

## Is Polarization Killing Democracy?

**Host:** Jordan Wruble

**Guest:** Yasha Mounk

00:00:02 **Ken Stuzin:** This is Ken Stuzin. I'm a partner at Brown Advisory. Welcome to our NOW 2020 podcast. NOW stands for Navigating Our World. We are simply trying to understand the world better, to navigate some of the most pressing questions that are shaping our lives, our culture and our investment challenges. How will we navigate the future of capitalism, climate change, our geopolitical relationships, and, perhaps most importantly, how will the coronavirus pandemic affect these questions and so many others. NOW 2020 is the place where we'll bring together thoughtful experts and people who are trying to make a difference. As we look to the future, the one thing we know for sure is that none of us can figure this out on our own. At Brown Advisory, we are focused on raising the future, and we hope these NOW conversations will help do just that.

00:01:03 **Jordan Wruble:** There's a big question I've been wondering about, that you may be wondering about, and that's how this coronavirus pandemic and the economic damage it's doing will change our politics. I think most of us have moments when we're optimistic. For all the pain we're going through now, there's a chance some good can come from this. Maybe we'll realize what really matters in our lives. Maybe we'll come together. But there's another possibility. In the past, when the world has been turned upside down by a crisis, it hasn't always set us on a new path. In fact, often, it's accelerated trends that have been building, and one of those trends, which has been running through global politics, is polarization. So here's my question: Will the coronavirus pandemic make our politics more polarized or less? I'm Jordan Wruble. I'm a partner at Brown Advisory, and I'm really excited today to have the chance to speak with one of the world's great thinkers about polarization, about the rise of populism and what it's doing to our democracies.

Yascha Mounk is an author, professor at Johns Hopkins University and a real citizen of the world. Before I bring Yascha into the conversation, I've been casting my mind back to remember what less polarized politics used to sound like. It's reassuring because you don't have to go back that far to find it. You may even recall these moments. Here's Barack Obama giving the keynote at the Democratic National Convention in 2004.

00:02:34 **Barack Obama Audio Clip:** It is that fundamental belief, I am my brother's keeper, I am my sister's keeper, that makes this country work.

00:02:45 **Jordan Wruble:** Or George W. Bush congratulating Nancy Pelosi, yes, Nancy Pelosi, as the first female speaker of the House of Representatives after his political party suffered a major defeat in the 2006 midterm elections.

00:03:00 **George W. Bush Audio Clip:** Thank you very much. And tonight, I have the high privilege and distinct honor of my own as the first president to begin the State of the Union message with these words: Madam Speaker.

00:03:18 **Jordan Wruble:** And then do you remember John McCain from 2008, when one of his supporters said she couldn't trust Barack Obama.

00:03:25 **AUDIO CLIP:**  
**McCain supporter:** I can't trust Obama. I have read about him, and he's not -- he's an Arab. He is not -- no.

