment of a

public good's cost.<sup>44</sup> An added difficulty here is that intolerant communities turn on people open to discussion and compromise. Hence, forming a large and sustainable tolerant community is no easy task in a society seething with intolerance. Many stars must line up for a return to politics based on mutual respect and willingness to seek common ground.

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<sup>44</sup> Mancur Olson, *The Logic of Collective Action: Public Goods and the Theory of Groups*, rev. ed. (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1971).