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Reaching Across the Political Gulf

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By [Neil Gross](#)

President Obama last month took a group of Republican senators to dinner at the Jefferson Hotel, in Washington, to discuss the sequestration crisis and a wide range of other policy matters. The next day he asked Rep. Paul Ryan of Wisconsin, the former vice-presidential candidate, to lunch at the White House. Another meal with Senate Republicans is planned for April 10. The goal of those meetings? To score PR points—but also to build personal relationships that might erode partisan gridlock.

It's too early to tell whether the president's outreach will work, but social-science research suggests that friendships that reach across the political aisle may be good for democracy: They facilitate cooperation by reducing extremism and enhancing trust. In a 2002 study, the political scientist Diana Mutz assessed the effects of political diversity among friends. Study participants who reported friendships with those who were unlike them politically had a better grasp of why people on the other side held the view they did. Those participants were also more tolerant.

Similarly, the political scientist Casey Klofstad found that Americans who disagreed politically with friends during the 2008 elections tended to be less entrenched in a partisan perspective in the future.

The problem is that, in both Washington and the country as a whole, friendships that cross party lines are becoming rare. The political scientist Robert Huckfeldt and his co-authors found that in 2000 only about a third of Americans who supported George W. Bush or Al Gore for president had someone in their political-discussion network who backed the other candidate. And in a study of wider acquaintanceship networks, the sociologist Thomas DiPrete and colleagues discovered that such networks are segregated by politics as well.

What lies behind this state of affairs? One important factor is party polarization. As the GOP has moved to the right, what it means for average voters to be Democrats or Republicans has changed. Increasingly, party affiliation signals a wide gulf in attitudes and lifestyles that friends or acquaintances may find unbridgeable. Liberals and conservatives can now tune in to completely different sources of information and entertainment (MSNBC vs. Fox News), amplifying that social divide.

According to the political scientist Shanto Iyengar, 27 percent of Republicans and 20 percent of Democrats said in a 2008 survey that they would be "somewhat upset" or "very upset" if their son or daughter married someone in the opposite party. Those figures contrast with 5 percent and 4 percent, respectively, who said they would be "displeased" at the prospect of a cross-party marriage in 1960.

At the same time, we are in the midst of what the journalist Bill Bishop calls "the big sort": the tendency of liberals to concentrate themselves in already blue states—or in blue communities within red states—and of conservatives to do the opposite. If you live in Brooklyn, N.Y., as I do, there aren't many Republicans for Democrats to be friends with, even if they wanted to.

Finally, the declining participation in voluntary groups and associations noted by the political scientist Robert Putnam has taken its toll. That fewer Americans are involved in PTA activities these days, or are joining athletic leagues, means that there aren't as many opportunities to meet people with totally different points of view.

In principle, a potential counterweight to that trend could be higher education. About a third of young American adults now earn bachelor's degrees, and given how important colleges and universities are in the formation of social networks—most people remain close to their college friends for years—one might hope that college would be a place where long-lasting relationships with politically diverse others could be forged, offering a bulwark against polarization nationally.

That sometimes happens—but not as frequently as it should. For one thing, “the big sort” seems to be affecting college choice. Most high-school students aren’t all that political, and surveys show the most important factors driving college choice are academic reputation, job-placement prospects, and cost.

Among politically oriented students, however, there’s at least anecdotal evidence of a desire to select colleges based partly on political fit. The Princeton Review rates colleges on the liberalism or conservatism of their students, and a cottage industry has sprung up to advise right-leaning students on how to avoid overly-PC college environments. For example, the Young America’s Foundation makes available on its Web site a list of “top conservative colleges” for students seeking “an alternative to the liberal status quo.”

What’s more, political views at the time of college entry influence students’ choice of major. Liberal students are more likely to major in the social sciences and humanities, conservatives in business and other applied fields. According to a national survey of college seniors, 43 percent of English majors are liberal while just 19 percent are conservative. Conversely, 33 percent of students who major in business are conservative while 19 percent are liberal. Students in those fields could theoretically go four years or more without meaningfully interacting with classmates of the opposite political persuasion.


Are those trends reversible? It’s not clear. If the GOP were to move back toward the center—which it may be forced to do in light of demographic trends—that could help. (Democrats and Republicans would no longer seem to come from Venus and Mars.)

Institutional redesign is another possibility. Could colleges and universities, for instance, do more to encourage a commingling of students with liberal and conservative sensibilities, by insisting on more general-education courses or requiring students in politically segregated majors to take subject-specific classes with peers bound for very different kinds of careers? If students were asked to civilly discuss politics in some of those courses, the effects could be salutary. Polarization is such a serious problem for our political system that those options should be on the table as we enter a new period of higher-education reform.

In the meantime, though, we might all take a cue from President Obama. Invite someone to lunch or dinner who doesn’t share your politics. You won’t come away from it a convert, but you might end up less suspicious of the other side’s motives. In our current political climate, less suspicion would be a godsend.


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Perhaps colleges and universities should first take a hard look at two issues salient in this article.

1. Just what do the term "liberal" and conservative' mean now? What did they mean? Do they continue to have any content at all?
2. That the article points to only two positions and fixates on polarization reflects a very superficial view of the number of positions that can be taken on any issue. It also misses the point that many people shift codes as well as places on the political spectrum (which really is NOT linear).

I suspect that students and politicians and the news media need to study hard; knowing that such a dualism is bogus might help break the cycle of dumb and dumber inside the beltway and provide starting points for conversation. Remember: The fact that things are as they are does not explain