- 00:03:36 **John McCain:** No, ma'am. No, ma'am. He's a decent family man, citizen that I just happen to have disagreements with on fundamental issues, and that's what this campaign is all about. He's not. Thank you.
- 00:04:09 **Jordan Wruble:** But even while Barack Obama, George W. Bush and John McCain were making those appeals for unity, were we already becoming more polarized? I'm fascinated to know how we got here, so let's talk to Yascha Mounk.
- Yascha, it's great having you here with us. Thank you so much. Let's start off with is the world more polarized today?
- 00:04:15 **Yasha Mounk:** Well, it depends on how you think about it. Certainly when you study the actual opinions of people in countries like the United States, there were moments in history when we were more polarized than we are right now. In fact, when you ask Americans about a lot of nitty-gritty questions of public policy, you see relatively a bell curve-like distribution, which is to say that a lot of people are somewhere in the middle, and then, you know, there's a bunch of people out on the far left and a bunch of people out on the far right. What is more polarized today than it has been in a very long time in American history is the partisan hatred. So even for Americans [who] actually agree on a set of ideas about how to run the economy, about how much immigration we should have, about all kinds of sensitive issues, there is a deep, deep distrust for the team on the other side. If you think of yourself as a liberal and you prefer the Democrats, you deeply, deeply mistrust conservatives and Republicans. And if you are a conservative or a Republican, you probably have even deeper mistrust for liberals and Democrats. And that hasn't been the case within living memory in the United States to this extent.
- 00:05:24 **Jordan Wruble:** So there have always been different parties, but now you talk about this team partisanship. How did we get from one to the other?
- 00:05:31 **Yasha Mounk:** Yeah. Just to give one more example on that, you know, there's a really fascinating study in which people are told that they have to decide who will get a college fellowship. And the researchers have manipulated these made-up CVs in order to get at who we might discriminate against. Now it turns out that if you are white and the applicant quite clearly is white, there's some mark on the CV that makes it likely that this person would be white even if there's no photograph, you favor them a little bit over somebody who is black, but you don't actually favor them that much. If you are a Democrat and the applicant is a Democrat -- he was the president, let's say, of a high school Democratic club -- you are much, much more likely to give this person the fellowship than if the applicant, identical in all other respects, was the president of the high school Republican club. And, again, the penalty goes both ways. So Democrats discriminate against Republicans. Republicans discriminate against Democrats. That's really remarkable.
- Now how did we get there? That's a complicated question that has a lot to do with American history and then also a lot to do with the rise of the internet and social media. You know, the last moment of deep polarization around issues in the United States was the 1960s, when you think about desegregation, when you think about Civil Rights, when you think about Vietnam -- deep split in the American population. But political parties weren't particularly split because the Democrats had some very liberal members from more northern states and then some deeply conservative and in many cases segregationist members in the south. So even though there was deep debate about what kind of action we should take on domestic policy, on international politics, it didn't manifest itself as that kind of hatred of the others' political party.
- As the southern Democrats slowly turned into Republicans, as the Republican Party started to dominate the south, the two American political parties became much more aligned on ideological grounds, and that prepared for the kind of mutual partisan hatred that we have today.
- And then the other thing, of course, is very rapid transformation in our media ecosystem. Not that long ago, certainly within living memory, most people would tune into the big broadcast network for the news. And so those news anchors, those reporters, those editors had to speak to people with a broad range of use. And people kept being pulled a little bit toward that common ground in terms of what we think about what's happening in the world and to some extent in terms of what we think about what should happen in the world. Well, that is all gone thanks to, first of all, cable news, Fox News, and other networks and then, you know, Facebook and Twitter and other parts of social media. People now are deep within information bubbles. And

so instead of being pulled toward the middle, they only surround themselves with people who agree with them, and they tend to radicalize each other.

00:08:33 **Jordan Wruble:** What are you seeing in the rest of the world, and how much does it reflect what you're seeing in the United States?

00:08:38 **Yasha Mounk:** I think there [are] two big developments around the world. The first is political systems that were always more consensual than the United States ever was starting to feel those forms of polarization as well. When I was growing up in Germany, you know, all of the television news didn't have a very clear ideological lean. You know, there was a big daily newspaper that was a little bit more center-left and a big daily newspaper was a little bit for center-right. But really, those distinctions were quite small. They were ever margins. And today, you are starting to see real counterprogramming. So there [are] now things in Germany that, you know, spread fake news. I just came across something like that on social media saying that Angela Merkel had secretly planned for coronavirus in order to, you know, have an excuse to put through her political agenda; I mean really, you know, very extreme forms of misinformation. So that's a fundamental transformation in a formerly placid political system like Germany. And it's, of course, connected to the second big development, which is the rise of a set of politicians who I call populists in Germany and France and the United Kingdom, and of course the United States.

So in Germany, we now have a party called the Alternative for Germany, which is calling into doubt the country's relationship to the Third Reich in the Nazi past, which considers the current German constitution to be of dubious legitimacy, which is extremely xenophobic and which really stands at the center of spreading these kinds of conspiracy theories, of de-legitimizing our political system.

00:10:24 **Jordan Wruble:** So what is populism, and why are people buying into it today?

00:10:28 **Yasha Mounk:** Populism sounds like a fine thing. We live in a democracy, and part of living in a democracy is that politicians should try to be popular. They should [try] to reach the people. So, you know, why is this term "populism" supposed to be so bad? Well, the way that political scientists define and understand populism, it has something to do with your kind of narrative about politics, with the way you see the world. Now, a lot of populists are going to dislike the political elite, dislike established institutions, dislike experts, and that's legitimate. Practically every successful American presidential candidate for the last 40 or 50 years has run in some way as an anti-elitist, even when that was very implausible, as might have been the case with the son of a former president, George W. Bush, or a former Hollywood star, like Ronald Reagan, or, you know, Barack Obama, a product of elite universities in this country. They all did that to some extent, and that's fine.

But what populists do is to go one step further. They're not just anti-elite. They're also anti-pluralists, which is to say they go, look, the only real reason why we have problems in the world right now is that there's these people who are in charge who are corrupt, who are self-serving, who care more about various outsiders than we do like people like you and me. And what we need is somebody who sweeps all of them aside and truly represents the people. And I'm that person. And it's not just that I can do a better job than others of speaking for people's political concerns. It's that I alone represent the people. So if you disagree with me, it's not that we just happen to have different values. It's not that we just happen to disagree on a bunch of important things. I am legitimate, and you're a traitor. I speak for the people, and you [are] an enemy of the people. And you see that kind of rhetoric from politicians on the left or the right in different countries with very different ideologies, with different sets of enemies. They people they tend to dislike always depend on the local context. It can be different groups. But in all of those cases, this claim that I alone am legitimate and everybody else who disagrees with me is not legitimate becomes very dangerous because it leads them to attack the core features we need to preserve our political system, including a vibrant opposition, including independent courts, including free media.

00:12:51 **Jordan Wruble:** People are buying in on this. Is it that people are not thinking for themselves, or are they more easily manipulated today because of technology, or is this something that has always been appealing?

00:13:02 **Yasha Mounk:** Look, let me say two very different things about it. The first is it's always tempting for politicians to dislike their electorate. As playwright Bertolt Brecht put it, you know, those who are in power

always want to reelect their own constituents. And it's tempting for academics and intellectuals like me to think that, you know, people are stupid, ill-informed and, you know, that must be the case, because look, they keep choosing different political candidates from the ones I like, so they must be stupid, right? I'm skeptical of that. I agree with Henry Kissinger on his line that he would rather be ruled by the first 300 people in the Cambridge telephone book than by the assembled Harvard faculty.

So I think we can't simply dismiss the rise of populism as people just woke up one morning and they went crazy. I think there [are] deep causes of it. One we've already talked about, which is the rise of social media and the internet, which allows more extreme voices to shine through, which often encourages and prefers simplistic and short content over more complicated messages. I think a second thing has to do with big economic transformations over the past decades. So in the United States, it used to be the case that most Americans could say that their lives were much better than those of their parents. From 1935 to 1960, the living standard of an average American doubled. From 1960 to 1985, it doubled again. And since 1985 until a year or two ago, it was essentially stagnated, and that's before we come to the terrible economic damage that the coronavirus is likely to inflict on our country and most other countries in the world.

So that makes a huge difference in how people think about politics. They used to say -- you know, they never loved Washington, D.C., or London, or Paris. They never thought that politicians were the paragons of moral virtue, but they used to say, you know, I'm doing twice as well as my parents were. My kid is going to do a lot better than me. Do I like those politicians for senators, as congressmen? Not really. But something seems to be working, so let's give them the benefit of a doubt. They seem to be sticking to their end of the deal. Now I think a lot of the time, people are saying, "I worked hard all my life. I don't have a lot to show for it. I'm not doing much better than my parents were. I'm really afraid that my kids are going to do worse than me, so let's try something new. How bad could things get?"

The third element is around culture and demographic change. So in many countries, like in Western Europe, where I grew up, democracies were quite homogenous 50 or so years ago. And there was a very strong idea of what it is to be a true Italian, a true Swede, a true Frenchman. So it was somebody whose grandparents had already lived in the same town or area, somebody who was ethnically like the majority of the population. Well, thankfully, we've changed that over the last 50 or 60 years. As immigrants have come into those societies, a lot of people have changed their conception of who belongs in them. But there is a significant portion of a population that is resentful about that, that doesn't want to change their understanding of nation herd and that perhaps fears that their status is being undermined by some of those changes. I always think when I try to sort of think through this how somebody would feel who is in that category. I always picture somebody who perhaps not the richest, the most talented, the best looking guy in his town or village who 30 or 40 years ago might have said, "I know I'm no great shakes. You know, I'm not one of the most powerful people in this country and so on. That's fine. But I have a kind of dignity and I have a kind of status, right? I'm a man rather than a woman, which gives me kind of status. I'm straight rather than gay, which gives me a kind of status. I'm the head of a family, which gives me kind of status. I'm born in this country rather than one of those immigrants, and so that gives me a kind of status. And so I feel like I'm, you know, toward the top of the society. I'm not at the very top, but I have a certain dignity in this world."

And I think a lot of those people now feel that their status has been diminished because suddenly, the wife might earn more money than them. Thankfully, people who are gay are respected in the community. The boss at work might be an immigrant. The person representing them in parliament might not look like them. And so they feel that their status has been diminished, that they used to be on the seventh or eighth rung on society, and now they're on the fourth or fifth rung. And those tend to be people who are very resentful. And that's a similar story in the United States, which, of course, has always been a diverse country, has always been a multiethnic country in ways that was not true of Western Europe, but in which actually we've come very far in overcoming some of those status hierarchies, which, again, is a very good thing for our country but does lead to some members of it becoming more angry and more unsure about their place in society.

And when you take those three different phenomena together, the cultural change, the economic worries and the rise of the internet, which allows politicians to play on those anxieties much better. That makes for a very dangerous cocktail.

seeing, and we put it in a coronavirus pandemic world. What's the impact on democracy from this existential or quasi-existential health threat, and how does it reinforce some of these challenges and what opportunities do you think it creates?

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**Yasha Mounk:** Well, I think, you know, it's too early to know for sure, and partially that's because it depends on what choices people are going to make. It depends on the ability of democratic governments to live up to the awesome responsibility they now have for keeping the population safe and preserving the prosperity of their countries.

I do think we can say a few things at this point, though. One of them is that it would be a mistake to look at the performance of autocracies and conclude that they're doing systematically better than democratic countries. We've seen a lot of countries in east Asia do relatively well at dealing with this pandemic, and that includes countries, whether they're democracies like South Korea, semi-authoritarian regimes like Singapore or dictatorships like China. But it is also the specific problems and shortcomings of dictatorship that allowed this disease to spread in the first place, including a lot of censorship, a lot of manipulation of local media, punishing some of the whistleblowers who first spoke publicly about this virus. So that's a very mixed record. And when you go to other autocracies around the world, whether it is Iran or whether it is Belarus, they're doing even worse because we are continuing to deny the seriousness of the threat of this virus.

Now in democracies, I think there [are] two competing tendencies, especially as it relates to populism. On the one hand, a lot of populous, and especially a lot of right wing populous, could jump on this virus in order to claim vindication, to say, "We've been telling you for years that we need to close down borders, that the world is a very dangerous place, that foreigners bring in disease. And now, lo and behold, look what's happening. Well, you finally need to get onboard with a program and shut down borders and migration, undo globalization, end free trade, and so on and so forth." And there's a real danger that that is a lesson a lot of people will take from this political moment.

Now I also think that there's a second quite different tendency, and that's that people like me have warned for a long time about the dangers of populism. When you don't trust experts, when you undermine independent institutions, when everything becomes politicized, it will take a real toll on human lives. In good times when there wasn't a crisis, it was easy for people to dismiss what I was saying: "Oh, you're just trying to protect the kinds of institutions that you like because they're staffed by people like you. We've elected a set of populous. Nothing really has changed. My life's not any worse than it was four or five years," and that's because it turns out that the state is a mighty ocean liner. You know, it'll keep a course for a while. And even once it drifts off course, it'll take a while until it hits an iceberg. Well, we've now hit a giant iceberg, and a tragic one, a terrible one. And I think that people in many countries, in Brazil, in the Philippines, are seeing what the price is for having irresponsible leadership in such a deep moment of crisis. And so I think that some of the threat of populism may be attenuated when people recognize how high a price we pay for all of our shortcomings.

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**Jordan Wruble:** We're seeing politicization around some maybe basic health questions around reopening the economy, testing. How did science become political?

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**Yasha Mounk:** Well, I mean, I think it's legitimate that we have real political debates and even partisan political debates around some of those issues. You know, but science can give us facts. But as moral philosophers never tire of pointing out, you know, an ease does not imply an order. Facts don't imply what we should do. So when people look at the fact that we have coronavirus at the moment, and we're still uncertain because we're at a very early stage of learning things about it, and they take different lessons about what we should do about it, that is appropriate. And there's not a scientist who can answer those questions for us. There's not a scientist who says, "You know, at what point is it worth reopening the economy if it means that 50 more people will die, that 5,000 more people will die, that 50,000 more people, that 500,000 people will die, that 5 million more people will die?" Scientists cannot give us a good answer. It is a political question, and it is the terrible trade-off that objectively now faces all of us around the world.

Where I start to worry is not when people have passionate and sometimes partisan debates about what we should do -- that's legitimate. It's when they are unwilling to acknowledge the underlying facts. And the thing that has saddened and angered me more than anything else over the last weeks or months is that those people who seem to believe we should just open up the economy, even if it leads to a lot of loss of life, aren't

willing to be honest about what they're saying. So they don't say, "Look, opening up the economy might kill a lot of people, but that's better than us being locked in at home for the next six months." I don't ultimately agree with that, but that's a legitimate thing. We have a really, really hard trade-off in front of us. But what they say instead is: "Oh, you know, this is all made up, and Bill Gates is actually profiting from this. He's sort of put the virus into the world. And actually, this is no more deadly than the flu." You know, that's not taking the science and then having a passionate political debate about its upshot for what we should do. It is starting with your preference for what we should do and then ignoring the science and claiming that the facts are something they're not because it fits your narrative better, and that's very, very dangerous.

00:25:23 **Jordan Wruble:** We're building up to spend trillions of dollars as a government to deal with the pandemic and to repair some of the damage to the economy. What would your prescription be for spending that money to support democracy, to strengthen institutions, to develop some of the things that you see as the weaknesses? What would you recommend?

00:25:43 **Yasha Mounk:** Well, look, the first thing here is that to defend democracy right now is to defend people's lives against the coronavirus, which is to say that if democracy has come out of this moment, having handled this pandemic more poorly, having vastly bigger death tolls, having a much weaker economy than (unint.) competitors, this will be a body blow to the legitimacy of democracy for many years and decades to come. So both for substantive reasons, because that's what we owe our fellow citizens and ourselves, and for those strategic reasons. You know, the first thing we should be doing and spending money on right now is this test, trace and quarantine system – it's something that allows us to make sure that we catch people who have a coronavirus very, very quickly, that we ensure that they effectively quarantine themselves while they may be symptomatic and that we tell everybody who they may have infected. That is the best thing we can do for democracy right now.

Now in the longer term, I think what we need is two functional political parties that can have deeply different ideological views, one of which can be robustly liberal progressive and one of which can be robustly conservative, and that's absolutely fine, but both of which believe in fact and in science, both of which have a commitment to independent institutions, both of which believe the rule of law and both of which welcome everybody who is a legitimate holder of a U.S. passport as our compatriot on equal terms.

00:27:28 **Jordan Wruble:** So building off this, you studied the problem. What gives you hope looking forward?

00:27:34 **Yasha Mounk:** Well, one of the things that gives me hope is that I do think democratic people tend to try to correct their mistakes. I've seen again and again that populous leaders eventually become quite unpopular because they claim that they're going to give people more democracy, but it eventually becomes very obvious that they're concentrating power in their own hands. They claim that they will root out corruption, that on average, as I've shown in a study with my colleague Jordan Kyle, that countries become more corrupt under their leadership. And then they tend not to be all that good at governing, which leads to all kinds of economic crises and other forms of suffering. And when people recognize that, they often say, "Well, we gave this guy or this gal a chance, and now it's time to have somebody else in power."

Now what's hard is that at that point, it may no longer be possible to throw them out of power. They may already have entrenched themselves. But that's not the case in many countries in the world. And so I'm actually quite optimistic that people will course correct when they see the real world impact that (unint.) forms of populism has on countries around the world.

I also wonder -- and let me preface this by saying that, you know, the suffering we're encountering right now is of historic proportions. I mean, at this point, the number of people who have died in the United States from COVID-19 is higher than all Americans who died in the Vietnam War. I'm trying to look for a silver lining, but it is just a silver lining of a terrible, terrible event, and I want to be very clear about that.

But I do think that the silver lining is that a lot of Americans don't want to be as divided as we are right now, don't want to be as polarized as we are right now.

00:29:22 **Jordan Wruble:** What's your evidence of that?

00:29:23 **Yasha Mounk:** Well, so there is a study that came out recently where you ask people, "Do you think that

Americans have more in common than what divides us?" And a very clear majority of Americans believe so, we do have more in common than what divides us. And by the way, along some of the lines where you might think divisions are most likely, people felt the same way. So I know that people in my ideological bubble would likely guess -- I know, because I did have people guess this in a couple of contexts, you know -- who's the group who is least likely to say we have so much in common? Well, it's African Americans, because they've suffered a lot in our history, in our country, and so they have reason to think we don't really have anything in common with us. That is untrue. African Americans are more likely than other demographic groups to think that we have more in common than what divides us, but all demographic groups strongly agree with that sentiment. One of the groups that doesn't believe this is one that I don't exactly belong to but know a lot of people from, which is that of progressive activists, an ideological grouping of people who are furthest to the left. They are the people who are most likely to say, "We don't have anything in common." But even within that group, it's actually a minority who thinks that. So I do think that there is a strong urge for us to come together in this terrible moment. And I think that some of the most divisive kinds of politics that we had before are coming to seem more obscene and less appealing both from the left and the right, by the way, among genuine suffering than they did a year or two ago when, you know, we were relatively well off, relatively comfortable, and we could indulge in our lowest instincts.

00:31:04 **Jordan Wruble:** You lay out a wonderful vision. I truly have countless questions I could continue to ask. I've enjoyed this so much. I want to just say thank you. It's been an incredible experience for me to learn about your work and to get the chance to talk to you. On behalf of Brown Advisory, all of our colleagues and our clients and the whole firm that will be listening to this, please let me say a huge thank you. We're very grateful for the chance to speak with you and learn from you today.

00:31:33 **Yasha Mounk:** Yeah, thank you so much. I had a lot of fun thinking through this together.

00:31:42 **Ken Stuzin:** Hello. This is Ken Stuzin. Thank you for joining us as we seek insights that help us navigate our rapidly evolving world. If you missed our first episode, a candid conversation with Jon Meacham, the Pulitzer Prize-winning historian, please visit the Brown Advisory website and click on the podcast link on our homepage. And don't forget to subscribe to the podcast. We will be back with another episode next week. Until then, please stay safe.